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Abstract

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Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Ph.D.

First Advisor

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Keywords

Black feminist thought, Black sororities, Predominantly white institutions, Sista circle methodology, Sorority rejection

Subject Categories

African American Studies | Arts and Humanities | Education | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Higher Education | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Women's Studies

Publication Statement

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Seeking Sisterhood: An Exploratory Qualitative Inquiry Into The Sorority Rejection
Experiences of Black Women

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jasmine Michelle Pulce

November 2023

Advisor: Christine A. Nelson

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In response to a call to fill the gap left by previous studies on collegiate sorority rejection, this study explored the meaning Black women ascribe to experiences of rejection from historically Black sororities. Using Black feminist thought and sista circle methodology, this study introduced narratives from five Black women who came together to comprise a collective standpoint. To better understand this phenomenon, study participants completed individual interviews, two Sista Circles, and one reflection survey. Three main findings were the interconnectedness of Black Greek-letter organizations and Black subcommunities at predominantly white institutions, the nonlinear nature of the Black sorority rejection experience, and participants' post-rejection social navigation strategies. Student affairs practice implications address institutions' responsibility to create interventions and support structures for Black women students outside peer-led groups like Black Greek-letter organizations. Black sororities historically have been seen as a retention tool and site of resistance for Black women. Findings of this study highlight that this is not the case for the Black women rejected from these organizations. In conclusion, recommendations for future research directions are offered.

Keywords: Black sororities, sorority rejection, Black feminist thought, sista circle methodology, predominantly white institutions

Acknowledgments

When I think about my journey as a doc student coming to an end, I get so overwhelmed. None of this would be possible without my circle of family, friends, faculty, and colleagues who have supported me through the years. I would like to dedicate my dissertation to a dear friend who passed away before I was finished, Dr. Christina Paguyo. She believed in me from the very beginning, and I know she is proud. Now on to my many thanks. I would like to acknowledge the sacrifices of my grandparents, Mahdi and the late Rashedah Muhammad. It is not lost on me how I came to live a life very different than the ones you experienced. To my parents, Robin and Kevin Berry—I am so grateful and blessed to be your daughter. You have been my cheerleaders, role models, and lenders when needed. To my aunts and uncle, Krystal, Kim, and George, you have always come through for me, and I feel so lucky to have you all. To my sisters, LaKayla and Dalenisha, you have helped me in ways you probably don't realize by supporting our family in my physical absence, thus shielding me from potential stressors. To my friends, Carolyn, Cameron, Shan, Shana, Jon, Abby, Damion, Mo, Christa, Stevie, Margaret, Claire, MJ, Kelly, and Hope—I love you, and thank you for your support. To my committee, thank you for your patience and guidance, I literally could not have done this without you. Also, shoutout to my participants, the real heroes. Lastly, as someone who worked full time throughout this program, I must shoutout to my mentors and former supervisors who supported my journey: Tracey, Renell, Chenthu, Lili, Frank, and Mary. I am humbled by my circle, am infinitely blessed, and am out of space. If I missed you, please charge it to my head and not my heart! <3

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Chapter One: Introduction

“It be ya’ own people” – author unknown

After completing my undergraduate education in Kentucky, my home state, I moved to Dallas, Texas, to pursue my master's degree. The culture shock was real. Dallas was far more diverse than I could have imagined. It felt like I was surrounded constantly by Black and queer people. When people from home asked me how I liked my new city, I always boasted about “feeling seen” and enjoying the food, music, and culture. While this statement was true, I was not sharing the whole truth as being in a city with a higher Black population brought forth a consequence I did not anticipate. No matter where I move, one collegiate experience seems to follow me. When I was a sophomore in college, my friends and I decided to pursue membership in a historically Black sorority. With confidence, I submitted my application and consented to an interview. I felt strongly about my record of leadership and service and believed I had represented myself appropriately in the public eye. A few days after my interview, I was notified via mail that I would not move forward. I applied and interviewed to be a part of this same sorority two additional times, to no avail. My rejection experiences caused a significant shift in my life. My self-esteem decreased, and I became someone I did not recognize.

Years later, I had convinced myself that I was “over it.” I was in a new city, charged with building a new community. Imagine you are me, a young Black woman (23

years old) attending a gathering of one of your Black friends. While there, you hear someone scream “Black Girl Magic!” as a compliment to a girl wearing her natural hair, smell the flavorful aromas of foods across the African diaspora, witness new TikTok dances, and pass a not-so-friendly card game of Spades. The gathering is full of college-educated people, so you see a range of attire, including paraphernalia of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs). Some people are wearing branded T-shirts and jackets, while others are sporting something more modest like a keychain or bracelet. These items indicate membership in a known Black communal treasure, the Divine Nine. At Black gatherings such as this one, every DJ knows what to expect when they play “Down for My N****z,” “Wipe Me Down,” “Knuck if You Buck,” “Atomic Dog,” or “Set it Off” (by the artist Strafe). These songs elicit joy and excitement from BGLO members as they rush to the biggest open space, deeming it the dance floor, to perform a stroll with any nearby members. With pride and confidence, newly initiated members and old alike form a line and began to move and dance to the words of the songs, creating a stroll. Some might know the stroll better than others, but in the end, members will laugh, hug, and make their way back to their seats—reintegrating with the BGLOs members who do not stroll and those of us who are not members of BGLOs at all.

The average person may not see anything wrong with the scenario I described. I am sure many Black people reading this nodded as they read along, affirming the list of songs I mentioned as true stroll classics. For some members of the Black community, the moment I described may be bittersweet. Although I refused to admit it as a young adult, moments like these were and continue to be awkward. Depending on the day, I pretend to

be unamused by looking down at my phone, or I strike up a conversation with someone nearby to keep myself busy. If I choose to look on, I know I will see a profound display of sisterhood/brotherhood and camaraderie in which I cannot engage. If someone catches me looking on, they may ask, “Are you affiliated?” When I respond “no,” the next question is usually, “Why didn’t you join?” The impetus behind that question speaks to the incredible legacy of BGLOs. The assumption is that these groups are inherently accessible to all Black people who desire to be part of that legacy. However, as described by my experience, I had the desire but was not given access. Reflecting upon my experience, I have met others with similar stories.

In fraternity and sorority life literature, this denial of membership is referred to as rejection (Kane, 2016). As I critically examined the literature exploring BGLOs, I realized that the mention of BLGO rejection is far and few between. I began to wonder why these experiences and stories were less prevalent. I also pondered the need to learn more about Black women collegians, a population that is enrolling in college at a higher percentage than any other community (de Brey et al., 2019). As institutions look for ways to continue promoting and celebrating Black excellence in higher education, the voices of Black women collegians, including those who experience BLGO rejection, need to be centered. In this study, I aimed to expand Black women’s collective standpoint in the literature by elevating the voices of Black women who have experienced Black sorority rejection. The standpoint of Black women must be centered by student affairs practitioners who seek to cultivate supportive spaces for this community on college campuses.

Background of the Problem

Higher education was never meant for Black women (Whitehead, 2019). In 1636, when Harvard College was founded, many ships carrying enslaved African women had already made their way to North America almost a decade earlier (Hannah-Jones, 2021). The slave trade and higher education are inextricably linked (Wilder, 2013). Long before Black women were welcomed as students, they were enslaved by university founders and presidents (Wilder, 2013). Higher education institutions were cultivated as extensions of the systemic oppression, white supremacy, and colonization that continue to define the United States today (Patton, 2016). Modeled after universities in England, a similarly oppressive country, early U.S. colleges like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale sought to produce male clergy members (Cole, 2010). Although the wealthy, white, male youth of the United States were being educated, the labor of Black women was being exploited to build the foundation of U.S. capitalism (Collins, 2009).

College did not become a feasible option for many Black women until the 20th century because Black women were routinely denied the rights and privileges of white people and men through political subjugation (Collins, 2009). As access to college expanded for Black women, it was usually for those who were affluent and well-traveled (Perkins, 2015). By 1910, only two historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were accredited; thus, many of the Black women who were able to pursue higher education did so at northern predominantly white institutions (PWIs; Gbemi, 2016). Using data from a study on institutional perceptions of Black students at three different institution types, Cox (2020) found the PWI context provides behavioral constraints that

can limit a student's ability to show up "authentically Black." In other words, Black students have to navigate racial dynamics in addition to the traditional academic pressures of college. For Black women, PWIs present an environment in which the racist and sexist "controlling images" of Black women in society are hegemonic, causing further oppression (Collins, 2000).

Black women are survivors. Although colleges and universities are charged with offering inclusive environments in which all Black women can thrive academically and socially, Black women continue to be let down and experience isolation, microaggressions, and lack of support at PWIs (Solórzano et al., 2000; Stewart, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Black women differ from other students, such as white women and Black men attending PWIs, because they have to navigate the general pressures associated with college, including academic and social challenges within a broader realm of white supremacy and patriarchy. In a critical discourse analysis of representations of Black undergraduate women in higher education journals, Everett and Croom (2017) saw three major themes. First, their study illustrated Black women are "resourceful and find a way to adapt and excel in most collegiate situations" (Everett & Croom, 2017, p. 80).

Additionally, Black women thrive when they have established personal networks, and lastly, Black women have to navigate performing race and performing gender; however, their racial identity is often prioritized. In other words, to combat these negative encounters, Black women are left to take matters into their own hands. In addition to exhibiting resilience to cope, Black women seek out spaces with a shared racial and

gender identity (Whitehead, 2019). For some, this may include student organizations or historically Black sororities.

There are four sororities within the National PanHellenic Council (NPHC), home to nine historically Black fraternities and sororities. NPHC organizations are also called BGLOs. The oldest sorority in the NPHC was founded in 1908, which attests to the determination of the Black women founders at the time. Black sororities continue to have a rich legacy of promoting higher education, sisterhood, character development, and racial uplift (Tindall et al., 2011). According to Willis (2023), for Black women, “companionship from their sisters offers a haven where they can seek shelter from [discrimination], receive psychological support, and enhance their group identity” (p. 25) as Black women. The importance of spaces where Black women can be in community with one another cannot be overstated. Black women occupy a unique place in society at the intersection of race, gender, and class, as Collins (2000) outlined.

Countless articles support the presence and engagement of Black sororities as a means to counter-act some of the negative experiences Black women suffer. Although some historically Black sororities were founded at HBCUs, their collective presence at PWIs has had a profound impact. The literature has shown Black sororities serve as spaces of intersectional refuge (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Hannon et al., 2016), facilitate leadership development (Jennings, 2017), promote racial uplift (Tindall et al., 2011), and contribute to the collegiate retention of Black women (Chambers & Walpole, 2017). The founding of Black sororities serves yet another example of how Black women have had to facilitate their own support in place of institutional interventions.

Recognizing that all Black women are diverse and filled with various distinctions, Collins (2000) inferred the shared experience of gendered racism and political and economic subjugation forms a “group-based, collective standpoint” (p. 24). The standpoint she speaks of is not static; instead, it is in continuous evolution as Black women navigate power, privilege, and oppression in their daily lives. PWIs operate as gendered and racialized systems that mirror the oppressive structures of U.S. society (Everett & Croom, 2017). Moreover, if institutional leaders are interested in supporting and retaining Black women collegians, they should consult Black women. Usually lost in broader data sets regarding Black students and women of color (Stewart, 2017) or not acknowledged at all because the high numbers of enrollment lead scholars to believe they are doing just fine (Everett & Croom, 2017), Black women can be rendered invisible (Kelly et al., 2021). Black women scholars must respond to the call to action to center the intersectional experiences of Black women in the literature (Haynes et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Due to the nature of Black women “struggling successfully” (Dawn Shaw, 2017), higher education institutions do not identify Black women as a population in need and, thus, have let themselves off the hook for establishing environments that meet the needs of Black women students. Despite some advances in student support offerings, such as multicultural and women’s centers, the needs of other populations, such as Black men and women in science, technology, engineering, and math, have taken priority, leaving Black women understudied and under supported (Everett & Croom, 2017). In alignment

with the “adaptable” label, Black women have created their own support structures to navigate the oppressive systems within higher education institutions.

Black women continue to matriculate through higher education at higher rates than their peers (de Brey et al., 2019). Some higher education scholars may look at this statistic and see a population doing well; however, other higher education scholars call for increased attention to Black women (Patton & Croom, 2017). Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 2000) calls for Black women to produce research and scholarship directly linked to changing the conditions that subordinate Black women and their communities. We must investigate and chronicle the intersecting experiences of Black women in the literature because student populations with perceived needs are the ones who get resources (Everett & Croom, 2017). Scholars such as Collins (2000) called on researchers to raise awareness of the erasure of Black women’s experiences in literature by bringing Black women and their experiences to the center of academic discourse over a decade ago. I propose elevating the experiences of a group of Black women who have had a different engagement with Black sororities. Those who sought membership but were unsuccessful in their pursuit. I believe their experiences can help expand the collective standpoint found in the literature regarding Black women and Black sororities. Insights from the population can reveal how higher education institutions need to evolve to best meet the intersectional needs of all Black women.

Black sororities historically have been seen as a retention tool and site of resistance for Black women. If this is not the case for Black women who are rejected from these organizations, there could be an even more significant gap in support for

Black women than institutions realize. Black feminist scholar, hooks (2014), reminded us that an “internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation” (p. xiv). As Black women scholars, we must continue to be introspective and work to ensure the collective standpoint of Black women captured in the literature includes a wide array of Black women’s experiences. When comparing the plight of Black feminists in Britain and the United States, Reynolds (2002) questioned whether the collective standpoint of Black women presented in “academic accounts and popular narratives of the Black female experience” (p. 591) captured the authenticity of all Black women’s experiences. I have had similar concerns when I have read literature regarding Black women’s experiences with Black sororities while attending PWIs. I want to elevate the experiences of Black women that have not been captured.

Previous studies have indicated cause for concern regarding sorority rejection within historically white sororities and had similar findings (Chapman et al., 2008; Golden, 2014; Kane, 2016; Kiray, 2018). Their research has been insufficient in understanding the meaning Black women ascribe to experiences of sorority rejection because Black sororities maintain a unique cultural significance. For Black women, questions of sorority affiliation can be a lifelong experience due to the postgraduate engagement component of Black sororities. Additionally, the recruitment and intake processes differ between historically white and Black sororities because Black sororities do not conduct a recruitment and bid process. Each researcher noted limitations and encouraged future research on rejection within BGLOs and multicultural Greek councils.

By using Collins's (2000) standpoint theory to inform my inquiry into the sorority rejection experiences of Black women, we can learn more about the meaning Black women collegians ascribe to these experiences in predominantly white environments. With insight into how Black women are navigating this experience, we can leverage this shared knowledge to foster a better understanding of how institutional leaders and student affairs professionals can support Black women.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to expand the collective standpoint of Black women found in higher education literature by exploring the phenomenon of Black women being rejected by Black sororities while attending PWIs. According to Collins (2009), researchers interested in exploring the experiences of Black women should consult Black women because they are the best subject matter experts. Black women can self-define their collective standpoint because of their unique placement at the intersection of racial and gender oppression. Collins (2000) inferred two components characterize this standpoint, one informing the other. The first component cites that "Black women have a unique political and economic status that affects the work (paid and unpaid) that Black women perform, the communities in which they live, and the relationships they have with other people, amongst other things" (Collins, 1986, p. 747). The second component is informed by the first. Collins argued these experiences, colored by racial and gender oppression, create the conditions in which a distinct Black feminist consciousness is developed. With this understanding, any research that elevates Black

women as the authors of their own experiences can be considered a part of a collective Black feminist standpoint.

Despite some negative attention, over 100 years since their founding, BGLOs continue their legacy of racial uplift by promoting civic engagement and leadership among their collegiate members. Each organization boasts an incredible list of prominent members, including Martin Luther King Jr., Zora Neale Hurston, Jesse Jackson, and the first Black and Asian American Vice President, Kamala Harris. A wealth of literature has highlighted the incredible impact and benefits of BGLO membership (Brown et al., 2021; Kimbrough, 2003; Parks, 2017; Ross, 2000). However, it is not lost on me that several prominent Black cultural figures who are college educated, such as Oprah and Barack and Michelle Obama, are not affiliated with BGLOs. Oprah attended Tennessee State University, an institution with BGLOs when she matriculated, yet she never pledged. I have always wondered if she had a story.

Although there has always been great interest in joining these organizations at the undergraduate and graduate levels, interest does not guarantee membership. Moreover, much of what happens during these processes varies beyond the national membership intake processes that each organization generally adopts. Due to the secrecy of these organizations and the unique attributes and approaches taken by each region and chapter, there are things about membership selection that we, nonmembers, may never know. Given the lack of accessibility to this data, my goal is not to dissect each organization's membership intake process. Instead, I am interested in learning more about Black

women's experiences with these processes, specifically those not granted membership and what followed.

Previous studies on sorority rejection experiences omit Black sororities, which can create gaps in support for Black women students. The recruitment and membership intake processes differ between the varying Greek councils, and the literature investigating sorority rejection experiences must account for these nuances to inform the support of all students. This study used an exploratory qualitative approach to gather the lived experiences of this unique population of Black women. There is a rich tradition of storytelling in community among Black women I intend to foster through a Black feminist lens (Black, 2008). The history of exclusion from historically white groups, the intersecting oppressed identities of Black women, and the prevailing lack of support for Black women students at PWIs lay an interesting foundation for social rejection. My study did not aim to evaluate or condemn Black sororities. Instead, I wanted to expand Black women's collective standpoint in the literature by elevating the voices of Black women who have experienced Black sorority rejection. Again, the purpose of this study was to understand better the phenomenon of sorority rejection among Black women to expand the collective standpoint found in higher education literature.

Research Questions

RQ1: What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority during their undergraduate studies at a predominantly white institution?

RQ2: What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution?

Significance of the Study

The continued study of Black women's experiences while attending PWIs is significant because Black women continue to endure race and gender-related stressors in these contexts. Many studies frame Black sororities as a source of support for Black women (Green, 2020; Hannon et al., 2016; Jennings, 2017). The narratives captured in these studies almost always come from the perspective of Black sorority members, offering a standpoint that does not include Black women who were unsuccessful in their attempts to gain membership in these organizations. Black sororities boast hundreds of thousands of members and play a prominent role in the racial uplift of the Black community. Despite the global impact, legacy, and broad appeal, we know that interest in these organizations does not guarantee membership. Existing research exploring the phenomenon of rejection from Greek organizations is limited to historically white sororities (Chapman et al., 2008; Golden, 2014; Kane, 2016; Kiray, 2018). Findings of these studies noted the damaging effects this experience can have on the potential new members as individuals.

Considering the limited nature of research exploring sorority rejection experiences, I intend to use Collins's (2000) standpoint theory to highlight the distinctive consciousness of the Black women who share in this experience. Unlike their white counterparts, Black women experiencing sorority rejection in predominantly white environments must navigate systems of power, privilege, and oppression. My study can

provide a foundation for further inquiry into these rejection experiences by using the tenet of standpoint theory from BFT. Additionally, by using the sista circle methodology, which acts as a method and methodology, the Black women who share in this experience were positioned as experts to inform a more inclusive standpoint in the literature.

All humans have an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In psychology, social acceptance exists on a continuum in which people feel included in varying ways (Leary, 2010). On the opposite end, social rejection is the absence of inclusion that exists on a continuum as well (Leary, 2010). Higher education scholarship has noted the importance of connection and social integration in the literature that dates back to 1970 (Astin, 1996; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1988). Scholars such as Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Strayhorn (2008) expanded this notion by stating that a sense of belonging is of particular importance to students who “may perceive themselves as marginal to campus life” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 305). With Black sororities being one of the few spaces a Black collegiate woman can have the intersections of her identity addressed, this study’s findings can help improve the social and institutional support of Black women attending predominantly white institutions.

Glossary of Terms

- **Black** is a U.S. racial and cultural term used to describe any person of African descent. Black people may also be referred to as African American.
- **Divine Nine** is a term referring to the nine historically Black Greek-lettered organizations. They are also called the National PanHellenic Council (NPHC), founded officially in 1930.

- **Graduate advisor** is an alumnae member of a BGLO who voluntarily advises an undergraduate chapter of the organization.
- **Hazing** is any act that endangers the mental, emotional, or physical health or safety of a person for initiation, admission into, affiliation with, or continued membership in an organization.
- **Induction** is an event marking the beginning of a membership intake process.
- **Informational session (rush)** is a meeting in which aspiring members are informed about the historical events of the organization and given information about the next steps in the membership intake process.
- **Intersectionality** is a concept and analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different experiences of oppression and privilege.
- **Line** is a term associated with a pledge class or group that is engaged in the membership intake process as a collective. Each line is given a formal name to denote the characteristics of the line membership and can be identified by a specific initiation season and year (e.g., Fall 2018).
- **Membership intake** is the process by which interested persons become members of BGLOs. An informational meeting, an application process, an interview, and an intensive educational process generally characterize it. The educational process can involve 2–4 weeks of education centering on the organization's evolution, its founders, and its unique programs and philanthropic endeavors. Membership intake replaced pledging in 1990 and

requires a chapter to maintain regular contact with national officers for approval activities and align with expected standards of conduct.

- **Paper** is a term used to define a person who did not pledge. Usually considered a derogatory term.
- **Pledging** is the process by which someone became a member of a BGLO before 1990. Pledging entailed members of a pledge class wearing like clothing, engaging in activities around campus, and engaging in a call-and-response dynamic with current members.
- **Potential new member/aspirant** is a label placed upon people interested in becoming a sorority or fraternity member.
- **Rejection** is the process by which someone's pursuit of membership into a BGLO is unsuccessful. Notification of rejection may be done through formal or informal means of communication.
- **Sorority** is a sisterhood of women who collectively convene for a purpose.
- **Stroll** is a synchronized form of stepping, dancing, and chanting unique to one or more BGLOs.

Researcher Positionality

Going beyond a traditional positionality statement, I want to offer radical honesty to my readers in hopes of challenging racist and patriarchal institutional cultures and acknowledging that my life experiences and historical contexts influence how I approach my research (B. Williams, 2016). I am particularly fond of hooks's (1984) descriptor of positionality in how she stated those in both the margin and center are very aware of their

positionality in relation to the other. I identify as a 32-year-old Black queer woman from Louisville, KY, an advanced doctoral candidate, and a diversity trainer at a local government agency. Although both my older sister and mother obtained bachelor's degrees while I pursued my undergraduate education, I am the first in my immediate family to pursue a graduate education. I also worked in student affairs for 6 years, serving in various roles supporting multicultural, religious, and LGBTQ identity populations. My privileged and minoritized identities are always present in my roles as a professional and student due to the nature of my work within the (newly forming) diversity, equity, and inclusion industry and my awareness of critical theories. It is second nature for me to assess my social location in a situation, and yes, I am one of those folks who can make anything "about race." Critical race theory teaches us that racism, although socially constructed, is endemic to our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

As a youth, I was nerdy and driven and went on to become the valedictorian of my high school class. I attended a state school an hour from my hometown because my calculations determined I would receive the biggest financial aid refund. I changed my major many times to find one aligned with my interests and skills, finally settling on kinesiology. When I reflect on my interest in pursuing membership in a Black sorority, I think about my first encounter with sorority women on campus during orientation week. I remember seeing girls serving as orientation leaders and staff wearing coordinated colors like pink and red during orientation activities. I gathered quickly that these women were a part of sororities. I remember circling the BGLO event scheduled to take place on Friday

in my orientation book. I did not know much about BGLOs then beyond knowing an older cousin who lived out of state was a member.

When Friday arrived, I sat in awe with the small group of girls I knew from high school and watched as two hosts laughed with one another while introducing various sororities and fraternities to the stage. Although it was a simple exhibition or stroll-off of sorts, the dynamics of the amphitheater were explicit. It was us vs. them. From that moment on, my intention to join a sorority guided my future decisions. Through the help of my friends and self-guided research, I developed a plan to carefully curate a resume of leadership, student involvement, and community service. At the top of my sophomore year, rumors were buzzing that the sorority I was interested in would be taking a line. After picking up my application from the graduate advisor's house, submitting all the necessary documents, and completing an in-person interview. I was notified within two days that the sorority would not be "pursuing my membership." I was devastated.

Almost immediately after my rejection experience, my mental health declined. I became depressed, bitter, and isolated from many of my friends. I no longer had any motivation to attend Black social events and feared it would be evident I had been rejected. The blow to my ego was not one I felt equipped to handle. A review of evidence linking social pain to human neural systems by Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004) noted rejection from one's peer group can lead to diminished self-esteem in young adults.

Moreover, Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004) suggested an overlap exists between physical and social pain that can lead to a neural response that "motivates action at regaining safety and mitigating painful experiences" (p. 294). Although I had

experienced rejections and failures before this point, nothing compared to the feeling I felt when my own people rejected me. A group of collegiate Black women I admired and respected collectively decided they did not desire my acceptance into their sisterhood.

Later in the same semester, I applied to participate in the National Student Exchange program, was accepted, and moved to a nearby state to attend an HBCU. A new institution would provide a fresh start for me and instill a new sense of confidence. In a 2017 study of 231 Black women from various educational backgrounds, Lewis et al. underscored Black women's resilience to create strategies and techniques to promote their survival. I rushed to leave my home institution because I needed to remove myself from the environment and felt there was an overall lack of support. Looking back, I cannot think of one person of authority I felt would understand my situation and provide resources to support me. Almost all my advisors and trusted professional staff, like the woman who operated the multicultural center, were personally affiliated with BGLOs. I was unsure of their loyalties and did not know who I could trust.

I subsequently returned to my home institution after one semester away at an HBCU. I continued to pursue membership in my desired sorority two additional times to no avail. My community assured me it was "their loss" and that I could always "do a graduate chapter." The words were anything but comforting, but I eventually found peace with the outcome. After my senior year, I was offered a position in the multicultural center of my institution. I accepted the role, experiencing my first taste of student affairs. The physical space of our center was enclosed in glass, with a center wall separating the lounge space and the staff offices. As a staff member, I got to experience an outsider-

within phenomenon described by Harrison (2008) as a person who has a “particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about a dominant group without gaining full power accorded to members of that group” (p. 18). Initially coined by Collins (1986) to describe the unique social location of Black women when they served as domestic workers for white families, the phrase has since been extrapolated to serve as a backdrop for what Collins (2010) called a standpoint or the unique perspective of Black women.

As a staff member in a multicultural center, I was tasked with creating and supporting a culture at our university where our students of color could thrive. Even though we served all students of color, our usual patrons identified as Black, as did most of the staff. I observed our students' interactions through the glass for the next few months. I watched as various social dynamics played out, fascinated by what I had not noticed before when I was just a student. There were differences in the ways BGLO members and nonmembers engaged in the space and interacted with one another. The seed for this dissertation was planted at that moment. Were the interactions informed by the role of social rejection? Although there were indeed students who had no interest in joining a BGLO, others also openly expressed interest in their respective social circles. At probates, it was not unusual for the performance to include jabs at those who did “make it to the finish line.” These moments of public humiliation were always challenging for me to watch.

At the time, I did not have the language to frame my experience correctly. I convinced myself that rejection was a part of life and that I was being dramatic. I told

myself that I was not the only one who did not “make it” and that there would be other opportunities to join. I told myself that a solid group of friends was just as good as a group of “sisters.” I convinced myself that my sexual orientation had nothing to do with the decision. I avoided the “conversation” with my friends, who were members of the sorority I pursued for years, because I was not convinced I could handle the truth about my experience. I eventually broke down and asked the direct question. The response I received was less than satisfying. There was no long conversation or intense debate about my candidacy—just a few moments, with one or two points raised regarding my “fit” in the organization. I was told voting occurred, and the group moved on to the next person in an anticlimactic manner. Assuming what I was told was the truth, I think about how there is no one-size-fits-all approach to this membership selection process. Every organization, every region, and every chapter have processes that are known and unknown. The variety in approaches to membership selection makes it difficult to dissect or determine what is right or wrong.

Now that I have completed my doctoral coursework, I have a variety of ways to analyze and process my own experience and that of others. Collins’s (2000) work helped me to think about my experience more critically. For most of my life, I was seeking validation to confirm that the story of my rejection experience mattered. I sought this validation, not realizing my standpoint was already enough as a Black woman. My rejection experience catalyzed subsequent decisions that made me who I am today. As it is our nature as Black women, we tend to figure things out on our own, which can be incredibly exhausting. We need interventions, too.

Overview of Dissertation

My dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study and gave background of the problem, the problem statement, and the study's purpose. Chapter 1 also states the research questions, researcher positionality, glossary of terms, and the significance of exploring the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of rejection from Black sororities at PWIs.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature and research regarding Black women, PWIs, Black Greek life, and sorority rejection. In it, I provide a general history of the origins of U.S. higher education, present scholarship regarding the experiences of Black women in U.S. higher education and discuss the origins of fraternity life for white men. I also explore the origin of BGLOs in addition to a review of the literature surrounding Black sororities. In closing, Chapter 2 presents existing literature on sorority rejection and introduces my theoretical framework, Black feminist thought (BFT).

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, qualitative approach, and data collection measures and introduce my method and methodology: *sista circle* methodology. I also explore Black feminist epistemology as an epistemological foundation for identifying and analyzing the data collected. I used one interview, two *sista circles*, and one online survey to explore the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of rejection from Black sororities.

Chapter 4 begins with introducing the study participants before presenting the research findings. Three major findings were identified to support the research questions. I illustrate Black students attending PWIs have to navigate worlds within worlds. Then, I

reveal how inextricably connected BGLOs and Black communities can be at PWIs.

Lastly, I leverage participants' narratives to highlight that unique cultural nuances in their experiences can complicate social rejection.

Lastly, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings, drawing attention to how they support my theoretical framework, identify practical implications, and make recommendations for student affairs practitioners and future research directions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This research aimed to better understand the meaning Black women collegians ascribe to experiences of rejection from Black sororities while attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Recognizing Black women have a collective standpoint or unique experience in the United States because of our exposure to gendered racism, this dissertation addressed the complexities of one half of a prominent structure in the Black community: Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) for women. With over 800,000 combined members of Black sororities in the United States and abroad, the legacy of the original founding members continues to reign prominent today. In society, Black women are subject to anti-Blackness and sexism (Collins, 2000). While attending PWIs, Black women are subject to stereotypes, microaggressions, and experiences of gendered racism (Moore, 2016). Black women are distinct from white women and Black men students attending PWIs because they must navigate the general pressures associated with college, including academic and social challenges within a broader realm of white supremacy and patriarchy. To cope with these challenges, Black women lean on one another and seek out environments and communities where they can bring their whole selves (Greene, 2020). For some women, these communities are Black sororities that bring forth a lifelong commitment to scholarship, service, and sisterhood (Hernandez, 2007). I argue, for other

women, Black sororities may represent and perpetuate the same structures of oppression from which Black women seek solace.

I seek to elevate literature that helps define Black women's social location within higher education. Using Collins's (2000) concept of a Black woman's standpoint as a lens, I reference literature that offers insight into a shared experience of Black women pursuing education at PWIs. I focus on the institutions and structures that oppress Black women in academic and sociocultural contexts. The experiences of Black women studying at PWIs have been explored thoroughly in the literature (Allen, 2019; Canty, 2021; Domingue, 2015; Kelley et al., 2021; Shahid et al., 2018; Stewart, 2017; Woods, 2021). However, the addition of research highlighting the phenomenon of rejection from Black sororities, one of few Black cultural institutions, will present a perspective from nonmembers rarely explored in literature. Again, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of Black sorority rejection while attending a PWI.

Conclusively, my literature review is comprised of five parts. In Part 1, I provide a general history of the origins of higher education and Black access points to higher education. By introducing higher education access through a lens of Black experiences, I establish a context in which women felt Black sororities were needed. After years of exclusion from higher education, Black women eventually became the highest earners of baccalaureate degrees when you account for race and gender. In Part 2, I present scholarship regarding the experiences of Black women in higher education, their psychological need to belong, and the existing support structures. I elevate Black sororities as one of the few spaces on college campuses where Black women do not have to negotiate their race and gender. For Part 3, I discuss the origins of fraternity life for

white men and women. Then, I follow a chronological timeline that brings forth the founding of white sororities, Black secret societies, Black women's clubs, and BGLOs. By providing a brief history and timeline, I situate the founding of Black sororities within a broader, complicated legacy of elitism, advocacy, and Christian values. Part 4 highlights the existing scholarship regarding Black sororities. Lastly, Part 5 begins by discussing the membership selection processes for sororities. It is during this process that a rejection experience is likely to occur. I then present an overview of existing literature on sorority rejection. The lack of inclusion in existing research on sorority rejection will highlight a gap in the literature that my study hopes to address by exploring the phenomenon exclusively in historically Black organizations. Part 6 closes the chapter with an introduction to my theoretical framework, BFT, to demonstrate the lens through which I enter this scholarship. BFT aims to shift Black women and their experiences from the margins of academic discourse to the center.

Black Women in U.S. Higher Education

I provide a brief history and timeline of U.S. higher education in the following sections, emphasizing key access points for Black women. Through the presentation of this history, I argue the rise to the top of baccalaureate degree attainment by Black women is no small feat, considering there was never an intent for their entry into the PWIs of higher education. Every progression toward the inclusion of Black people and, thus, Black women was fought for by the oppressed and against by those in power. Although the overall circumstances of Black women's matriculation are arguably better than in the 19th century, the phrase "these halls were never meant for me" rings valid for

Black women students then and now. In contextualizing the access points of Black women into higher education, I show higher education is an inherently oppressive system that was never designed to benefit Black women (Whitehead, 2019).

Patterson Paves the Way

The opening of Harvard College (now Harvard University) in 1636 marked the beginning of U.S. higher education. Before the Civil War of 1861, more than 500 colleges were started in the colonies, although only a few survived. Access to these colleges was limited to the wealthy who were close in proximity, and early admission processes considered your family's reputation, previous schooling, and social connections (Cole, 2010). Very few colleges admitted women and Black people at this time, with some exceptions in women's colleges and coed schools like Oberlin College in Ohio. In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black woman to earn a bachelor's degree in the United States (Oberlin College and Conservatory, 2022), many years before most Black women would gain access to higher education.

HBCUs served as the only access point to higher education for Black students for many decades before the failed attempts to desegregate (Bell, 1980; *Hawkins v. Board of Control*, 1956). As access to other institutions slowly increased after 1964, Black students found themselves in an environment that did not promote their success and well-being. According to Gbemi (2016), "By the early 1970s, two-thirds of all African American students in the United States were enrolled at PWIs [predominantly White institutions]" (p. 2). Early narratives from Black students attending school at this time depict an environment rife with racism (Chambers, 2014) and pressure to assimilate into white

culture (Gbemi, 2016). Differences between the experiences of Black women and Black men in higher education during this period are hard to ascertain as Black women are largely absent from the literature surrounding women's access and Black people's access to higher education. After laws expanded access after 1964, degree completion for Black women still lagged behind those of Black men. Some have posited this was due to their prioritization of roles as mother and wife over education; however, racism and political subjugation likely played a role.

Although it has been over 60 years since the racial integration of U.S. higher education first began, it is well documented that Black students attending PWIs still face many of the same challenges as their ancestors. Several scholars have noted Black students who choose to attend PWIs are likely to encounter microaggressions, the permeance of racism, isolation, exclusion, lack of a safe space, and lack of institutional support (Ferguson, 2019; Griffith et al., 2019; Harper, 2013).

Coupling these experiences while engaging in academic studies can affect the sense of belonging of Black students negatively. Additionally, Black women students may encounter race and gender issues, making their ability to integrate into campus environments more difficult socially (Cox, 2020; McDougal et al., 2018; Shabazz, 2015).

Black Women at PWIs

Black women currently account for the largest non-white matriculating student body in U.S. higher education and also lead in the attainment of bachelor's degrees (de Brey et al., 2019). However, for some Black women, the journey to degree completion is anything but easy. In 1991, Allen and Haniff found Black women attending PWIs had

“lower academic aspirations, less than ideal relationships with faculty, and overall dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience. Almost 2 decades later, Winkle-Wagner (2009) described Black women’s college experience as a “perpetual homelessness” (p. 9), highlighting various tensions and conflicts with campus norms unique to Black women in her book, *The Unchosen Me: Race, Gender, and Identity Among Black Women in College*.

More studies have affirmed that college campuses can be a battleground for Black women students. Hannon et al. (2016) confirmed this notion when participants noted they “live in two worlds” at PWIs, further signaling Black women must function in different realities to persist. The high levels of attainment do not certainly reflect the journey of Black women who reach graduation. Many scholars have noted the unique position of Black women in higher education due to intersections of race, class, and gender and have called for research to elevate these experiences (Collins, 1985; Crenshaw, 1989; de Brey et al., 2019; Porter, 2013; Porter et al., 2020).

Racial tensions cause significant stress for Black women students at PWIs. In Shahid et al.’s (2018) study that engaged 129 Black women using a variety of scales, including the Racial Tension subscale of the Cultural Attitudes and Climate Questionnaire, negative campus environments were linked to increased stress for Black women, which may lead to declining mental health. Domingue (2015) explored the various stereotypes projected onto Black women by interviewing 12 Black women student leaders and found Black women’s peers and professors often had low expectations of them and, thus, were surprised at their intelligence. Different from the

Angry Black Woman stereotype, participants in the study recalled that the Exceptional Black Woman stereotype “is still inferior” and “evokes a range of intimidation and approachability from peers” (Domingue, 2015, p. 462).

Additional studies have explored the effects of another common stereotype: the Strong Black Woman (SBW). West et al. (2016) conducted a study using data from 90 Black women students through open-ended questions to explore the image of a SBW and its impact on mental health. The findings revealed participants had negative and positive associations with the SBW stereotype; however, when contextualized in an environment that can be racist, sexist, and classist, a positive association (hard-working) can turn into a negative one (perfectionism). The paradox of the SBW image is just one of many challenges Black women experience at PWIs. Without institutional support, these challenges led to the need for Black women to create their own spaces of belonging, a space by and for themselves.

The section on Black women in U.S. higher education offers a primer on the Black woman collegian experience at PWIs. By highlighting literature that explores the challenges Black women face in these environments, I assert coping mechanisms and support structures are critical to our success. Additionally, I highlight the lack of institutional interventions that have been brought forth to address the oppression and subjugation experienced by Black women collegians.

Finding Inclusion and Belonging in Higher Education

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the literature on social integration, inclusion, and belonging in higher education. Notions of inclusion and belonging in

higher education can be traced back to early student persistence research published by Spady (1970), Astin (1975), and Tinto (1975). With an emphasis on student retention, these authors developed models intended to explain the relationship between the student, the institution, and persistence (Ukoha, 2006). Although these three models of persistence laid the foundation for how institutions think about student retention, the models are less applicable to Black women because they were grounded in whiteness (Rendón et al., 2000). Of the three models, Tinto's model is regarded as one of the most accepted models to describe student persistence (Boyle, 1989). Tinto's (1975) model posits a student's integration into an institution's academic and social systems is most likely to predict their persistence.

The unfortunate thinking behind Tinto's (1975) model is that it assumes all students desire to integrate into an institution academically and socially. Several scholars have noted the inapplicability of this model to the experiences of students of color (Braxton, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Tierney, 2000). In 2003, Guiffrida conducted a qualitative study with 88 Black undergraduate students to determine the role of Black student organizations in facilitating social integration at PWIs. Although the study's findings largely supported the role of Black student organizations in facilitating social integration for Black students, this was not always the case. Guiffrida found, for Black students whose norms and values were more congruent with the white majority, their ability to integrate socially was challenged because they felt forced to choose between white and Black groups. For Black students whose norms and values did not align with the white majority, involvement in Black organizations provided a space they perceived

as having shared norms and values and, thus, influenced social integration. Additionally, Black students from predominantly Black communities had the most difficulties socially integrating into PWIs (Guiffrida, 2003).

Guiffrida's (2003) findings are critical because they illustrate the tension between assimilative models of retention and students of color. If institutions buy into Tinto's (1975) model, they are likely to believe students must align with the institution's norms and values to fully integrate academically and socially. Furthermore, if students are labeled as experiencing incongruence, the institution leveraging Tinto's model may assume this is due to the student's inability to make connections. It would be hard for Black women to assess their involvement experiences using this model as it does not account for systemic gendered racism. In a study informed by critical race theory exploring the engagement experiences of 31 Black women who attended colleges a part of the Great Lakes Colleges Association from 1945 to 1965, Stewart (2017) noted "racism most certainly endangered Black women's college engagement" (p. 40). Although some of these participants matriculated at PWIs over 70 years ago, PWIs continue to be places where Black women encounter gendered racism and exclusion.

Despite the shortcomings of Tinto's (1975) model, having a sense of belonging can influence the persistence of Black women positively (Cooper et al., 2016). I also recognize the opposite as true—that oppressive and exclusionary collegiate environments can harm Black women. Much of the literature in this section has detailed narratives of Black women facilitating their own spaces of belonging to survive oppressive campus environments with inadequate institutional interventions. In some cases, research has

depicted Black women as resilient and able to overcome any challenge. Moore (2016) explored the experiences of eight Black women attending one particular PWI and highlighted the significance of internal resilience when navigating the challenges of a PWI. Although it is true Black women have had to rely on themselves to succeed, there must be greater attention to the responsibility of higher education institutions to meet the needs of Black women collegians (Patton & Croom, 2017). Throughout this paper, the concept of social integration may also be referred to as social networking or establishing a sense of belonging. In the next section, I bring the reader to the current context of Black women navigating higher education.

Black Women's Experiences at PWIs

To combat the challenges often experienced at PWIs, Black women seek various forms of support to persist. Social, academic, and financial support have been found to lead to the successful matriculation of Black women students. In a phenomenological study of 11 Black women students, some traditional and nontraditional, Shabazz (2014) described Black women's perceptions of the campus climate and university support options at PWIs. Her findings revealed several support elements for students coping with the racism and sexism often experienced at PWIs. Participants noted supportive family and friends, support groups for Black women, strong faculty connections, mentors, and financial assistance were essential to enduring the college journey.

In Domingue's (2015) study exploring the oppression of Black women at PWIs, participants highlighted women of color-centered networks as resources that helped "women to see that their individual oppression was actually connected to cultural and

systemic oppression” (p. 467). More scholars have affirmed the importance of a solid network to the success of Black women students. Greene (2020) interviewed 12 Black women students in a phenomenological study to understand the lived experience of Black women and their resilience. She found participating in clubs and organizations aligned with their identities gave Black women a sense of connectedness and community. The stance in the literature is clear: building and maintaining a social circle is crucial to Black women’s survival in higher education. Although the literature has contributed to the collective standpoint of Black women’s experiences at PWIs and helps us to understand what contributes to Black women’s sense of belonging, it also highlights another issue. Patton and Croom (2017) said it best, “Postsecondary institutions have been overwhelmingly irresponsible in addressing racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that affect Black women” (p. 3). Although Black women deserve collegiate experiences free from oppression and exclusion, Black women, as humans, also have an innate desire to belong.

Black Women’s Psychological Need to Belong

In 1995, Baumeister and Leary set out to determine whether the need to belong was a fundamental human motivation. Reviewing literature from the previous 3 decades, they established metatheoretical requirements and evaluated the empirical evidence against their “belongingness hypothesis” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Their analysis concluded the “need to belong can be considered a fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 521). Additionally, they found strong ties between belongingness and various emotional and cognitive processes. In other words, one’s well-

being can be negatively affected when there is a lack of belonging. This is particularly relevant for Black women because they are subject to gendered racism and political subjugation in higher education and U.S. society. The literature from the psychology discipline indicated Black women seek belonging in higher education on two levels. Like everyone else, they have an innate desire to form bonds and feel connected, but there is an additional layer. Due to the systemic oppression and subsequent exclusion of Black women within higher education, Black women also seek belonging to survive. Although Black women leverage many sources of support to find belonging in higher education, one primary source can be historically Black sororities. These organizations were not always an option. Next, I present an overview of BGLOs as a source of support for Black women.

BGLOs as Sources of Support

One social network Black women leverage is BGLOs. Many of these organizations were founded in the early 1900s and modeled after traditionally white fraternities that barred Black students from membership. The first Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, Fraternity, Inc., was founded in 1906 at Cornell University. These men sought to create a space emphasizing academic studies, service, and leadership training (Ross, 2000). In 1908, the first sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., was founded at Howard University, an HBCU, by women seeking to challenge the many injustices subjugating Black women during the time (Jennings, 2017). By 1963, nine fraternities and sororities completed the formation of the Divine Nine, otherwise known as the NPHC. Together, these groups and other minority student organizations help to establish

a cultural familiarity for Black students at PWIs, which provides a foundation that enables Black students to move beyond various cultural obstacles (Museus, 2008).

To further underscore the importance of Black sororities, Hannon et al. (2016) found, for Black women, participation in all-female organizations provided a space where they “did not have to negotiate race or ethnicity” (p. 662). The appeal of these organizations cannot be overstated. Black sororities have a rich legacy of promoting higher education, sisterhood, character development, and racial uplift (Tindall et al., 2011). Although some Black women choose to join historically white sororities, these sororities do not offer channels for a lifelong commitment or have chapters in the United States and abroad like historically Black sororities (Ross, 2000). The presence of these organizations has undoubtedly contributed to Black women students’ retention at PWIs. The section on Black women finding inclusion and belonging in higher education offers a primer on the Black woman collegian experience at PWIs. By highlighting the literature exploring Black women's challenges in these environments, I assert coping mechanisms and support structures, such as networks of Black women, are critical to their success. As BGLOs are uplifted in the literature as one medium of support, my study aimed to add complexity to the current literature on Black women’s experiences with BGLOs by introducing a perspective that has yet to be explored: those of women who sought membership unsuccessfully. Fraternity and sorority life, or Greek life, as it is also referenced, has a long history in higher education (Syrett, 2009). The same oppressive structures of race, gender, and class that inform Black women’s current navigation of higher education are also present in the Black Greek life structures regarded as a saving

grace for its members. This point is not to minimize the role of BLGOs within the Black collegiate community. Instead, the point is to explore how a system like fraternities and sororities, or Greek life, is rooted in systems of oppression. Although the founders of BLGOs sought to evolve Greek life to be relevant to their community's needs, it is warranted to question if they may have recreated harmful dynamics unintentionally during the evolution—in this case, the rejection of Black women from BLGOs. Next I provide an overview of these organizations' origins and evolutions to further demonstrate the throughlines of Black women's continued oppression and exclusion.

Fraternity and Sorority Life

As previously established, fraternities and sororities play a vital role in students' social integration on college campuses. By giving the reader insight into the origins of collegiate Greek-letter organizations, I illustrate how power, privilege, and oppression are constants within these organizational structures. In this part, I provide a brief overview of the history of Black fraternal groups, starting with the exclusionary practices of white fraternal groups that led to their creation. Taking a deeper dive into Black sororities, I outline the factors that informed their development by establishing the context of how they came about and their shared values. Although it is true that Black sororities were founded to disrupt the white fraternities and sororities and Black fraternities they were barred from, there is still a shared origin story. Previous research has addressed widely adopted practices such as pledging (Turk, 2004) and the values Black sororities espouse, such as racial uplift (Giddings, 1988). Still, it needs to address the tension between these two value systems. The scholarship highlighting Black sororities has demonstrated these

organizations are complex, lending positive and negative experiences to their members. Lastly, by elevating the literature on BGLOs, I detail these organizations' cultural significance, highlighting why people are continuously led to pursue membership. With this understanding, the reader can see why rejection from one of these organizations may be significant.

Origin of White Fraternal Organizations

Inspired by collegiate literary societies, secret societies with Greek letter names whose membership was limited to white men date back to the early 1800s (Syrett, 2009). Early functions of fraternities in higher education include asserting independence from faculty control, promoting leisure, and cultivating brotherhood. Values of intelligence, protection, honor, and loyalty were salient for members of these brotherhoods. These days, college access was limited to those of an elite class. As higher education continued to expand and open its doors to the poor and middle class, class status became an important distinguishing factor. The appeal of these organizations cannot be overstated. In addition to the exclusivity and secrecy, members could connect to men in similar organizations at other college campuses. These three elements (intelligence, class, exclusivity) are still salient to most Greek-letter organizations today, including BGLOs.

By the 20th century, the number of Greek-letter organizations increased, the U.S. economy shifted, and the focus of higher education evolved beyond clergy preparation. Familiar attributes of Greek life were born in this era, including an emphasis on networking, financial contributions of members, and distinctions between Greek members and nonmembers. Membership selection was reserved for the wealthy, the

moral, those with connections, and those with a natural “gentlemaness” about them. As new legislation passed expanding access to higher education, the fraternities began to adopt racially exclusive policies to ensure their membership would remain limited to the white male elite (Hughey, 2010). The overt exclusion ended in the 1960s, with fraternities shifting to a de facto culture of segregation (Hughey, 2009).

Before the turn of the 20th century, the first Greek-letter sorority was established by a group of four white women (Turk, 2004). In 1870, the year of the sorority’s founding, many U.S. colleges continued to exclude women from attending. As for Black women, despite the passing and ratifying of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment, segregation, racism, and discrimination continued to mark their daily lives, making enrollment at a “white” school nearly impossible. As years passed and the number of white women enrolling in coed institutions increased, a barrage of anti-women’s education literature was released. These books claimed that education damaged a woman’s health and that women were physiologically “unsuited” for academic training (Kelley, 1979). Like their male counterparts, the white sororities of the early days emphasized companionship, emotional support (to combat the hostile collegiate environment), and academic excellence. Long before Tinto’s (1975) retention model, students had identified companionship and emotional support as critical to their success.

The early white sororities expanded similarly to fraternities, creating chapters on other campuses. Forty years after their founding, conversations surrounding Christian values became apparent in the sororities as an influx of Jewish and Catholic women

began attending college due to immigration (Turk, 2004). Wanting to limit membership to Christian women, many white sororities adopted discrimination policies. I could not determine when historically white sororities expanded their membership to include non-white members; however, due to exclusion from existing sororities, Black and Jewish women began to create their own sororities in the early 1900s. Some members of sororities, such as Kappa Alpha Theta, feared inviting women into the organization that would not fit or mesh well with existing members (Turk, 2004). Subjective elements such as “fit” still play a role in sorority membership selection today (Jennings, 2017).

Regarding inviting non-Christian women, one woman noted although she was not personally against them, sisters in other parts of the country would be (Turk, 2004). As of 2022, racial diversity and inclusion within National Panhellenic sororities remain a problem (Smith, 2022). In a study exploring Black women’s experiences in historically white sororities, Smith (2022) interviewed eight women and found many experienced microaggressions and racism within their organizations. For many Black women, Black sororities contribute to an increased sense of belonging and help provide solace against racism (Canty, 2021). If historically white sororities are seen as an extension of PWIs and the larger U.S. society, some Black women may pursue membership in historically Black sororities instead (Smith, 2018).

In closing, only a tiny percentage of Americans are members of fraternities and sororities; however, every U.S. president has been a fraternity member, except three presidents (Chang, 2014). Despite its small numbers, I call attention to this statistic to demonstrate how powerful a fraternal network can be. As of 2023, fraternities and

sororities continue to boast about their ever-expanding network and influence on college campuses. With increases in their social networks, there have been minimal strides toward diversity and inclusion. For example, despite advances in our understanding of the complexity of gender, most fraternities, including BGLOs, still limit their membership to those who identify as men. As to whether organizations are clearly defining their framing of gender, I would argue they are not; thus, a preference for cisgender identity can be assumed. There are some exceptions, with historically white fraternities such as Sigma Phi Epsilon adopting a clear policy supporting transgender inclusion (Fraternal Law Partners, 2022).

In other words, despite fraternities and sororities' role in helping their members feel included, parallel experiences of exclusion from these organizations are also constantly taking place. To promote a sense of inclusion among some, excluding others may be inevitable. Regardless of how one may feel about this dynamic, this structure became the foundation for subsequent fraternal organizations.

Origin of Black Elite Groups

At a time when sororities for white women were taking off, Black women continued to be excluded and subjected to systemic racism and sexism. For example, the late 1860s–1920s women's club movement brought forth substantial progress toward equal rights for women; however, Black women were excluded. Groups catering to white women, like The National Woman Suffrage Association, founded in 1869, believed women could achieve equal rights through a constitutional amendment. As decades of exclusion passed, women's clubs for Christian, Jewish, Indian (from India), Black, and

even collegiate women were founded to elevate specific group issues in pursuit of equal rights (Woyshner, 2009). In 1897, the National Association of Colored Women was formed, uniting hundreds of smaller women's clubs for Black women (Lerner, 1974). The functions of Black women's clubs varied by region and class and included everything from suffrage activities to social welfare programs and bible studies (Lerner, 1974). Black women's clubs predated the founding of the first Black sorority and illustrate the founding of Black sororities was inspired by more than white sororities and Black fraternities.

Although a good portion of the literature on the women's club movement acknowledges a diverse array of groups who organized, a timeline of the women's suffrage movement essentially erases the experiences of Black women. For white women, each element on the suffrage timeline was an important step toward equal rights and the eventual passing of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1920. However, for Black women, a timeline of the same period would reflect very different elements, as the suffrage movement largely ignored the plight of Black women until the 1900s. In a period marked primarily by what region of the United States one lived in, Black women in some areas were organizing locally in women's groups and coed groups for civil rights. Federally, a series of civil rights acts began (all subsequently overturned), and some Black men even secured political seats at the state level. Despite these advances, the overall climate for Black Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s still consisted of lynching, massacres, race riots, and separate but equal doctrine.

The climate of the late 1800s and early 1900s is significant because all the Black students who were the first to matriculate through higher education had to do so in a tumultuous national racial climate. The Black women who created the first Black sorority in 1908, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., were born in the 1870s and 1880s. At a time when very few Black people were enrolled in college, a group of exceptional women who were one generation removed from slavery made their way to Howard University. A historically Black college, Howard provided its students with a safe haven. I offer this brief history in hopes of demonstrating the varied but interconnected milestones that paved the way for creating a sorority for Black women. A vast landscape of oppression and exclusion prompted the creation of opportunities for inclusion. As more sororities for Black women formed on college campuses, the Black Women's Club movement persevered and immensely impacted Black communities. Black people were taking matters of racial uplift into their own hands.

Introducing BGLOs

Comprised of nine groups, five fraternities, and four sororities, the Divine Nine is a part of the NPHC. The NPHC is the home to nine historically Black fraternities and sororities, also known as BGLOs. Of the nine organizations, eight were founded between the years of 1906 and 1922: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity (1906), Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (1908), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (1911), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (1920), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority (1922). The remaining organization, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, was founded in 1963.

Although I could speak at length about these groups and their relative accomplishments, I want to emphasize some distinct elements of BGLOs that I find relevant to my study. Three of the nine organizations were founded on predominantly white campuses, including the first BGLO, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity (Ross, 2000). When referencing the impetus for the founding of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity in 1906, Chambers et al. (2005) described a Black student retention problem at Cornell University. By aiming to replicate the culture of “no man left behind,” the founding fathers of Alpha Phi Alpha sought to improve one another’s academic and social integration at Cornell. BGLOs continue to play a pivotal role in integrating Black students into university life. Membership in a BGLO can offer individuals social and cultural capital and contribute to a broader “community cultural wealth” (Chambers et al., 2005, p. 235).

Determined to carve out a space for themselves, the founders of BGLOs sought to emulate many elements of the white Greek-letter organization structure while also centering racial uplift and culture. Washington and Nuñez (2005) asserted “Greek-letter organizations were creations of this ‘double-consciousness,’ reflecting impulses toward both Black communal values and the trappings of white American elitism” (p. 143). Double consciousness is the concept that describes Black American existence as a contradiction. More specifically, it asserts Black Americans lack true self-consciousness and are forced to look at themselves through the eyes of White Americans (DuBois, 1903). In other words, assimilation occurred when the upper-class Black community sought to distance themselves from their Black peers who had a different experience in the South. Some may argue this pattern of elitism persists today within BGLOs. The

divide between upper- and lower-class Black people is another example of the inclusion/exclusion dynamic. Although opportunities for some Black people expanded, others were left behind.

In this section, I gave the reader insight into the origins of collegiate Greek letter organizations. I assert notions of exclusion have always run parallel to opportunities for inclusion. Whether class, race, academic standing, or geographic location, fraternities and sororities have always existed to include and exclude. Although all fraternities and sororities share in this dynamic, some attributes make them distinct. For this study, I took a deeper dive into literature that centers on Black sororities. These organizations occupy a unique space in fraternity and sorority life because they are one of few spaces on predominantly white collegiate campuses catering to Black women. Other race and gender communities have several non-Greek organizations to choose from, such as the Society for Women Engineers, the Black Student Union, or the Student Activities Club.

Black Women Finally Get a Seat at the Table

There are four historically Black sororities: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., founded in 1908; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., founded in 1913; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc., founded in 1920; and Sigma Gamma Rho, founded in 1922. Research on Black sororities can be relegated into four categories: comparison studies exploring the differences between white sororities and Black sororities, studies examining the philanthropic and service-oriented contributions of these groups, the impact of membership on its members, and the membership selection processes.

In a study with sorority members at two universities in the southern United States, Berkowitz and Padavic (1999) conducted open-ended interviews with 24 women. They found notable differences between the white and Black sororities. The memberships were vastly different, with the white sororities boasting 100–150 members and the Black sororities maintaining between 10–45 members. The white sororities had residential houses on campus, but the Black sororities did not. Further, members had varying reasons for joining their sororities, with a greater emphasis on “finding a man” for the white participants in this study. Lastly, members of Black sororities stay engaged beyond their undergraduate education through alumnae chapters. A more recent comparative study of Black sororities versus white sororities was Mitchell et al. (2017). Other comparative studies have explored non-Black membership in Black sororities (Chen, 1998; Hughey, 2010; Renee, 2020) and have contributed to the literature regarding sorority members.

Sorority Values

Service, sisterhood, and scholarship are shared values that tie all Black sororities together. When speaking on requirements for sorority membership, Giddings (1988) noted, to be considered, one has to demonstrate a devotion to community service. Inspired by elements of the Black women's club movement and the fight for civil rights, all four sororities maintain national philanthropic and civil service endeavors. For the duration of their existence, Black sororities have worked to serve and shape their communities. Gasman et al. (2008) found the philanthropic work of BGLOs is often overlooked because they are viewed as social organizations, not philanthropic ones. The theme of social networking continues to be a common thread within the literature.

Hernandez (2007) inferred that the greater part of “community service endeavors occurs in graduate chapters” (p. 19). Other scholarly works have provided more detail about the community service efforts of Black sororities, such as Hernandez (2008), Whaley (2010), and Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014). I take this emphasis on community service at the graduate level to mean there may be a greater emphasis on social networking at the undergraduate level.

Many studies have explored leadership development in BGLOs (Kimbrough, 1995, 1996; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). Regarding the literature examining Black sororities and leadership, Jennings (2017) conducted a phenomenological study to explore members' leadership experiences after graduation and used an online questionnaire and individual interviews and found membership in a Black sorority helps foster a sense of “self-determination and self-definition” (p. 104). Jennings (2017) also found “friendship and support, community service, and networking opportunities” (p. 109) proved to be the most significant experiences the Black sorority members felt empowered them as minority women. These findings are consistent with earlier published research regarding sorority leadership, including Kimbrough (1995), Tindall et al. (2011), and Giddings (1988). In conclusion, friendship, support, and networking continue to be elevated as outcomes of Black sorority membership. However, regardless of sorority affiliation, friendship, support, and networking remain critical components of establishing a sense of belonging for Black women collegians (Hauenstein, 2018).

Complex Member Experiences

The notion that not all Black women find a community within Black sororities is not a new one. Some literature has highlighted what I would call complex member experiences that speak to various intersecting identities. Very few studies have explored the lesser discussed experiences of women who identify as members of Black sororities and members of the LGBTQ community. Williams (2021) examined the experiences of LGBTQ members by conducting virtual interviews with 16 women. She explored how Black sorority members who identify as LGBTQ navigate sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity in their organizations. Some participants who identified as masculine-presenting shared outdated dress codes requiring dresses inhibited their participation (Williams, 2021). They shared experiences of not “fitting in” with their line sisters and spoke of fielding suspicions that they “wanted” their sorors in a sexual manner. Another finding of note was the necessity of cultural competence for chapter advisors. Some participants in the study shared the advisor initiated and encouraged discrimination, judgment, and, in extreme cases, bullying. Lastly, participants shared a “don’t ask, don’t tell” culture that describes how sororities secretly want to rid their organizations of homosexuality (Williams, 2021). This study's findings differed in some ways from Literte and Hodge’s (2012) research. In their study, many participants shared experiences of acceptance by their chapters, although they acknowledged a greater culture of homophobia within BGLOs and Black communities.

In the study, *The Challenges and Rewards of Sisterhood: An Exploration of Women’s Experiences in Black Sororities*, Hernandez (2007) engaged 31 women in semi

structured interviews to explore how membership in a Black sorority influenced participants' college life and relationships. Her research produced three main findings: women use membership in a Black sorority as a racial coping strategy in college (particularly in predominantly white environments), the legacy of skin color politics, gendered racism, and classism played a significant role in which sorority participants joined or believed they best "fit," and lastly, participants saw value in the graduate chapter component of Black sororities (Hernandez, 2007). Participants in Hernandez's (2007) study also shared the emphasis on academic achievement as members of Black sororities and gaining social capital and career advancement through membership. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology, Wilson (2021) further explored the effects of Black sorority membership on career advancement in the higher education industry through interviews with 12 women. Her participants indicated the wisdom from sorority members, increased sense of accountability, and preparation for management positions prepared them for career advancement in their field. Wilson's research contributed to the literature on the experiences of Black sorority members. Conclusively, these studies' findings demonstrate some Black sorority members experience the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion within their respective organizations.

Membership Selection Experiences

The last research category details women's experiences during a Black sorority's membership selection process. For some sororities, the membership selection process starts the first day you attend a sorority's event. For others, the process begins when you apply or begin the national membership intake process curriculum. Unfortunately, there

is no consistency across organizations, so the content of the membership selection process is difficult to assess. Regardless of one's starting point, the membership selection process is often when one could first encounter negative experiences of hazing, elitism, and colorism. Some scholars have explored why women pursue membership despite the publicity of negative membership selection experiences.

Tindall et al. (2011) explored how members of Black sororities “understand and perceive colorism and elitism” (p. 40). During in-depth interviews with 18 women, participants admitted individual members perpetuated stereotypes within their organizations. Each sorority has a unique set of stereotypes, some more pleasant than others, such as “the pretty ones” vs. “the ugly ones.” Tindall et al. (2011) noted sororities with more favorable stereotypes based on beauty standards rooted in colorism and outdated ideals of femininity risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and promoting elitism when they uphold these stereotypes. Study participants broadly acknowledged buying into stereotypes ultimately hurt the organization but there was something about the undergraduate BGLO culture that promoted an “us vs. them” mentality. Graduate chapter experiences are different, with the focus shifting to service and regional activities more than how another group perceives a group. Other studies (Brown et al., 2021; Frierson, 2019; Henderson, 2021) have taken a deeper dive into the phenomenon of colorism, a narrative associated with Black sororities since their inception. Given these associations, I believe they play a role in the membership selection processes that end in rejection or experiences of exclusion for some women.

Weathers (2001) studied the socialization methods of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the second oldest Black sorority. They discovered many tactics were used to socialize women into active members, including hazing, rituals, and social isolation. Sadly, notions of hazing and elitism have long been associated with Black sorority membership. Lee-Olukoya (2010) conducted a phenomenological study using a semi structured interview protocol with 17 participants to highlight the dynamics of hazing in Black sorority life. Participants went to PWIs and HBCUs in different parts of the country and had joined their sororities between 1969 and 2005. Although her study produced many significant findings, the theme I found most noteworthy was “Hazing Ideology.” Lee-Olukoya’s (2010) analysis defined hazing as “a rite of passage that builds traditions, cultivates power, and ensures integrity” (p. 102). Most but not all participants admitted to experiencing some form of physical or mental hazing during their pledge process. Despite some intentions to not go through with certain things, participants shared the various ways they rationalized the behavior associated with hazing (e.g., power, self-esteem, love). Lastly, participants described the discussion of hazing as complex because although there were moments they committed to doing things differently when they got the chance, they often found themselves hazing the next set of girls just as they were. Lee-Olukoya (2010) concluded, despite hazing being banned, many are still committed to maintaining it in their organizations because they feel it “creates a strong appreciation for the organization” (p. 114) and continues the “tradition.” Although this study is from 2010, hazing continues in many Black sororities today, all with a zero-tolerance policy. When someone considers pursuing membership in a Black sorority, they likely have done

their research and have formed an opinion as to whether they will consent to be hazed. Parks and Mutisya (2018) continued the conversation on hazing and Black sororities and reported a similar phenomenon.

In the section, *Black Women Finally Get a Seat at the Table*, the scholarship highlighting Black sororities demonstrates these organizations are complex, lending positive and negative experiences to their members. I argue the literature exploring the negative associations of Black sororities has fallen short of including the experiences of those who fail to secure membership. Although there are four unique historically Black sororities, shared values tie all their organizations together, creating a shared experience. By elevating the existing literature on Black sororities, I assert the experiences of potential members have not been explored thoroughly like those of current members. Additionally, although Black sororities' role in creating inclusive environments for their members has been elevated, the part Black sororities may play in leaving some Black women feeling excluded has not. My study hopes to further complicate the narratives regarding Black sororities and sources of support and inclusion for Black women in the literature.

You Either Have It or You Don't: Sorority Rejection

In this section, I provide a brief introduction to sorority membership selection processes. To explore the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of rejection from Black sororities while attending PWIs, I must investigate their experiences with Black sororities the moment they start. The process of identifying potential candidates for sorority membership is often referred to as the membership selection process. The

membership selection process for Black sororities has evolved over the years. In the early years following their founding, sororities had pledge clubs. Pledge clubs were educated, trained, and evaluated for membership in a public manner (Williams, 1992). Movies like Spike Lee's *School Daze* visually represent this phenomenon.

The topic of membership selection can be seen as controversial to some sorority members as much has changed since the 1900s. In 1999, pledge clubs were banned to eliminate hazing and replaced by a formal membership selection process (Williams, 1992). Much of what has been said regarding membership selection processes draws from cultural knowledge, not literature. It is crucial to offer the reader some context regarding this process because this is when the phenomenon of rejection is most likely to happen. Sweet (2001) called it the "separation" phase. Crenshaw (2004) understood this phase as being "when groups present themselves as an attractive option for non-members and attempt to screen out undesirable candidates" (p. 18). Following an overview of membership selection, I provide a literature review on sorority rejection and discuss the mental health implications of social rejection.

Introduction to Membership Selection

There are notable differences between Black and white sororities' membership selection processes. The recruitment process for white sororities usually begins before the 1st week of school for incoming 1st-year students. Many Black sororities do not allow 1st-year students to join their organizations. Regardless of one's year in school, the initial step of the membership selection process (an informational meeting) can be held during any semester at any time. For white sororities, there is usually a "rush" process managed

by the university's fraternity and sorority life office that involves potential new members attending various events hosted by the sororities. After the "rush," the potential new members and sororities engage in a ranking and matching process. Computer software is often used to determine whether a candidate is a match. Matching requires a potential new member to rank a sorority highly and for the same sorority to rank the potential new member highly. Chances for a rejection or leaving "rush" without a match increase if a potential new member only lists one sorority instead of all the other options.

For Black sororities, the membership selection processes differ among the four sororities. However, they are all likely to include an informational meeting, an application process, and an interview process in no particular order. Once a candidate advances past those steps, they are usually inducted into a formal membership intake process. Although BGLOs shifted away from pledging to adopt a membership intake process, many members were unhappy. They continued to pledge and conduct a formal membership intake process simultaneously (Kimbrough, 2009). There are unique norms and practices that take place during membership intake in each organization that are not documented (Kimbrough, 2009). Rejection of a candidate can happen formally or informally at any stage of the process. Although rejection is an inevitable phenomenon many experience as early as childhood, our desire to belong never dissipates (Leary, 2010). Today, four studies have been published exploring the concept of sorority rejection in traditionally white sororities (Chapman et al., 2008; Golden, 2014; Kane, 2016; Kiray, 2018).

Literature on White Sorority Rejection

In 2008, Chapman et al. found “those who are not successful in the [sorority] recruitment process experience a significant decline in self-esteem” (p. 45). For white sororities, recruitment is when new members seek affiliation with one or more sororities. These findings support earlier research by Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004), noting rejection from one’s peer group could lead to diminished self-esteem in young adults. Women who failed to receive a bid during recruitment described their reactions as shocked and devastated (Golden, 2014). Participants noted the week-long interactions with the various sorority women built up expectations and allowed them to envision themselves as members. Golden (2014) described the transition into one’s first semester of school without adequate support (i.e., the support of a sorority) as the “most vulnerable point in an unmatched woman’s experience” (p. 97).

In 2018, Kiray provided a more descriptive picture of sorority rejection and highlighted a need for better support structures for women who leave the recruitment process without a match. Several themes emerged in Kiray’s study, but one theme can be true of predominantly white and Black sororities: the lack of clarity about why women were not selected. Lastly, Kane (2016) conducted a quantitative study to conclude whether certain variables could predict acceptance or rejection from a sorority. Results determined women with higher academic scores were more likely to be rejected by a sorority and inferred existing policies related to sorority membership recruitment might be reinforcing a superficial selection process and limiting diversity in membership. All four studies acknowledged a lack of diversity within their participant pool, and three

explicitly stated the need for future research on rejection to include historically Black sororities. Although the findings of these studies are resources that can inform how institutions and leaders support impacted students, it is important to note the differences between white and Black women students. Black women students attending PWIs must navigate gendered racism in addition to experiences of rejection and exclusion that may come. Establishing a sense of belonging for Black women is arguably more important as they navigate the general pressures associated with college, including academic and social challenges within a broader realm of white supremacy.

Black Sorority Rejection

There are few to no studies that have explored the phenomenon of rejection in Black sororities. Related to Black sororities, membership is not always granted to those who pursue it and thus can lead to feelings and experiences of rejection (Jennings, 2017; Weathers, 2001). Some studies, such as Literte and Hodge's (2012) study examining attitudes regarding homosexuality within Black sororities, indirectly described the sentiment of rejection. However, the study participants ultimately succeeded in becoming members of Black sororities. Other studies have made mention of the possibility of rejection indirectly. When Hernandez (2007) interviewed one participant in her research exploring women's experiences in Black sororities, the participant shared, although there are qualities her sorority looks for in potential candidates, such as integrity, leadership, and loyalty, there is a chance a candidate could possess ideal attributes and still not be considered "a good fit" (p. 134). She said if no one is willing to vouch for her, or if she is perceived as having a bad reputation, the group is unlikely to extend membership to the

candidate. The participant further explained some chapters have “subjective standards” that can affect the selection process significantly. I hope to explore these subjective standards and their relationship to the rejection experiences of my participants.

In another nod to rejection, Allen (2013) mentioned HBCUs tend to have large pools of potential members, making joining a BGLO competitive. Although my study engaged students who attend PWIs, the competitive nature of securing membership may still be a factor. Additionally, when referencing the notion that sorority membership is exclusive, one participant in Lee-Olukoya’s (2010) study claimed, “You either have it, or you don’t,” while another shared, “Membership has its privileges, and we should stop offering membership for free” (p. 128). These comments support the belief that subjective standards are present in the membership selection process in addition to a Black sorority’s national standards. More research is needed to explore the presence of subjective standards in the membership selection processes of Black sororities. Existing models of social integration highlight formal student organizations as a resource to combat exclusion (Tinto, 1993). Guiffrida (2003) agreed culturally based organizations can contribute to the social integration of Black students attending PWIs; however, these organizations can promote social separation and exclusion. Although Guiffrida’s study generally explored culturally based organizations, more research is needed to determine the full impact of Black sororities on social integration for Black women attending PWIs.

The Psychology Behind Rejection

Humans are social beings motivated to seek social inclusion (Branscombe et al., 1999). When one perceives a lack of social inclusion or belonging and instead feels

subject to social exclusion—one will experience feelings of rejection (Maslow, 1968). Cozzarelli and Karafa (1998) cited many theorists who have linked social exclusion to adverse psychological outcomes (Baumeister & Tice, 1979; Spivey & Prentice-Dunn, 1990). A study on peripheral group membership by Jetten et al. (2008) distinguished intragroup rejection as a result of exclusion by the ingroup from intergroup rejection where the source of the rejection is an outgroup and found, despite the differences, there is a “similar phenomenology of the rejected” (p. 104). When one considers the dynamics of Black sorority rejection, the source of the rejection comes from one’s ingroup (the Black community). It renders the rejected women to the periphery of the Black community. This marginalization can lead to decreased well-being, and, as research has indicated rejection can be a painful experience, especially due to in-group issues (Branscombe et al., 1999). Knowing social rejection can lead to adverse mental health effects, more research is needed that explores the relationship between rejection from Black sororities and mental health.

In this section on sorority rejection, I briefly introduce sorority membership selection processes. It is mainly my voice presenting my understanding of how these processes unfold based on my experiences and conversations with BGLO members. Existing literature on membership intake in BGLOS primarily has explored the shift from pledging to membership intake. Following a primer on membership intake, I offer a literature review on sorority rejection, noting a gap in the literature regarding BGLOs. Lastly, I discuss the mental health implications of social rejection. Although sorority rejection has not been studied widely, the concept of social rejection has. The research

regarding the psychology of social rejection is highly relevant to studies exploring sorority rejection because sorority rejection can be considered a form of social rejection.

Black Feminist Thought

There have been many iterations of Black feminist thought (BFT) as it has evolved. Although some iterations have overlapping themes, others may have distinct tenets. Nonetheless, many scholars have agreed BFT remains one of the most comprehensive theoretical and epistemological frameworks to assess and discuss the lived experiences of Black women created by a Black woman (Alinia, 2015). BFT was an ideal choice for the theoretical framework of my study for a few reasons. First, it encourages Black women to tell their own stories and for others to listen (Collins, 2000). As I explore the phenomenon of sorority rejection, BFT helped me capture the stories through the lens of Black women.

Additionally, BFT validates the need for the intersectionality of Black women to be acknowledged (Collins, 2000). Lastly, it names the gendered racism and political subjugation that has historically and continuously influenced Black women's experiences in the United States, which ties all Black women together (Collins, 2000). Porter et al. (2020) offered the following summary of the three main themes of BFT:

First, the philosophy is guided by the experiences of Black women although others have documented their stories. The second theme is the interlocking nature of oppression expressed through the crucial intersections and similarities that connect Black women. Black women's multiple identities are inextricably linked; one cannot be discussed as separate from the other. Thirdly, Black Feminist Thought attempts to redefine Black women's culture. (Collins, 1986, as cited in Porter et al., 2020, p. 255)

I appreciate Porter et al. (2020) because their summary highlights the elements of BFT that I found most relevant to my study. As a Black woman, I feel honored to conduct this study with other Black women to ensure our experiences are elevated adequately in the literature. What I have always loved about sororities is their ability to unite diverse groups of women. Although some women may align perfectly with sorority stereotypes regarding who should be members of specific organizations, many women fall outside those narratives. Given this diversity phenomenon, I expect similar diversity among a group of women who were unsuccessful in their pursuit of membership. BFT affirms this notion of diversity and takes it one step further by addressing how Black women have numerous intersecting identities that link us. Lastly, BFT is “for the culture.” According to urbandictionary.com (2022), the phrase means you do something “because of an additional perceived value of doing that thing. The value can be perceived by yourself, a group of people, or society as a whole” (n.p.). I am doing this study for the culture. Although my findings might not shed the best light on historically Black organizations, I intend to promote healing and change. I hope the implications of my study will reduce future instances in which Black women cause harm to other Black women.

To expand further on the importance of centralizing Black women’s experiences, Collins (2000) suggested, for Black women, knowledge is constructed through their lived experiences and the process of reflection and dialogue about those experiences. My chosen method and methodology, sister circle methodology (SCM), allowed my participants to construct knowledge through their lived experiences and contribute to a collective standpoint in the literature. As related to the intersecting oppressions Black

women face, Collins drew attention to the structural ways Black women are oppressed through race, class, and gender. It is also important to acknowledge all Black women do not experience all types of oppression the same way. This complexity makes it challenging to define and understand Black women's experiences from the margins, so their experiences must be brought to the center. BFT also acknowledges the historical narratives surrounding Black women as jezebels, Black mummies, and domestic servants and commits to redefining the culture of Black women. I will dive deeper into BFT in Chapter 3. Ultimately, the oppression Black women experience in the larger U.S. society is also evident within structures of higher education (Phillips, 2005).

Similarly, Black sororities set out to change the narratives of Black women in the 1900s. Founders of the first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, had a vision for Black women that embodied the ideals of progress for Black people captured in the motto, "By culture and by merit" (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, 2022). Based on publicly accessible literature, I argue the founders of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority exemplified Black feminist thinking (Whaley, 2010). With such a heavy emphasis on racial uplift, I wonder how my participants' stories can help unveil the nuances of overlapping systems of oppression and reveal how Black women experience these systems.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, Black sororities can play a pivotal role in the lives of Black women. Members and nonmembers have reaped the benefits of the founders' advocacy and racial uplift efforts. On predominantly white campuses with BGLOs, they are likely to offer student engagement opportunities not offered elsewhere on campus. What makes

Black sororities unique is that they are lifelong organizations. As Black women continue to navigate graduate programs and the larger workforce, they are continually identified as affiliated/unaffiliated. Although I encourage scholars to continue contributing to the literature regarding positive aspects of Black sorority membership, there is much to learn about the women who attempted membership into these prestigious organizations but were unsuccessful. When there is such a small community and limited structures of support of Black women at PWIs, and there is a possibility that one such structure can embody both supportive and unsupportive practices simultaneously, what does that mean for higher education institutions? My study sought to learn what meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority at a PWI. BFT served as my theoretical framework and lens used to analyze the data collected from my study.

Chapter 2 was comprised of six parts. Part 1: Black Women in U.S. Higher Education provided a general history of higher education, paying particular attention to Black access points. By introducing a timeline of higher education through a lens of Black experiences, I established a context in which Black sororities were created in response to Black women's systemic oppression and political subjugation. In Part 2: Finding Inclusion and Belonging in Higher Education, I presented literature that elevated Black women's experiences in higher education, their psychological need to belong, and existing support structures. I identified Black sororities as one of the few spaces in collegiate environments where Black women could bring in their whole selves. Part 3: Fraternity and Sorority Life explored the origins of collegiate fraternity and sorority life that situated the founding of Black sororities within a legacy of elitism, advocacy, and

Christian values. Part 4: Black Women Finally Get a Seat at the Table highlights sorority values and complex member experiences and offers an introduction to membership selection. The literature has demonstrated the complexity of Black sororities while also uplifting the shared values that tie them together. Part 5: You Either Have It, or You Don't: Sorority Rejection compares the membership selection processes of Black and white sororities, followed by a literature review regarding sorority rejection. The literature reveals a gap I hope to address regarding including Black sororities in existing studies on sorority rejection. Part 6: Black Feminist Thought closes the chapter by introducing my theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 introduces the method and methodology of my study. I also share the research design, data collection methods, and delimitations.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how the experiences of Black women in higher education are complex and filled with legacies of struggle and success. My awareness and understanding of those struggles provide the foundation for my decision as a researcher to use Black feminist theory (BFT) as a theoretical framework. In this chapter, I discuss the research design, qualitative approach, and my rationale for using a critical lens to explore the experiences of Black women. This chapter describes how sista circle methodology (SCM; Johnson, 2015) informed this study, including participant qualifications, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Lastly, I discuss my study's delimitations and trustworthiness measures before ending with a chapter summary.

Higher education was never meant for Black women as they were routinely denied the privileges and level of access extended to white people and men (Collins, 2009). Despite progress in the matriculation of Black women, predominantly white higher education institutions continue to operate as gendered and racialized systems of oppression (Everett & Croom, 2017). When attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Black women face additional challenges to persist (Shabazz, 2015). Microaggressions, stereotype threats, and isolation are just some of the many challenges explored in the literature (Canty, 2021; Hannon et al., 2016; West et al., 2016; Woods, 2021). Institutional and student-led programs aiming to build community among Black

women, such as cultural centers and Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), have all been credited as vital components leading to the perseverance of Black women in higher education (Bartman, 2015; Brown, 2021; Domingue, 2015). However, not all Black women find community and belonging in these spaces (Hernandez, 2007). For example, Black queer people, although Black, could be considered the “wrong” kind of Black because Black communities do not generally approve of LGBT individuals (Brown, 2021; Williams, 2021). For some women, pursuing membership in a sorority may be a dream deferred if their attempt at gaining membership is ultimately denied.

Additionally, despite the historical legacy and well-documented benefits of Black sorority and fraternity membership, their value has been questioned before (Kimbrough, 1995). Currently, most higher education institutions view Black sororities as a retention tool and site of resistance for Black women. If this is not the case for Black women whose request for membership into these organizations was denied, there could be an even greater gap in support for Black women collegians.

In her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) referenced Black women's collective standpoint when saying, “As historical conditions change, so do the links among the types of experiences Black women will have and any ensuing group consciousness concerning those experiences” (p. 25). For some women, joining a Black sorority is the pinnacle of their collegiate experience (Jennings, 2017). For others, joining a Black sorority may symbolize the lowest point of their collegiate experiences (Lee-Olukoya, 2010). By elevating the experiences of a group of Black women who have had

a different type of engagement with Black sororities not yet explored in the literature, we can expand the collective standpoint regarding Black women and Black sororities.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to expand the collective standpoint of Black women found in higher education literature by exploring the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by Black sororities while attending PWIs.

The following research questions will guide this study:

RQ1: What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority during their undergraduate studies at a predominantly white institution?

RQ2: What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution?

Research Paradigm

I wanted to establish a clear research paradigm so readers of my study could make sense of my choices and provide clarity regarding my philosophical understanding (Willis et al., 2007). I approached this research endeavor using critical theory as a lens, which is an inquiry paradigm allowing the subjectivity of participants' rejection experiences to be emphasized while framing these experiences within inherently oppressive institutions of higher education. The following sections highlight the epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions that guided my research study.

Epistemology describes the nature of knowledge and asks, "What is the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known" (Guba & Lincoln, 1991, p.

108)? BFT as an epistemology recognizes the sociopolitical location of Black women in the academy is at the intersection of multiple oppressed identities, often invalidated by the “social institutions that legitimate knowledge” (Collins, 2009, p. 253). As a Black woman researcher, I, too, feel the tension between the dominant narratives I was exposed to throughout my education and my own lived experiences. Growing up in Kentucky, our K–12 curriculum was not very diverse and failed to include the narratives of triumph and resilience of many communities of color. The dominant narratives I was exposed to taught me I needed to attend college to succeed. When I went on to college, the distance between my peers from high school and I widened as many of them went directly into the workforce or started families. My father never graduated from high school and is also a convicted felon; however, he became a business owner and raised a wonderful family. The dominant narrative about what knowledge was valued led me to believe what I was learning in school was superior to other learning methods. Through Black feminist epistemology, the collective histories and lived experiences of the Black women in my study constituted a standpoint that brought forth its own measures for assessing and validating knowledge.

Critical Theory

According to Howell (2016), critical theory considers emancipation to be the primary rationale for knowledge development and “involves an understanding that reality is shaped through social and historical processes” (p. 38). Additionally, Bronner (2011) stated the main objective of critical theory is to challenge existing perspectives and systems of power. As referenced previously, Black women are an oppressed group whose

very existence within higher education is the fruition of hard-fought battles for inclusion and equity. Critical theory emphasizes the relationship between one's historical and current condition, and similarly, BFT asserts the same association is required to understand Black women's collective experiences fully. Although it has been 150+ years since the earliest matriculation into higher education, Black women still experience barriers to their collegiate success. Critical theory paved the way for a BFT epistemology to be born. Noting Black sorority rejection as one shared experience of Black women, the SCM engaged a group of Black women in dialogue about their experiences.

In addition to critical theory, my study was guided by constructivism, which epistemologically believes the "validity of knowledge arises through negotiated understandings of what knowledge may encompass" (Howell, 2016, p. 33). By leveraging SCM, I encouraged my participants to help co-construct areas of inquiry in alignment with constructivist thinking. Next, I state the ontological and axiological assumptions to delineate my research paradigm further. Ontology helps frame what the researcher believes is true or real (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The ontological assumptions of constructivism infer multiple constructions of reality coexist as opposed to one singular truth (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). This supports Collins's (2010) standpoint theory that validates the diverse array of Black women's experiences as one collective perspective. Axiology frames what the researcher values (Creswell, 2013). I value bringing my whole self to my research, as I articulated in my positionality statement in Chapter 1. I also appreciate research conducted for Black women by Black women in the sense that I can connect with my participants and engage in conversation with them rather

than just asking questions. Constructivists value the cocreation of knowledge and construction of meaning in communal environments (Denicolo et al., 2016).

Black Feminist Epistemology

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Black feminist thought (BFT) was an ideal choice for the theoretical framework of my study because it encourages Black women to tell their own stories (Collins, 2000). Johnson (2021) described BFT as a theoretical framework that “situates Black women in the historical context of how they have been subjugated and victims of racism and sexism in the United States” (p. 45). Black feminist epistemology is the epistemological arm of BFT, also described as Black women’s “ways of knowing” (Collins, 2000, p. 289). Leveraging BFT and the tenets of Black feminist epistemology within the framework empowered me to validate the experiences of my participants and me more nuancedly.

Collectively, the measures or core tenets of Black feminist epistemology affirm all Black women can contribute to bodies of knowledge because their lived experience is a criterion of meaning (Collins, 2000). As Black women, we are survivors, graduates of a “school” for those with our unique intersecting identities and experiences (Collins, 2000). Formal education or not, Black women have a unique intelligence that has been overlooked and devalued in traditional research (Evans-Winters, 2019). Black feminist epistemology asserts meaning making through dialogue and a sense of connectedness is essential to validating knowledge (Collins, 2000). Be it our ancestors, Black classmates, or siblings, speaking and listening helps us refine our collective voice. I successfully

leveraged my participants' individual voices to offer a collective voice regarding the phenomenon of Black sorority rejection.

Another component of Black feminist epistemology is what Collins (2009) called an ethic of caring. To do this properly, one must not dismiss emotions in dialogue but focus on an individual's uniqueness and maintain a capacity for empathy. I love this element because it highlights how Black women can be different and see one another as the same all at once. My research design welcomed any emotions in dialogue and intentionally sought to offer a healing space for my participants.

The final tenets of Black feminist epistemology include the ethic of personal accountability, Black women as agents of knowledge, and the pursuit of truth (Collins, 2000). These remaining tenets speak to the epistemology's foundation as a critical theory. Emotion and reason are considered alongside ethics when assessing a knowledge claim within Black feminist epistemology. Although Black women may be tempted to validate their knowledge claims through other means perceived to be well respected, Black feminist epistemology asserts the standpoint of Black women is valid knowledge – no translation or comparison is needed (Collins, 2000). Evans-Winters (2019) affirmed this point by reminding us that Black women often rely on our cultural intuition, which may deviate from traditional methodological rules.

Lastly, Black feminist epistemology questions how we arrive at the truth while asking and asserting what is truth all at once. The exploratory nature of this epistemological approach gave me the freedom to engage in research for and with Black

women without limitation. Given this admission, my study refrained from identifying limitations and instead highlighted delimitations.

Research Design

The overall research question was: What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution? To answer this question, I took an exploratory qualitative approach to gather the lived experiences of this unique population of collegiate Black women. According to Creswell (2013), in its simplest form, qualitative inquiry reflects the researcher's interpretative capability and beliefs. As a Black woman researcher, I was committed to reflexivity and "investigated all dimensions" (Collins, 2002, p. 33) of the Black woman's standpoint with and for the Black women in my study. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate vehicle to explore my research questions because qualitative research allows the researcher to serve as the key instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Additionally, Yin (2015) stated qualitative research promotes the study of the meaning people ascribe to their lives in real-world conditions in addition to representing the people's views. I captured these features (reflexivity, researcher as a key instrument, and an emphasis on real-world conditions) using *sista circles*, my chosen method and methodology, created for Black women by Black women who sought to minimize the historical distance between the researcher and their participants (Johnson, 2015). In its inception, SCM was designed to be both a methodology and a qualitative method. It served as my method and methodology and allowed me to explore the meaning Black women ascribe to their Black sorority rejection experiences in their own words. Due to its

dual application, you will see SCM referenced throughout the study as “sista circle method,” “sister circle methodology,” and “sister circle method and methodology.”

As previously mentioned, Black women occupy a unique position in higher education due to intersections of race, class, and gender (Collins, 1985; Crenshaw, 1989). In qualitative research, it is essential to integrate the contextual conditions in which people live because they likely influence how people make meaning (Yin, 2015). BFT contends, “despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group” (Collins, 2000, p. 25), we are diverse individuals and thus may perceive, interpret, and respond differently to experiences of oppression. Therefore, context integration is critical when designing a study for and by Black women. Lastly, qualitative researchers aim to contribute insights into existing concepts and strive to collect data from a variety of sources (Yin, 2015). In this study, I expanded upon previous studies that have explored the phenomenon of historically white sorority rejection (Golden, 2014; Kiray, 2018).

Qualitative Approach: Exploratory Qualitative Inquiry

In addition to the aforementioned research paradigm, an exploratory qualitative inquiry enabled me to gain insight into the experiences of collegiate Black women. The five popular types of qualitative research design include narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, I chose to pursue an exploratory inquiry approach. Because the rejection experiences of Black women are understudied, an exploratory inquiry allowed me to provide a broader understanding without placing any additional constraints on the data collection and analysis processes. In a dissertation using an exploratory research approach, Lehning

(2013) posited “exploratory research analysis is chosen because it allows the researcher to more fully describe the phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives” (p. 79). My selection of an approach outside the core five types of qualitative research was an act of resistance in alignment with Black feminist epistemology. I chose not to shapeshift as my scholarly ancestors once had to (Collins, 2009) to honor the standpoint of my participants in its raw form.

An exploratory approach provided synergy with both BFT and SCM by emphasizing the inclusion of the researcher's and participants' voices. Traditionally, qualitative research is an interactive process in which a study’s purpose, research questions, conceptual context, methods, and concern for validity continuously interact (Maxwell, 2012). Black feminist epistemology asks us to consider who determines the validity of the traditional qualitative process. Thus, I resisted said knowledge and opted not to include a “validity” section. To achieve this exploratory and interactive process fully, the experiences of Black women were centered continuously throughout this study.

Methodology

SCM came to life when Johnson (2015) set out to explore a “culturally relevant, gender-specific methodology” (p. 3) that could serve as a way for qualitative researchers to study and support Black women simultaneously. Conceptualized through her dissertation on the experiences of Black women teachers, Johnson (2015) began with the notion of mentoring as a research methodology. Okapalaoka (2014), as quoted in Johnson (2015), described mentoring as a research methodology as follows:

What will determine the type of questions we ask as researchers and what we do with the responses we get . . . means rejecting the detached position of the

traditional researcher and engaging in the community in which we work both during and after the study . . . [and] challenges us to seek a “higher moral responsibility” that transcends our pursuit of career advancement. (p. 65)

Using this notion of mentoring as a research methodology as a foundation, SCM was created to serve as both a “qualitative research methodology and a support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women” (Johnson, 2015, p. 43). The support group, or *sista circle*, is the data collection method within the methodology. Unlike focus groups, *sista circles* are not simply for obtaining participants' stories. Among its goals, researchers engaging in *sista circles* aim to “gain an understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomenon impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves” (Johnson, 2015, p. 45). Among its characteristics, *sista circles* also operate in an informal nature, allowing the researcher to conduct the circles in a setting they deem appropriate, such as at someone’s home or over a meal (Johnson, 2015). Additionally, health scientists and psychologists have used a variation of *sista circles* to study health interventions for Black women, exemplifying the expansive application of the methodology.

Dillard (2000), a BFT scholar, asked researchers to honor “allegiance and substantive connections to the very communities under study” (p. 2) by regarding participants’ history and culture. By leveraging SCM, I used a culturally relevant approach that considered participants' cultural communication styles. According to Collins (2009), “If U.S. Black Feminist Thought is to reach its full potential . . . then U.S. Black Feminist Thought must redefine power and empowerment” (p. 292). A central component of SCM is the “centrality of empowerment” (Johnson, 2015, p. 47). By

creating a space for Black women to be in community with one another and to share and affirm their experiences, Black women redefine power and empowerment.

Additionally, in Johnson's (2015) dissertation study involving Black women teachers, a central research question was, "How do contemporary Black women teachers respond to sista circle methodology" (p. 49). When describing their response, Johnson (2015) noted the women felt sista circles allowed them to express themselves freely in ways they could not communicate with other colleagues who were not Black women. The women also described how empowering it was to connect with other Black women around a shared identity (as teachers). These findings support Collins's (2000) call, through the BFT framework, to center Black women as agents of knowledge, not as objects of knowledge. In other words, as agents, Black women are regarded as creators of knowledge rather than objects to be framed by someone else's knowledge. By putting these Black women in community with one another, Johnson legitimized their experiences from a shared perspective and her role as a researcher.

Distinguishing Features of Sista Circles

According to Johnson (2015), SCM has three distinguishing features: (a) communication dynamics, (b) centrality of empowerment, and (c) the researcher as a participant.

Communication Dynamics

Ideally, a sista circle would stimulate natural social interactions among Black women, so much so that participants may finish one another's thoughts or speak directly with one another (Johnson, 2015). When in community, Black women may use unique

verbal expressions that alternate between Mainstream American English and Black English Vernacular (Stanback, 1985). For example, if the method was used in 2020, participants might use words like “Period!” “Okay!” or “Hello!” to signal they agree with another participant's statement. Black women may also engage in nonverbal communication only other Black women may understand and acknowledge. To foster this sentiment in the sista circles, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant to build trust before bringing them together and to offer at least one familiar face in the Zoom room.

Centrality of Empowerment

The second distinguishing feature of sista circles is its intent to be “supportive, sister-to-sister contexts that foster Black women’s group empowerment” (Johnson, 2015, p. 47). Within sista circles, empowerment is defined as “the process of stimulating Black women to access their personal or collective power to strengthen one another” (Johnson, 2015, p. 48). By sharing experiences and wisdom, SCM will uplift these narratives as a powerful wealth of knowledge. Many people associate experiences of sorority rejection with shame. Culturally, it is not something you speak about publicly or even privately.

Sometimes, it is better to pretend you never pursued membership than to acknowledge your pursuit was unsuccessful. On many PWI campuses, the Black community is small and familial, making social ties and one’s social standing extremely fragile. Without an intentional space designed to host a dialogue about sorority rejection experiences for those personally affected, many would continue engaging in the norms that frown on the discussion. With sista circles, there were many possibilities. I was

prepared for some women not to describe their rejection experience as traumatic and as something they need healing for. For others, I assumed this moment may be long overdue. Ultimately, all my participants' reflections were valid and contributed to the gap in the literature surrounding Black sorority rejection experiences.

Researcher as Participant

Lastly, in a *sista* circle, the researcher's role extends beyond facilitating the discussion to become a participant (Johnson, 2015). Operating from the belief that researchers sharing their personal experiences is a source of empowerment, the researcher is encouraged to engage in group dialogue. In other words, this methodology values reciprocity and asks the researcher to obtain knowledge from participants and contribute knowledge when appropriate (Johnson, 2015). As someone who shares this experience with my participants, finding a methodology that welcomed researcher participation was vital.

Additionally, BFT is concerned with the broader plight for social justice, including the continued empowerment of Black women (Collins, 2000). SCM allowed me to address this call to action because it operates on the notion of mentoring as a research methodology. Beyond naming the researcher as a participant, Johnson (2015) references Okapalaoka (2014) in their challenge for researchers to seek a higher moral responsibility that transcends our pursuit of career advancement and allows us to engage in the community in which we work both during and after the study. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I identify as a Black woman who was rejected from a Black sorority at a PWI and acknowledge I undoubtedly shared a connection with participants in the study. When

I served as a student affairs professional, I saw firsthand how devastating sorority rejection could be for young college students. In support of my students' continued success considering these experiences, I would never hesitate to share my own stories of failure and rejection. Although expressing vulnerability is only one method, serving as a resource to get students connected to communities, new interests, and work opportunities is another way I aimed to uplift my community in that role.

In conclusion, SCM allowed me to use unstructured and open-ended questions, yielding substantial participant data. Furthermore, using SCM enabled participants as Black women to “narrate their individual and collective experiences, reflect, make meaning, and interact with one another in a structured way” (Porter et al., 2020, p. 257), producing what Collins (2000) referred to as a standpoint (distinctive group consciousness). As a researcher-participant, I assumed a pseudonym with the rest of the participants and present my data alongside theirs in Chapter 4. I conducted this study hoping this dialogic space would become a source of healing for all involved. According to Norton and Slied (2018), through listening to the stories of others, “social thinking is facilitated to work towards recognition of different views and interaction between each other that is for the collective benefit” (p. 57).

Data Collection

In this exploratory qualitative study, I used sista circles, a form of culturally relevant focus group interviews, to complete the research. Open-ended interview questions served as a guide but did not represent an exhaustive list. According to Yin (2015), a qualitative interview is like a conversation that establishes a relationship

between the participant and the researcher. SCM asks the researcher to go beyond an inquiry and an interest and encompasses three distinguishing features. When conducting a *sista circle*, the researcher must center the communication styles unique to Black women (Johnson, 2015). This aligns with the two main elements of culturally responsive focus groups: (a) participants' identities must be validated in the research process, and (b) the interview environment must value participants' cultural communication styles (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Secondly, facilitators of *sista circles* must empower participants collectively as creators of knowledge (Johnson, 2015). The researcher must ensure participants feel comfortable enough to control the flow of the conversation. Lastly, as mentioned previously, the researcher must move beyond simply facilitating and instead become an active participant in the discussion by sharing their experiences (Johnson, 2015).

Sista circles were an ideal instrument for this study because Black women come to know through lived experience, dialogue, and reflection with other Black women (Collins, 2009; Dillard, 2000). Green (2017) asserted, "For research with Black women, using collective storytelling as a mode of collecting data and as the actual data itself is a culturally responsive method" (p. 40). Before this study, I was unaware of a broad opportunity for Black women to engage in collective storytelling around a rejection experience from a Black sorority.

The University of Denver Institutional Review Board (IRB), which focuses on overseeing human subjects research, approved this study and permitted me to move forward with data collection.

Participant Recruitment

Over 700,000 women have been initiated into 1 of the 4 international Black sororities within the Divine Nine. There are many unwritten rules within sorority life, including one that says, “Do not discuss your rejection experience because you must continue to show integrity.” Due to limitations like these and the shame often associated with a rejection experience, it is unclear how many women have sought membership over the years and were unsuccessful. Additionally, the sororities do not publicize the number of applicants they receive each year. Given the lack of accessibility to this data, I aimed to secure 10 participants via snowball sampling methods. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability recruitment technique involving a convenience sample of an initial subject that recruits additional subjects for the researcher (Etikan et al., 2015). Avenues such as announcements within social media groups specific to the collegiate Black community were used. If this were 2 decades ago, email might have been the most effective way to reach my target population. However, thanks to technological advances, social media is now one of the most effective ways to reach a large population segment (Gelinias et al., 2017). Based on how social media allows members to self-identify the various cultures and interest groups they are a part of, I could make inferences about what groups most likely fit my participant criteria.

In alignment with Facebook group rules, I advertised this study in the following groups: Black Women in Higher Education, BLKSAP (Black Student Affairs Professionals), Black Girl Doctorate, and Black LGBTQIA+ SA Pros (Student Affairs and Higher Education). These social networks foster an online community for those who

identify as Black and include other intersecting identities, such as those who identify as women, who have an affiliation with the higher education profession, those who are currently pursuing or have completed doctoral education, and those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community. I estimated I could reach a large population of Black women who attended a PWI for their undergraduate education and who may have experienced rejection from a Black sorority by leveraging these channels. Although my inclusion criteria were not limited to these populations, by soliciting participation from these groups, I attempted to cast the broadest net possible through the groups of which I was a member. Individuals who met the study criteria were asked to sign up or to share with individuals they know who meet the criteria by following a link to an online survey.

I anticipated the call for participants might also be shared in Facebook groups specifically for members of BGLOs or find its way on the radar of BGLO members through other means. If this had happened, I was prepared to address any pushback about the validity of my inquiry. Many BGLO members believe the folks who are meant to be accepted get accepted. Some people rejected from BGLOs believe withholding information about their experiences helps preserve the integrity of organizational processes. To address these dynamics, I was prepared to elevate my study's confidentiality measures and emphasize my research's positive student affairs and BGLO implications. Luckily, I did not receive any inquiries or engagement related to pushback.

Unfortunately, weeks passed without any engagement once my recruitment materials began to circulate. I thought this was my worst fear coming true, that Black women were not interested in discussing this topic or returning down memory lane. After

weeks of only having three sign-ups, my response rate jumped to over 200 people. As I began celebrating, a friend cautioned me to look closer at the data. Appearing too good to be true, the responses showed I somehow managed to solicit Black women who attended PWIs in every region of the country and who had experienced sorority rejection from all four historically Black sororities. Double checking the emails, IP addresses, and submission times, I realized some responses were from the same people, indicating fraud. Before I could even panic, a fellow doctoral student explained what was likely happening: international scammers aiming to get the gift cards advertised on my recruitment flyer. He forwarded me a protocol instructing me to update the settings on my Qualtrics survey to prevent VPS and international IP addresses (Winter et al., 2019).

It took some tinkering, but eventually, I could identify and contact five real women who completed the prescreening survey. Of the five people other than myself who completed the prescreening survey, only four met all the participant criteria. I am not sure what led these five women to sign up as opposed to other women who had had this experience but did not sign up. There was a high level of vulnerability required to participate in this study, which may have dissuaded some eligible women.

Participant Criteria

Inclusion criteria for this study included Black women who graduated between 2012 and 2022 and were formally or informally rejected from a Black sorority while attending a PWI for undergraduate education and remain unaffiliated with a Black sorority. The sample was limited to women who experienced rejection during their

undergraduate collegiate experience within the last decade to contextualize this phenomenon among traditional college-age students.

Inclusion Criterion

The emphasis on matriculation at a PWI is intentional because of the systemic barriers to inclusion for Black women (Patton & Croom, 2017). Although “PWI” is not an official designation the government offers, there is generally a shared understanding regarding the “PWI experience” (Bourke, 2016). According to Bourke (2016), the PWI experience indicates more than the number of white students; it suggests there are embedded institutional practices based on whiteness. Although the literature explored in Chapter 2 regarding Black women’s experiences while attending PWIs supports this notion, for this study, PWIs were defined as institutions in which white students account for 50% or more of enrollment (Lomotey, 2010). The estimate of the white student population will be a more reliable measure as it can be challenging to have participants measure institutional practices.

Adding the criterion that required participants to have graduated between 2012 and 2022 established a shared sociopolitical context as the past decade brought forth significant events that likely had implications for the Black women who served as participants in my study. The year 2012 wrapped up the end of Barack Obama’s first term in office, the first Black president. In 2013, three Black women founded the Black Lives Matter (BLM, 2023) movement following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman. As the decade passed, police-involved shootings of unarmed Black people dominated the media. Eventually, President Trump was elected in 2017, a

president known to support efforts that undermined the health, safety, and prosperity of communities of color during his tenure (Solomon & Maxwell, 2018). Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic started plaguing the world in 2020 and continues to disproportionately impact Black Americans (Vasquez-Reyes, 2020).

Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria extended to women who experienced Black sorority rejection while attending an HBCU, non-Black women, and women who were members of Black sororities at the time of this study. The distinction between PWI and HBCU attendees was necessary because existing literature detailed how the two educational experiences can differ for Black students participating in BGLOs (Allen, 2013). Further, although each Black sorority has non-Black members, this study sought to contribute to literature expanding the collective standpoint of Black women (Collins, 2009) by exploring the meaning Black women ascribe to their rejection experiences. Although someone may pursue membership in a Black sorority and be rejected once, they may pursue membership again and gain entry into the sorority later. Those women may have a different experience than those who remain unaffiliated; thus, I proceeded with excluding those women from the study.

Additionally, when seeking membership into a Black sorority at the post undergraduate level, the recruitment and intake process differs from that at the undergraduate level. Thus, these differences also warrant a different research inquiry. Given these considerations, the inclusion criteria participants in my study met included identifying as a Black woman, holding an undergraduate 4-year degree from a PWI,

experiencing rejection from a Black sorority, and being unaffiliated at the time of the study. I define rejection as when someone submits a formal application for a sorority and receives a formal or informal notice of denial in which you are not granted membership into the sorority and will not continue in the intake process. A PWI is defined as any institution with a 50% or higher white student enrollment.

After getting confirmation from the four women who completed the prescreening survey, the study moved forward with five participants, with the addition of myself as the final participant. All but one participant attended a large R1 university. Four states were represented, three in the south and one in the Midwest. I concealed the names of the states to protect participants' confidentiality. Most participants identified as having an LGBTQ identity, and two identified as being first in their families to receive an undergraduate degree. Three of the five participants pursued membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, one pursued membership in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and one pursued membership in Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. There are four historically Black sororities in the NPHC, also known as the Divine Nine. This study did not represent the fourth sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. More information regarding the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Profiles and University Type*

Participant	University type and location	First-generation college student	LGBTQ identity	Sorority pursued
Nadia	R2 – Midwest	Yes	Yes	AKA
Penny	R1 – South	No	No	DST
Samantha	R1 – South	No	Yes	AKA
Britt	R1 – South	Yes	No	AKA
Monique	R1 – South	No	Yes	ZPB

Data Collection Methods*Prescreening Survey*

A 10-minute prescreening survey was used to gain informed consent and determine eligibility. I distributed the survey online via the call for participants and asked demographic and experiential questions (see Appendix A). If the interest exceeded what was reasonable for my study, I identified the following approach to narrow down the number of participants. I first would have prioritized diversity among the sororities participants were rejected from, then worked to ensure balance related to the type of area participants grew up in and the type of local community the school was located in. Lastly, I would have prioritized students who attended the same institution throughout their undergraduate studies. If I had overrepresentation in some areas and many potential participants exceeding 15 people, I had planned to begin turning people away. As mentioned earlier, although I thought I was in this situation for a moment, it turned out not to be the case, and thus, this approach did not need to be engaged.

Interviews

Before hosting the sista circles, I conducted hour-long, one-on-one interviews to serve as an introductory meeting with participants to establish a relationship (see Appendix B). Green (2017) used SCM in her dissertation on the lived experiences of Black women who studied abroad and recommended this additional step. Green found the introductory meeting allowed her to establish rapport with participants and to answer any questions they may have had about the study. I used this time to allow them to verbally share their personal experiences with rejection and other salient social identities they may hold, and I answered any questions they had. All participants completed a one-on-one interview, and I had a friend conduct a one-on-one interview with me using my protocol.

In the interviews, I began by introducing myself and shared more information about the study and informed consent. After participants introduced themselves, I created space for them to ask me questions informally before we began. My questions explored topics ranging from our salient identities, experiences with rejection, the cultures of the undergraduate schools we attended, and the presence of Divine Nine on our campuses. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Sista Circles

To maximize participation and appease concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19, Influenza, and Monkey Pox, the sista circles took place virtually on the Zoom platform. Green (2017) successfully conducted eight 60-minute virtual sista circles with 3–5 participants, including the researcher. I adopted a similar small-group approach, with

two sista circles total. To guide the conversation, I asked 11 guiding questions (see Appendices C and D). Each sista circle lasted 120 minutes. Although I aimed to build a sisterhood among my participants in alignment with the tenets of SCM, some nerves and anxiety were to be expected. During the 1:1 interview, I asked each participant to create a profile to share with the other participants ahead of the first sista circle. Broom (2022) found sharing participant profiles beforehand helped build rapport among participants. These participant profiles are captured in a table in the Data Collection section and in Chapter 4.

Additionally, consistent with SCM, I allowed participants to ask one another questions in addition to the prepared questions I asked. The sista circles initially were recorded for transcription and later deleted per IRB protocol. A waiting room for the Zoom call allowed participants to change their Zoom profile names to pseudonyms so their true identities were not revealed. I offer a researcher reflection on the use of sista circles in Chapter 5.

Reflection Survey

At the onset of the study, the third form of data collection needed to be solidified. In alignment with BFT, I wanted to cocreate a reflection activity (see Appendix E) with participants to integrate further the thoughts and ideas of the Black women participants. At the end of each one-on-one interview, I asked participants for their input to inform what this final reflection activity would consist of. We discussed various ideas such as putting together a music playlist, cocreating some form of art, or simply submitting words and phrases to be input into a word cloud. Four of the five participants were

vehemently against engaging in something that would result in an additional lifelong reminder of their rejection experiences. There was no interest in attaching songs to this experience either. Creating a word cloud was elevated as the safest option that would not result in a physical reminder of their rejection experiences or participation in this study. Based on this feedback, two questions were composed and put into a survey format using Qualtrics. Question 1 asked, “What are some words and/or phrases that describe your experience with sorority rejection?” Twenty words and phrases were submitted and input into a word cloud generator. Question 2 asked participants, “What are some words or phrases that describe how this research study experience was for you?” After all participants completed the survey, I inputted responses into a word cloud generator.

Data Analysis

Data gained from the sista circles included the video recordings, audio, and transcriptions provided by Zoom. The 3-step analytical technique, constant comparison analysis, was applied to the transcripts. Initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) for grounded theory research, Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) noted its applicability to focus group research. My theoretical framework of BFT implored me to think critically about the data analysis process to ensure my participants' stories are honored (Collins, 2002). I took field notes throughout the data collection process to complement the data gained from the sista circles. Field notes are a form of qualitative observation in which the researcher notes the behavior and activities of participants in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the sista circles, my field notes did not include observations of nonverbal communication styles like body

language because all participants opted to join Zoom with their cameras off. The field notes largely served to engage in reflexivity and note my reactions to how the conversations were going. For example, when two participants began going back and forth during one of the sista circles, I noted how passionate they were about this topic.

Using open coding, I organized data into small groups and then labeled each group. As previously mentioned, I altered transcripts as little as possible to preserve participants' cultural communication styles and intended meanings. I then conducted axial coding, reorganizing the original small groups into categories. Finally, I engaged in selective coding by reviewing the content of each group and then identified themes that represented the full extent of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Clemons (2020), "Black feminist thought and qualitative research in education positions data analysis as a process of organizing, interpreting, and producing stories that generate reflexivity" (p. 7).

At each step, I leveraged the tenets of BFT in my analysis, specifically looking for any mention of intersecting oppressions faced by Black women, structural inequities affecting Black women, and moments in which similar oppressions are experienced differently (Collins, 2000). Although they did not always have the language, participants all had a shared experience of navigating the structural inequities while attending PWIs. After cleaning the transcripts for accuracy, I reviewed the data and identified 35 relevant codes that supported the research questions as a form of open coding. From there, I continued axial coding by grouping the codes into smaller categories. I initially identified seven themes but then collapsed the seven small themes into three overarching main

findings. One example of how I reviewed the data through the lens of Black feminist epistemology is by leaning into the tenet that encourages meaning making through dialogue. Any code tied to data from *sista* circles and not one-on-one interviews was given a different color in NVivo to explore any differences between the data collection mediums.

Usually, during data analysis, researchers are encouraged to exercise three precautions: (a) check and recheck the accuracy of their data, (b) complete a thorough analysis, and (c) continually acknowledge any unwanted biases during the analysis process (Yin, 2015). In the spirit of BFT, I rejected the notion of unwanted biases as I engaged in a collaborative relationship with my participants to ensure an ethic of caring (Collins, 2000). The accuracy of my thematic findings reflected the lived experiences of my participants and cannot be defined by traditional means. BFT promotes the self-definition and self-determination of all Black women (Collins, 2000). As such, my participants' lived experiences, as shared, revealed the meaning Black women ascribe to sorority rejection experiences.

Trustworthiness

Green (2017) connected Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2009) to trustworthiness in qualitative research by reminding us that for Black women, “meaning is created and validated through [our] lived experiences and subsequent dialogue and reflection with other Black women” (p. 43). At the start of each one-on-one interview with participants, I shared my story and experience with sorority rejection before asking them to share theirs. I wanted to model vulnerability to build trust throughout the process.

By combining video recordings, written transcription, and field notes, I triangulated the data to provide validity to the findings. Creswell (2013) defined triangulation as the process in which evidence from different sources is used to confirm a theme or perspective. Using member checking, I provided copies of the transcripts to participants to ensure they agreed their thoughts and attitudes were represented appropriately. Before the submission of my final dissertation, I also shared the themes of my findings from the data analysis for participants to confirm or disaffirm for accuracy. Descriptive validity was also accomplished by my continuous process of checking and rechecking the videos and transcriptions for accuracy to prevent distortion of words (Maxwell, 1992). Lastly, another trustworthiness strategy I leveraged checking in with friends and colleagues who were Greek to help decipher what of my inferences were common knowledge versus something specific to the Black or Greek culture.

Delimitations

When Johnson (2015) reflected on what she may have done differently after her first use of SCM, she noted the unstructured nature allowed some participants to monopolize the conversation and others to be silenced. In BFT, all Black women's experiences must be honored and uplifted. Considering the intersecting identities many Black women carry, if all women do not contribute equally to the conversation, a dominant narrative may arise that fails to encompass the diversity in identity and perspective. To address this, I cocreated ground rules to govern the conversation.

Another reflection Johnson (2015) offered surrounded participants' inability to attend all sista circles. She realized she had failed to make clear the intention of sista

circles as both research and support for Black women. In failing to make this clear, some participants solely viewed the sista circles as a research study and did not view the space as a support group as Johnson hoped. When analyzing this feedback through a BFT lens, I recall Collins (2000) noted the importance of “safe spaces” for Black women in which they can self-define and, when in community, create a collective consciousness. To incentivize participants to engage, I offered each participant a \$25 gift card after completing two sista circles.

Lastly, the fluid nature of gender has yet to be studied in conjunction with methodologies centered on Black women. Although Collins (2000) focused on shifting the negative narratives around the image of Black women in media and other mediums, all related text to BFT uses a binary understanding of gender and biological sex. Higher education operates as a microcosm of the larger society, and studies have shown incoming students from Generation Z are more likely to identify as nonbinary or gender nonconforming (SheKnows, 2019). According to Zamani-Gallaher (2017), the modern understanding of gender “denotes a socially constructed concept in which gender identity comprises a spectrum of how individuals identify that is multidimensional and not linear, but rather a continuum of maleness, femaleness, and [other identities not bound to a binary]” (p. 91). When opting to use a gender-specific methodology like sista circles, some people who identified outside the gender binary or as having identified previously as a Black woman may not have seen themselves as participants in this study. I did not have anyone identify as nonbinary serve as a participant in this study.

Additionally, existing policy regarding membership within Black sororities such as Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (2022) does not contain language addressing gender identity beyond stating federal law recognizes them as a single-sex social sorority; thus, membership is only open to women. Although invalidating gender-expansive experiences with sorority rejection is not my intent, the language of the methodology may lead to notions of exclusion. To make my study more inclusive to those with gender-expansive experiences, I shifted away from biological sex and focused on gender identity in my criteria. In conclusion, as I pursued transferable and not generalizable findings, the delimitations of this study using SCM ensured I generated insights that could inform future engagement with Black women students at PWIs.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter, I outlined my study's methodology and research design that explored the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a historically Black sorority at a PWI. I discussed successfully applying a critical theory research paradigm and an exploratory qualitative inquiry approach. I also detailed SCM and reviewed participant characteristics, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. Lastly, I discussed the delimitations of my study. In Chapter 4, I reveal the study's thematic findings developed as a result of the data collection and analysis process outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative inquiry was to explore the Black sorority rejection experiences of Black women who attended predominantly white institutions (PWIs) for their undergraduate studies. I used Black feminist thought (BFT) and sista circle methodology (SCM) to honor my participants' lived experiences and invite them to be in community with Black women. The study was designed to uncover the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of sorority rejection as well as what strategies they leverage to navigate their social circles following this experience. Participants answered guiding questions during individual interviews and sista circles and were allowed to ask their own questions. Collectively, participants offered rich reflections on their experiences that highlighted how they interacted with the structures and institutions of higher education.

Two research questions guided this study and analysis:

1. What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority during their undergraduate studies at a predominantly white institution?
2. What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution?

The chapter begins with an introduction to the major findings of (a) The Pervasiveness of Black U', (b) Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection, and (c) The Aftermath of Black Sorority Rejection. Next, I present participant profiles that reflect the five participants, one of whom was me. The chapter closes with a summary.

Introduction

After I graduated from my master's program, I conducted a national job search. It was full of rejection. Sometimes, an organization would send me a standard email saying they went with another candidate. Other times, I would have to wait to hear back from the organization. Mentors encouraged me by saying that rejection was a part of the process and that the right job will come to me. In our society, the expectation is that you move on after rejection. We tend to think of rejection linearly. Whether it is rejection from a job, a partner, or a sports team, we tend to frame rejection as the ending point of one experience.

Findings of this study explore the phenomenon of rejection in a different context, seeking membership into Black sororities. The findings demonstrate how Black sorority rejection diverts the assumption that rejection is a linear process that you move on from, like a job rejection. For example, when you are told you did not get a job at a company, you do not spend the next 2 to 3 years showing up at the company's building looking through the glass at the company's employees, wondering what it would have been like to work there. With sorority rejection, however, you do not get to escape the presence of the organization you did not get into. The experience can be likened to showing up at a company's building and looking through the glass at the company's employees every day

for 2 years, being reminded you did not get the job. Moreover, the experience resembles being asked if you are an employee at the company sporadically for the rest of your professional career. The point is, unlike other types of rejection, the study's findings demonstrate the experience of Black sorority rejection is nonlinear.

In the first main finding, participants' experiences in this study illustrate how pervasive BLGOs are within the small Black communities that form at PWIs. The second main finding brings together the multiple elements that define the experience of Black sorority rejection for participants. Lastly, the third main finding gives insight into participants' post-rejection experiences and social circle navigation strategies.

Participant Profiles

During the first interview, participants were asked to describe their salient identities. Their responses were short and sweet, but most importantly, participant authored. I had considered more in-depth participant profiles but feared it would threaten my participants' confidentiality. The high-level attributes have been organized into Table 2. More insight regarding participants' salient identities will be shared within the findings. All but one participant attended a large R1 university. Most participants identified as having an LGBTQ identity, while two identified as being the first in their families to receive an undergraduate degree. Lastly, 3 of the 5 participants pursued membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, one sought membership in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and one in Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. Four historically Black sororities exist in the NPHC, also known as the Divine Nine. This study does not represent the fourth

sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. The names of the universities participants attended were concealed, and Greek-letter pseudonyms were used throughout the chapter.

Table 2

Participant Profiles

Participant	University	First-generation college student	LGBTQ identity	Sorority pursued
Nadia	UU – Upsilon University	Yes	Yes	AKA
Penny	GU – Gamma University	No	No	DST
Samantha	PU – Pi University	No	Yes	AKA
Britt	LU – Lambda University	Yes	No	AKA
Monique	PU – Pi University	No	Yes	ZPB

The Pervasiveness of Black U’

The first research question explored the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of rejection from historically Black sororities while attending PWIs. Excerpts from participants revealed nuanced connections between Black womanhood, Black cultural institutions, and white supremacist structures. The Black women of my study, albeit from different regions and universities, all described a similar phenomenon at their PWIs. As I listened to participants reflect on their experiences attending PWIs as Black women, it was clear they navigated “a different world.” The Black community was distinctly segregated from the larger white and non-Black communities on campus, serving as its own smaller world within the larger world of the institution. In addition to having to learn the ins and outs of a PWI and how to excel academically and socially, my study participants also had to learn to navigate the culture and politics of the school’s Black community.

PWIs were not created to serve Black students (Cole, 2010). In many cases, through forced desegregation, institutions opened their doors to allow Black students to enroll (Bell, 1980). There appears to be no corner of PWIs untouched by the influences of white supremacy, including Black community spaces set up within PWIs. To cope with the tumultuous and unwelcoming environments of PWIs, Black students banded together to form their own communities of support and refuge (Guiffrida, 2003). Black students began to replicate elements of PWIs that they could not access, such as fraternities and sororities (Ross, 2000). Institutions followed by establishing cultural centers that engaged and retained Black students (Gbemi, 2016). Although much has changed since the earliest enrollment of Black students, Black students attending PWIs still have to navigate collegiate environments shaped by white supremacy (Ferguson, 2019).

As the first main finding, “The Pervasiveness of Black U’” introduces a hypothetical moniker for the Black community at PWIs. Black U’ is the context in which many Black students, including the study participants, find community and belonging within their PWIs. Black U’ is a subcommunity comprised of Black students and maintains its own norms, values, and expectations. Additionally, this finding represents participants' experiences before they pursued membership into a Black sorority. Although their narratives inform us of how they made meaning of their sorority rejection experiences, they also add to the literature highlighting Black women students' experiences attending PWIs. As previous literature exploring sorority rejection centered on the experiences of white women students pursuing historically white sororities at PWIs (Chapman et al., 2008; Golden, 2014; Kane, 2016; Kiray, 2018), it felt necessary to

ground the experience of Black sorority rejection within the broader experience of being Black at a PWI.

Three subthemes emerged from the interviews and sista circles that revealed how pervasive Black U' can be for Black students. Participants' narratives hardly address the fact that the students attended PWIs; instead, their self-perception, day-to-day interactions, and understanding of social hierarchies seem to begin and end with Black U'. Subtheme 1 describes how participants defined themselves as members of Black U' and highlights how there is a shared experience among Black students who attended school in predominantly white environments. Subtheme 2 focuses on participants' high engagement levels and illustrates the unique pressures associated with Black student leaders. Lastly, Subtheme 3 elevates BGLOs as the social elite and offers narratives from participants as they reflect on the social hierarchies within the Black communities at their institutions. Collectively, these themes laid the foundation for how participants made meaning of their subsequent sorority rejection experiences.

My Black U'

Black U' represents the shared way all participants described the Black communities on their campuses. Each used a similar moniker, inserting the word "Black" before the main acronym used to describe the school. For example, if a participant attended Western University, they would refer to the Black community as "Black WU." This phenomenon made me smile because it reminded me of how, culturally, Black people can be on the same page despite being miles apart. It demonstrated that Black students attending PWIs have a shared experience of navigating worlds within worlds

while attending school. The broader culture of PWIs is not shaped with the success of Black women students in mind. In many instances, the PWI environment can be unsafe, leading Black students to create their own support structures. Black U' is that structure of support that centers Black culture and elevates Black leadership. Within this subcommunity, Black students, like my participants, can see their identities reflected back to them.

When asked about their salient identities, it was evident the language participants used relied on naming their Black identity. All participants recognized they held minoritized or systemically oppressed identities without being prompted. I believe this is because there is a unique level of identity consciousness that Black women experience at the intersection of multiple oppressed identities. BFT reminds us that Black women's multiple identities are inextricably linked. Each participant had a different relationship to their identity as Black women. Porter (2017) released a revised version of her model of identity development in Black undergraduate women and affirmed the gendered-racial socialization of Black women influences their identity development. Although not everyone felt welcomed into Black U' in the same way, all their paths led them to pursue Black sorority membership. Engaging with the Black community and with Black sororities became a part of participants' collegiate socialization. As Black women, there was a shared interest in being connected to and welcomed by the Black community at each institution. These various identities served as the lenses through which they engaged in Black U'. Participants shared the following perspectives:

I identify as being a double minority or double minoritized, and for me, being Black is the more salient identity than being a woman. (Britt)

I don't usually like to identify my sexual orientation because, like being Black, I can't not be Black like, I can't hide that. I can go put a dress on or some shit if I want it to but I can't hide being a Black woman. (Monique)

I've really been able to get a much deeper understanding of who I actually am, who I want to be, and how I can better make sure that I am living life in a way that is supportive of the things that I cannot impact or change: like being on the spectrum, having ADHD, being a woman, being a Black woman, being gay.

(Nadia)

I feel like I've had a triple consciousness [of a Black, queer, and woman identity] since I was an undergrad for sure. I don't know where I picked up the understanding. But I was like yeah, oppression. Um, I think now as an adult. I'm a little more aware of how these identities show up professionally in terms of the expectations that are projected onto women and Black people. (Sam)

I am figuring out Black womanhood for me. And that's really what it means to me because like, I carry this identity every day like I don't try to hide it like I'm very proud of being a Black woman. I don't want to be anything else. So, I live at the intersection of Blackness and womanhood. Like, I want people to know that's the first thing you need to know about me before we even get into it. Because that's who I am. And that's how I'm going to show up. (Penny)

Learning more about how participants self-identified helped me to better frame their responses to subsequent questions. Collier (2017) asserted when we recognize “the influence and realities of intersectional experiences, [we gain a] more nuanced understanding of Black women’s experiences” (p. 9). As noted previously, three of the five participants identified as having a queer identity, two identified as being the first in their immediate families to attend college, and 3 of the 5 were on track to become the first BGLO member in their immediate families. These identities are notable because they added layers of marginalization to participants' lives and, ultimately, informed how the Black women participants showed up in their collegiate environments. The various intersecting identities also highlight the diversity within Black U’ and the broader Black community. Although there are typically LGBTQ student organizations and structures of support for first-generation college students, Black identity in those spaces is not centered in the way it is in Black U’.

Figure 1 illustrates the various layers that informed participants’ identity development process within their Black communities. White supremacy influences, PWIs, Black communities at PWIs, and BGLOs are represented as structures in participants’ experiences. By naming their Black identities, it helped me to understand that participants were navigating many layers of the institution but that Black U’, represented as “Black Community at PWIs” in Figure 1, is the layer that had the strongest influence on shaping their meaning-making processes.

Figure 1

Layers of Identity Development



Most participants identified the Black community as a distinct “world” at their PWIs, as highlighted by Figure 1. The Black community, or Black U’ has its own rules of engagement, inclusive of social calendars, organizations, and gatekeepers. BGLOs are a prominent component of Black U’ participants named. Like traditional “white” Greek organizations, BGLOs facilitate many social, academic, and service-oriented engagement opportunities for Black students. In some ways, this made BGLOs and Black U’ inextricably linked for participants. Typically, culturally relevant groups are regarded as a positive attribute of collegiate life that leads to retention. However, participants' narratives began to problematize some of the interactions that occur with and within culturally relevant groups and racially homogenous spaces.

Navigating Campus Engagement to Belong

The level of involvement of a participant was notable because it strongly correlated with their sense of belonging. Within Black U’, getting involved is one pathway to building community. Beyond community, becoming a leader within Black U’ can also increase one’s social status and sense of belonging. Leadership is an essential component of what BGLOs look for in prospective members, so it is not surprising that

participants had high levels of engagement. All but one participant was highly engaged and served as a student leader. The one participant who was not highly engaged was a commuter student. High levels of engagement became synonymous with belonging and led participants with high levels of engagement to believe they were good candidates for sorority membership. To be a leader in the Black community at a PWI is a coveted and powerful position. In addition to being upheld as a leader by your peers, the institution affirms your role as a leader by tapping students for opportunities that require students to represent larger constituencies. It is unclear if white students are tapped to represent their peers in a way that Black student leaders can be (Guiffrida, 2003). The cultural nuances of being a leader in the Black community on one's campus further affirm how Black U' has its own unique ecosystem. For some, being highly engaged was the expectation if you wanted to join the ranks of a BGLO. Obtaining a leadership role is one of the first ways those interested in pursuing sorority membership "perform" their interest. Penny described how being involved as a student leader elevated her visibility in both the larger university community which she referred to as "white" and Black U'. The heightened visibility is a relevant point to understand because Penny later described how "public" her experience of sorority rejection felt within Black U', stating, "If you're in Black Student Government, like basically you're very visible to Black GU, white GU, like everybody, so I wasn't like a low-key person at all."

Being a leader within Black U' seemed to bring pros and cons. There was a hyper-awareness of one's social positioning that served as a throughline in participants' narratives. Penny assured me no matter how "bad" Black GU got socially, she would

never engage with “white” GU. This level of assurance affirmed just how much maintaining a connection to Black U’ played a role in Penny’s collegiate success. Despite whatever drama that may occur in the Black community at her school, the feeling of connectedness and belonging she received from her Black peers could not be duplicated by her school’s white or larger community. Penny shared:

I wouldn't ever be in white GU or like regular GU, but also like Black GU was so toxic and so gossipy. Like people talk about each other behind each other's backs all the time, like judging people at parties, like literally just all sorts of weirdness. People wouldn't speak in person but it's like we can interact on social media you can send me heart eyes and congratulations on my Instagram, but you can't say hello to me in person. Like it's just very weird.

As she talked about these social dynamics, it gave me insight into how being highly engaged put her on a pedestal. Regardless of the numbers, the Black community at Penny’s school felt small and operated almost like a family. Although we love our families, there are often relatives we do not look forward to seeing or rumors that have plagued family gatherings for years. In other words, Black U’, like families, can also be toxic. Britt was a commuter student and thus did not feel included in the Black community at her school, although they seemed to operate like a Black U’ in similar ways. Britt shared:

Being first gen and my mom being really religious like, I wasn't out at like the student events. So, like, I was a commuter student, so I went to class, and I came home. So, I wasn't like going anywhere, I wasn't part of Black LU like that's what

they call it. I wasn't part of Black LU; I wasn't hanging out in the quad [central green space on campus]. I walked through the quad to go to class and then walked back to the parking lot.

Britt emphasized how not being connected to Black LU made it difficult to pursue certain leadership opportunities. She named that every Black student was not necessarily a part of the Black LU she referred to contrary to what people may think. Britt shared:

I was part of Black LU in terms of being a Black student at LU, but I wasn't part of Black LU. So, because I wasn't part of like Black LU like I wasn't selected for that [leadership opportunity] either. So, I really didn't have a strong sense of belonging.

Britt added emphasis when she said “Black LU” illustrating that simply being Black did not automatically warrant membership into this community. As a commuter student, Britt sought ways to be more involved on campus but did not realize certain connections to Black U’ may have been needed to make that happen. On the other hand, Samantha was very intentional about making the necessary connections to garner a “portfolio” of engagement that would meet the expectations of the BGLO she was pursuing. She said:

I thought I had a good chance. I didn't think I would have a problem getting in and it never crossed my mind really, that I wouldn't get in because I had kind of perfectly curated this portfolio of engagement. I was helping to coach a youth step team, just doing the absolute most being involved in all these clubs. I had a 3.4 GPA, which exceeded the minimum required for this chapter. And so, I was like,

I'm assuming, you know, I am this leader, and so I thought I would be amongst my own kind; it just felt like it made sense.

Nadia was also very engaged in campus life and shared:

I knew people from every org, I knew people from every major, and I knew professors that I was really close with. I was going to dinners at the fucking president of my university's house like private sit-down dinners like I was as included as anyone could be. And even more so I felt like I was very, very, very involved and accepted and included.

The high levels of engagement or lack thereof for some certainly contributed to how part of or outside Black U' participants felt they were. Because Black U' functioned as its own world, it facilitated a lot of engagement opportunities for Black students, for better or for worse. Although some participants equated high levels of engagement with "having a good chance" at gaining membership into a lifelong sorority, it does not seem they realized fully what the impact would be if this lifelong commitment did not pan out.

BGLOs and Black U' Are Inextricably Linked

To understand the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of rejection from Black sororities while attending PWIs, it was vital for me to understand better the social context of each PWI and how BGLOs played a role in participants' eyes.

Recognizing the Black communities at the PWIs referenced in this study operated as their own worlds, it became clear BGLOs hold a lot of social power within Black U'. In other campus contexts, the social elite might include legacy students, student government leaders, athletes, or members of historically white fraternities and sororities. Across the

board for all participants, Divine Nine sororities and fraternities, or BGLOs, held high social status on their campuses and were regarded as the social elite of Black U'.

Reflecting on the job analogy I shared earlier, let's say you identify a company you like and want to apply to. You research jobs you may qualify for and apply to the one you think will be the best fit. Ultimately, if you do not get the job, it is unlikely you would encounter anyone from that company who could remind you that you were rejected as an applicant. Pursuing membership into a Black sorority at a PWI is not like this. If you get rejected, the sorority is still a huge part of Black U's fabric as they are inextricably linked. As a student who experienced rejection, avoiding interactions with the sorority can be very hard. Members of the sorority may participate in the same student club you are a part of. The sorority may host all your favorite Black U' events. In this story, the sorority is the company you applied to and did not get the job; the only difference is that you must see and interact with this company daily. The ties between BGLOs and Black U' make it so that you are reminded of your rejection experience every day. In this subtheme, participants detail the social hierarchies within Black U' as they experienced them during their undergraduate studies.

Penny shared the BGLOs on her campus had a higher social capital than nonmembers because there was a clear hierarchy, "It was definitely a hierarchy. Like if you're Greek, everybody knows you." Penny described the social dynamics as being like those in the film *Mean Girls*. She said people were defined by the organizations they were a part of and that there were levels. People were more likely to know who the members of BGLOs were and prioritized their events over others when deciding where to

go. In the movie *Mean Girls*, there was a scene where one student explained to a new student that there was an existing social hierarchy. The students in the film used the cafeteria to point out different cliques that sat together at different tables. There were some tables the new student was instructed never to sit at versus one table the new student could only dream of sitting at, the popular table. Samantha recognized a similar phenomenon and recalled almost immediately feeling like she was at the bottom of the Black social hierarchy during orientation week. She said, “I quickly learned like most Black students their first year that it's an us versus them kind of vibe.”

By “us versus them,” she referred to the dynamic that seemed to exist between BGLO members and nonmembers of BGLOs. She went on to describe how the BGLOs hosted a lot of events for Black students. As an attendee, it felt like you were getting a glimpse into a secret world full of inside jokes, meetings, and connections nonmembers were not a part of. If you were active in Black U’, this was a dynamic you were always privy to. She did not necessarily think this dynamic was a bad thing. She quickly began to imagine herself as part of the higher ranks by joining a BGLO. Although she was not the first in her family to attend college, no one had ever explained Greek life to her. She was used to applying herself and achieving ideal outcomes but eventually learned that pursuing BGLO membership was not Black and white. Samantha went on to study higher education, and so she had a unique lens that came through her reflections. Samantha shared:

You're looking on to Greek folks, and ideally, you will walk away wanting maybe to aspire. Maybe you see the bickering that can happen or the competitive

chanting, but for the most part, you're energized. You're excited to be at the school and excited to be a part of this community.

As a higher education professional, Samantha could reflect on her undergraduate experiences with a different language. She saw the value BGLOs brought to PWI campuses. Britt felt similarly. She remembered seeing BGLOs stroll during 1st-year orientation and immediately knew she wanted to be involved. She shared:

And there were all these like different activities and like cool things like in the student union, and I just remember that was the first time I saw Greeks strolling, and I remember I was just like, oh my god, like, what is this? And I just, I don't even remember any of the organizations besides [the one I ended up pursuing]. And I just remember thinking like, whatever this is, like, I have to get involved with this. Like, I didn't understand what they were doing I was just like that, like, was amazing. And then as I would observe them on campus, I felt like they were just, for me, the epitome of like womanhood. How they looked on campus, how they walked on campus, like, I just thought the women themselves were beautiful. And I was just like, instantly intrigued.

The way Britt described this sorority sounded precisely like how one would expect these women to carry themselves based on their espoused tenets and values. Beyond modeling what some consider the ideal depiction of womanhood, the sorority women across the various campuses named in this study also exuded other desirable traits. Both Samantha and Nadia described the members of BGLOs on their campuses broadly as the epitome of engagement and leadership. Even if you never went to a single BGLO event, you were

likely to encounter a member of a BGLO because they were integrated into other areas of campus life beyond Black U'. Samantha shared, "I mean, they were just extremely active. And like probably any school, they were also a part of everything else." Nadia added, "The Greeks were very involved either as senators, which is just like serving in student government, and they were also on the boards. I would say almost every single student org had a Black Greek person on the board."

The prevalence of these organizations and their members certainly played a role in participants' interest in pursuing membership. As Black students attending PWIs, BGLO members modeled what appeared to be a successful integration into the larger macro structure of the PWI. Throughout the interviews and sista circles, participants highlighted many rational and aspirational reasons why they felt drawn to BGLOs. Some sought community, and others sought acceptance, which would have supported a sense of belonging by anchoring them further into the Black U' ecosystem. The BGLOs were the social elite of Black U', making it almost impossible for a Black student to limit their interactions with BGLOs. After participants experienced sorority rejection, many had to continue navigating social circles within Black U'. The deep connection between BGLOs and Black U' made it so the rejection experience became the Black U' experience for participants. In the second main finding, I illustrate how integrated the rejection experience was within the larger Black U' and PWI experience for participants. Even after the rejection experience, participants were still subject to the cultural norms and expectations of Black U'. For example, once you pursue membership into one Black sorority, it is frowned upon to pursue another Black sorority at the same institution. Once

participants decided to seek membership in a sorority, their relationship with Black U' changed.

Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection

“It's 13 years later, and it's still really something that is a devastating thought for me.” – Britt

The primary imperative of this study was to explore how Black women made sense of their rejection experiences from Black sororities while attending PWIs. In recognizing that BGLOs are a significant component of Black U', the subcommunity many Black students at PWIs have to navigate, the experience of Black sorority rejection dramatically differs from that of white students pursuing historically white sororities. Informed by individual interviews and sista circles with participants, four subthemes came together to define the second most significant finding, Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection. Subtheme 1, The Communal Experience of Rejection, recognizes all participants' pursuits ended in rejection as they were not granted membership into a BGLO. Next, in Subtheme 2, Seeking Sisterhood, I further delineate that, for participants, rejection from a BGLO meant rejection from a sisterhood. Also, in this subtheme, I explore participants' interests in joining a Black sorority. In Subtheme 3, Hidden Curriculum as a Form of Gatekeeping, participants discuss how, in retrospect, they failed to properly navigate a hidden curriculum without guidance. Lastly, Subtheme 4, Little to No Support, offers reflections on mentoring and support, an extension of the conversation regarding a hidden curriculum. Their narratives provide insight into how students may learn of their rejection, formal and informal ways they were expected to

“perform” their interests, and the lack of uniformity in the rejection process across BGLOs, chapters, and regions.

The Communal Experience of Rejection

Participants’ rejection experiences were very profound because they had to navigate the implications of this rejection within a broader social context, as illustrated in Figure 1. Across the different institutions, regions, and sororities, there were myriad ways participants were notified they would not be accepted into the organization. How one learns if they “get in” to a sorority vs. “gets rejected” matters because the decision makers and sorority members remain peers and leaders within Black U’. As established in the first main finding, as a subcommunity, Black U’ facilitates belonging and connection for Black students at PWIs. BGLOs are inextricably linked to Black U’ and, during recruitment periods, host events showcasing the many benefits of membership. To reiterate the job analogy, this experience can be likened to attending a job fair and being told by every company that you are a great fit. After you apply for a position, you do not get the job, and everyone who attended the job fair and even those who did not, also learn of this news. In the following section, I introduce participants’ rejection experiences in their own words, highlighting how their rejection felt like a communal experience.

For some participants, the notification of rejection felt formal and official, while others questioned if their “paperwork” was ever submitted. In the world of sorority rejection, questioning whether organizations truly submitted your paperwork to their national leadership is one of many conspiracies that may cross your mind if you find out that you were not accepted. In my role as a researcher during the one-on-one interviews, I

prompted participants to tell me about their rejection experiences. How one came to learn of their rejection was usually one of the first elements of their response. Samantha and Penny were two participants who received formal rejection letters. Samantha shared, “And so, for me, my rush was on a Sunday. By Tuesday, I received a letter in the mail saying, “We have decided not to pursue your candidacy.” Noting she experienced a relatively quick turnaround, Samantha described how the rejection impacted her. She had a rather emotionally charged reaction and admitted this was not the expected outcome:

I became depressed, obsessed, and just a hot mess around this unexpected decision. Some of my friend circle, most of us made it. There were like one or two other people who didn't make it. Fast forward. There's a probate I don't think I went. I'm pretty sure I didn't go. I never went to a probate again. Because that was the level of salt that was existing. And so, I talk to my mom. She didn't really get it. She was just like, “Oh, who hurt my baby?” But I was just really confused. Really just disappointed. I had my whole life planned out, and this took things off course.

Penny's situation was unique as she had pursued membership in the same sorority as her roommate. When Penny referenced the high levels of “salt” she was describing her level of bitterness. Integrity, though never directly defined to participants, is something potential new sorority members are expected to “perform” throughout the recruitment process. Integrity can look like loyalty (e.g., not attending another sorority’s events), secrecy (e.g., not telling anyone what sorority you are interested in or what events you have attended), and privacy (e.g., keeping a low profile). For two girls who are

roommates, their ability to maintain integrity is inherently threatened by their living arrangements and proximity. Penny shared more about how this dynamic played out with her roommate:

And then, like 2 weeks after my interview, I'm just like, Okay, I got it over with [the rush]. And then I think like a week later. Me and my roommate we ask each other everyday: "Did you hear something? Did you hear something?" And we didn't hear anything. And then when she finally told me I'm like, "Are you like, Are you kidding?" Like my heart literally dropped. And I went up to my room and I literally started crying. I called my friend who's in another sorority and she was basically coaching me through the whole process, even though the processes are different. She was like some of it might be, you know, similar. And she was just like, "Girl, what?! Did your friends get in?" And I was like, "Yeah, cuz, my roommate did get in." And then she was like girl, you're more qualified than them.

The notion of being more "qualified" than the women who got into the sorority you did not get into is not uncommon. Once it becomes clear who got in and who did not, you start making up stories to find a rationale for your rejection that makes sense. In a subcommunity like Black U', rumors can spread fast, and it can begin to seem like everyone knows everyone's business illustrating how rejection can be a communal experience. Additionally, once you learn you were rejected, you start retracing your steps, trying to understand how you got here. Penny shared how she was constantly reminded of "how good" her chances of getting in leading up to the sorority rush.

My friends used to tell me when I was nervous. They would be like, “Girl, you're the poster child for them. Like you're involved, you do service, like, you are all that they like.” Because like I said, I was very visible on campus as someone who does like activism, like social justice type work and stuff. And I was like, well, I kept telling them like I don't know, I don't know what they're looking for. And then when my roommate told me she got in, and I didn't, and I was just like, okay.

Immediately following the news, Penny retreated into isolation. She shared:

So, then I literally stayed in my room, like two days straight like no food, no water. Well, I had like water bottles in my room, but like, I was barely eating, barely having water. My parents would call me, and I would just be crying. They were really worried about me, but I was just like, I don't know what happened. And then after my roommate got in, she started her [pledge] process. Eventually, after I spent 2 days in my room, I had a presentation to give tied to an election for the vice president of the Black student government. I was like, well, this is something I have to do now. Like I have to save face or like do something because I can't be coming out looking like I haven't eaten in 2 days. So, my roommate was trying to comfort me but I was like, “I don't know. You just don't understand.” And then of course, once she got in, she wouldn't tell me much about it.

Through prior conversations with colleagues who were members of BGLOs in preparation for my research, they all shared there are rules governing the application process for each organization and that everyone who applied should have received formal

notification of their status. I asked Penny if she ever received any official notification from the organization about her status, and she said:

Well, my friend told me she did, and so then I checked the mail like a week later, and I'm like, oh, here it is. We were communicating [with the organization] through email about interviews so I just thought it'd be the same, but it wasn't.

Other participants, like Nadia, never received any official communication. Nadia learned of her rejection status from her resident assistant (RA), who encouraged her to pursue the organization. She shared:

I text my RA, and she's like, come to my office. So, we go sit in her office and she shuts the door. And then she was like, "You haven't heard from them?" And I was like, "No, how long does it normally take?" And she was like, "Well, they've already started." And I was like, "I hadn't heard anything." And she seemed really upset and really surprised.

Britt found out she was not accepted into the sorority through social media. Learning through the grapevine or because you never heard back from the organization only contributed to participants' despair. Britt reflected:

So, over the next couple of weeks, I would see two of the girls from the rush that I knew from high school, and we would walk past each other kind of whisper like, "oh, have you heard anything? No. Have you heard anything? No." "Okay. Well, hopefully, they'll get back to us." And so, this went on for like the entire semester. I'm thinking, like, they're kind of running out of time. Like, you know, they have to get this line together. I want to say it was like, maybe around this time, but like

the end of April. The girls that I knew, some of the girls had posted pictures on Facebook of them wearing letters. And I had heard because I was never in the quad that they had had a pop-up probate in the quad that day. And so. I remember texting my family friend who wrote my recommendation letter like, hey, like, I've heard that they're new girls on line, like at school like, do you know anything? She's like, No, she's like, let me make some calls. So, within 3 or 4 minutes, she texts me back. She's like, yes, like they've completed intake. She then said, prepare yourself for the next intake.

Lastly, Monique described her unique experience. For 14–18 weeks, Monique met up secretly with members of the organization she was pursuing and other potential members to endure an illegal hazing experience. The potential members were asked to engage in various hazing rituals throughout the process before submitting official paperwork to become a sorority member. There came a point at which Monique felt like a line was crossed. When a potential member decides not to continue with a process, legal or not, expectations of integrity still apply. Monique shared:

Okay, so yeah, so I think it was at like 18 weeks or something like it of being on line and then yeah, we stopped. And that's when me and my friend was like nah forget all this so we walked away or whatever. And of course, that's when they were actually able to pick up a line because the fucking school year started. So, they started a new line. So, I had decided I was gonna get up with them. And I actually started being on line again but then like, 2 or 3 weeks into it I said, You know what, y'all got me messed up. So, then I walked away again, but they said I

could still turn in my paperwork and my money. So, I did, and after about a week, they told me I didn't make it and then gave me my money back.

For Monique, her rejection looked different than the other participants because she spent over 2 months on line with other potential members. Her process was also unique because she originally “dropped” line, returned to the line, and “dropped” again all before applying and being rejected. Pledging processes like the one she experienced were banned by BGLOs in 1990 (Kimbrough, 2000). She described how it all began: “There was no paper process or anything like they decided just from the meetings we went to the people they wanted to deal with, they contacted us and then in May, that's when everything started.”

The “everything” Monique referred to was an illegal hazing process. Monique was frustrated to say the least. Monique was given a reason for her rejection unlike most other participants—too many withdrawals on the transcript. Although the other participants would have dreamed of receiving a reason or rationale, Monique said this clarity did not help her as she processed, mainly because the “rationale” followed her hazing experience. She shared:

I was frustrated, angry, and sad because I had expended so much. Like if we would have did the paperwork first—first of all, I wouldn't have the w's [on my transcript]. But if we did the paperwork first, I don't know if I would have felt the same way. You know what I'm saying?

Monique believed she only had the withdrawals on her transcript because of the hazing process. Had she not been participating in secret rituals and responding to the beck and

call of sorority members, she may have been able to focus on her classes. In her mind, she went through the necessary “process” to receive the “outcome” of becoming a member, but it did not work out that way. For this study’s participants, it was clear the “why” and “how” of their rejection were critical elements of their meaning-making process. Not being accepted into the sorority of their choice meant not being accepted into a broader, international, lifelong sisterhood. I do not think participants understood the full gravity of the rejection from this sisterhood until it happened. Navigating the rejection experience in a racial subcommunity like Black U’ did not make the experience any easier. The close-knit nature of Black U’ made participants feel everyone within the community knew of their rejected status which informed the meaning-making process. In some ways, this communal experience can be likened to that of the formal recruitment process for historically white sororities since everyone involved can identify one another.

Seeking Sisterhood

In a sista circle, I asked participants to reflect on the proposed title of the study, “Seeking Sisterhood.” I wanted to know if it resonated with everyone or if there were inherent assumptions in the phrase. Participants offered rich reflections regarding their interest in and desire to become members of Black sororities. For most participants, their rejection experience happened over 10 years ago, so their responses encompass insights that may have come later. Ultimately, participants’ desires were informed by the PWI context and its failure to provide structures of support for Black women. Nadia was hesitant to say she was seeking sisterhood. Instead, she felt she was looking for more community on her campus. Nadia shared:

I think I was seeking community. I've got quite a few Black women that I'm friends with now. But do I think that I have like a group of Black women that I am very close with? And like we all know each other, and we are all like, I guess friends with each other as opposed to me having a friendship with one or two people and then it being like splintered if that makes sense? I would say no. I don't think that I have another community of exclusively Black women that I am close with in a similar way as to what [joining a sorority] would have created.

Although she did not describe it as sisterhood, Nadia's reflections draw attention to one perceived benefit of sorority membership: this idea of a strong group of Black women who are all friends with one another. For Britt, joining a Black sorority would have gotten her one step closer to being an "ideal Black woman." Britt reflected:

I think I was looking for acceptance. And when I say that I grew up in a really racially mixed community in the south in terms of my schooling. And so, when I went to college, I looked at this, this organization as like this is the organization that represents the ideal Black woman. When I look at these women and even the woman who sponsored me when I look at her and the women in her chapter, this is what I want to be. And if I become a member of this organization, they can help me become this ideal Black woman, right? And so that's what I was looking for in this organization, for me to find acceptance and for me to find acceptance in terms of who I was as a Black woman.

Britt went on to reveal she ended up joining another Greek organization, saying, "As you know, I ended up becoming a member of another organization a multicultural sorority

that I did find sisterhood in, and I'm no longer a member for other reasons." Although she was not necessarily looking for sisterhood in the BGLO, she gained sisterhood in the multicultural sorority she joined. After being a member for many years, Britt left the organization. She shared:

My values no longer aligned with the organization, but like, even no longer being a member. There's still like this sense of sisterhood that I've been able to find that's been really, really great. So, it's been very fortunate. Throughout my years, I've been able to define what my idea of Blackness is for me it didn't take having to be part of a D9 organization to define my own identity as a Black woman.

In the end, it all worked out, though because Britt defined her own identity as a Black woman, something she thought she originally needed to join a BGLO to do. Additionally, although she is no longer a member of the multicultural sorority she joined, Britt said she would still have this sense of sisterhood for life. Penny did not think she was looking for sisterhood either. She felt instead that she was going along with the flow of Black U'. She reflected:

Um, I honestly, I don't know what I was seeking because I don't think I was seeking sisterhood because I already have a sister. So that has not been lost on me. But I do think that like, I think somebody brought up the phenomenon of like, you're kind of just like you're the shoo-in for this, you're the perfect fit for this, and I'm like, Okay, I guess so. It was definitely still some intentionality there.

Like I said, I had a lot of mentors in the organization and stuff. And I'm just like, okay, but I don't think I was seeking sisterhood because I did already have [Black

women] friends too. I was like 19 or 20 at the time, so I was just listening to what everyone else was like. Saying like, Oh, you'd be a shoo-in for this like, and then also at the time, I thought this organization and these [Black Greek] orgs, in general, were doing like groundbreaking revolutionary work.

Penny brought up some interesting points. She felt “ushered in” to pursuing membership in a BGLO. In earlier passages, Penny shared she was heavily involved and visible on campus. In addition to already having a sister and a circle of Black women friends, Penny had mentors who were a part of the Black sorority she subsequently pursued. She thought joining would allow her to engage in “revolutionary” service work. On the other hand, Monique was pursuing a familial legacy and was interested in shattering assumptions about masculine-presenting women. Monique shared:

I'm a masculine-presenting woman, so I don't look like a typical woman that would be you know, in a sorority, so, I just wanted to do something different and come out of my shell, you know. And then one of my sisters is actually part of the org so that was a motivating factor for me as well.

Lastly, Samantha shared more about her intentions.

On *Girlfriends* or these other shows with three or four Black women who have this deep kind of relationship across four people. I think I have always kind of received messages that that's what I need as a Black woman. Like we need each other. We need sisterhood. And so it just was not lost on me that I did not have that. And even now, as an adult. I don't have that. I have separate friendships with Black women and some of them know each other. But are we taking a group girls'

trip to Miami anytime soon? Probably not. And I think I thought that if I got into an organization that will kind of default and happen. Like, I see people I went to school with who are in D9 getting married and guess what—they take the pictures of the whole line. And sure, I don't know the specifics or if they're still really close or whatever. I'm sure a picture doesn't tell us everything, but I feel like I'm not going to have that element. Like if I do ever get married or have those big moments. It's just going to be these fragments of people coming together and think I always wanted the sisterhood.

Samantha's response illustrated she was interested in the long-term "benefits" of BGLO membership from the onset. Recognizing that all participants hoped to get different things out of their experience, I questioned if the proposed study title still made sense.

Britt and others were quick to agree I should keep the title. Britt shared:

I mean, in my opinion, I mean, I think it's okay to still call it seeking sisterhood because I think all the things that we mentioned are still components of sisterhood: acceptance, friendship, community. Those are all things that are and should be a part of sorority and sisterhood. So, my thought I think it's fine to keep it that way, because I think it's still an overall like encompassing term for all the things that we were, you know, ideally looking for out of those experiences.

Although we know it did not ultimately work out for participants, I felt it was important to go back to the beginning to understand everyone's intentions and motivations for wanting to join a Black sorority. Our conversations showed me it was not as Black and white as I thought. Everyone's experience of Black sorority rejection affected them

differently for different reasons, including their initial intention to pursue sorority membership. Regardless of what participants were looking for, to secure membership, they all had to submit a formal application to be considered. Continued conversations with participants revealed there was a hidden curriculum involved in their pursuits.

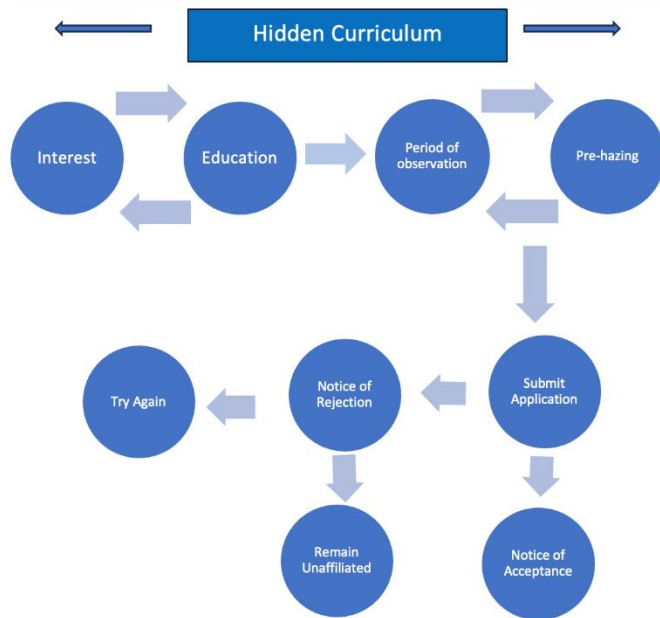
Hidden Curriculum as a Form of Gatekeeping

“So, I think what could have helped me with coping is to be to is to have been told why I was rejected. And what I could have done better.” – Britt

As mentioned in earlier passages, there is no uniform way to express interest in an organization beyond applying. Participants’ narratives highlighted that the expectations across organizations, regions, and chapters can vary. With this being said, how one gains acceptance into an organization beyond an application is less clear and can vary across organizations, regions, and chapters. Often, with limited guidance, participants set out to join these organizations through a process sight unseen. Although some felt more prepared than others, the notion of a “hidden curriculum” became a throughline in participants’ reflections. To help facilitate a broader understanding, Figure 2 illustrates a process map comprised of elements within participants’ recruitment experiences.

Figure 2

Sorority Recruitment Process Map



In the figure, you can see a “hidden curriculum” at the top encompassing a potential new member’s experience from the initial interest point through the submission of the application. I define “hidden curriculum” as a collection of implicit social and cultural messages, unwritten rules, and unspoken expectations related to pursuing membership in a BGLO. As I listened to participants reflect on their experiences, I sensed a pattern akin to the hidden curriculum Black students have to navigate at PWIs. Participants did not feel set up for success in their endeavors. Britt described being confused from her first interaction with a BGLO, thanks to shabby advice from a friend:

I was at an event with all the organizations tabling, and I saw from a distance [that a sorority] was tabling and I was with one of my high school friends. And she was like, okay, “so what you want to do?” she's like whispering, “Okay here’s what you want to do. You want to walk, go up to the table, you just want to look at it,

but like, don't talk to them. And like don't ask them any questions.” And I was like, “Wait, so like, how are they supposed to know like, I'm interested if I can't talk to them?” And she's like, “I don't know.”

The whispered tone and limited advice that foreshadowed this interaction further affirmed the perceived hierarchal dynamics that can exist between members, nonmembers, and potential members within Black U'. There can be a lot of confusion and misunderstanding when it comes to expressing interest in an organization. Some people present themselves as having insight, but they may ultimately be steering you in the wrong direction. Of the five participants, two felt they were underprepared for the process of pursuing membership. The other three thought they were prepared, although they questioned whether that was true now. Nadia described that although she had engaged with [the sorority] as a recipient of a scholarship their organization funded, she did not learn of things she was “supposed to be doing” until it was too late. She shared:

I didn't know I was supposed to be attending events. So, I wasn't. I was attending dinners for scholarships. I was attending literally all scholarship-exclusive events. Like that was it. I was like I don't know any of this. Um, I was not appropriately shepherded in or through the process. They needed to like me when I didn't know that that was a thing. I thought it was like being an applicant for a job. But also, back then I didn't realize that a lot of hiring is based on if they like you or not. I was like, Well, my credentials are good enough. So my credentials are great. I look great on paper and one of my recommendation letters came from [a notable

political figure], and that didn't matter. I was like I don't know any of this. Um, like I said, I was not appropriately shepherded in or through the process.

Nadia shared she thought it was like applying for a job. If you have everything they told you they were looking for, you will surely get the job. Unfortunately, there are often unstated characteristics that BGLOs “look for” in potential new members. Ideally, they would align with the organization’s values, but that is not always the case. Participants’ experiences highlighted many contrasts across regions and chapters. Some participants reflected on being surprised at “who got in.” In a small community like that of Black U’, this culture of gossip is to be expected. Even if you thought you were a shoo-in, that did not always work out either. Penny thought she was doing everything right but later learned that was not the case. She reflected:

I was going to events so that they knew I was interested, but my friend was like, “So you haven't called anybody?” and I was like, “No, I didn't know there was like a hidden curriculum.” So, I just thought I was supposed to show up. She was like, “No girl, you have to start calling people.” So, then I call my mentor, and I'm like, “Girl, what are these people talking about? “And she was like, “Yeah, you should have been doing it.”

Penny’s experience highlights an interesting thread throughout all the conversations with participants: this idea of mentorship. When I asked if participants felt they had a mentor or knew someone in the organizations they pursued, they all said yes. In Penny’s case, her “mentor” confirmed she was supposed to be making these calls before but had not mentioned it despite knowing about Penny’s interest. The title of this theme was inspired

by Penny. She described the expectation of the calls as an example of the hidden curriculum at play. Although it is unclear why the mentor failed to say anything sooner, Penny had to press forward in her pursuit of membership. She shared:

And then I woke up the next morning for rush. I like didn't know how to dress. I'm like, are they going to ask me to stand up? See if I'm wearing my slacks and business casual or business professional wear and stuff.

Britt recalled being at an interest meeting where the attendees could ask questions:

And so they asked like, "Okay, does anyone have questions?" Me being like, oh, I'm gonna be a business major. I was asking all these questions like "Oh, how many women are in the chapter?" "Blah, blah, blah. And I remember, one of the advisors was like, oh, like, she said, she was like, "Oh, like, you don't have a lot of questions, do you?" Something like that that sounded a little snarky.

Although the facilitators asked if there were any questions from the attendees, it was clear the cultural expectation was that no one ask questions. When Britt described this moment, she emphasized the question the advisor posed, even shifting her voice to illustrate that the person had a sarcastic tone. It was as if this moment had happened yesterday when it had taken place over 10 years ago. This kind of re-enacting occurred often throughout the interviews and sista circles, especially when we discussed the rejection experience. Circling back to Nadia, she recalled attending a rush meeting and being treated in a manner she could not understand. She had an inkling that it may have had something to do with her application but was not sure as she had consulted two organization members for guidance. Specifically, there was a hiccup with Nadia's official

transcript, but a sorority advisor and RA previously assured her bringing in a physical copy instead of mailing it as the application requested would be okay. It turned out that maybe that was not the case. Nadia reflected on a subsequent conversation with her RA:

I genuinely don't know what's going on. I don't know what I did to upset anybody. I was like, yes, I didn't have my completed application, but you knew that and you didn't tell me not to do it. And [a graduate advisor] told me that she was vouching for me, like she told me to do it with the hard copy of my transcript and so like I'm like, what the fuck is going on?

Nadia's admission demonstrates the high confusion levels experienced by many participants. Many of these moments that took place during participants' undergraduate years were permanently etched in their minds. The varying levels of knowledge regarding the recruitment process and the presence of mentorship or lack thereof constitute another critical element of the Black sorority rejection experience.

Little to No Support

Another reflection participants offered regarding their experiences is that very few of them felt truly supported throughout their process. One by one, participants detailed their interactions with different mentor figures and sorority members whose support, in some ways, fell short. Participants collectively felt providing an actual rationale for their rejection would have been the ideal medium of support. In lieu of that insight, participants discussed what support looked like for them. First, Nadia described her interactions with her RA who had previously served as the president of the sorority she pursued. Some of what she referenced may sound familiar, as she previously shared her

RA was how she learned she did not get into the sorority she pursued. Her previous insights were shared in a one-on-one interview, and she expanded on this interaction with her RA in the sista circle:

I would say I had one conversation with that chapter's former president. She had graduated and was like in graduate school at the University at the same school. And she's also how I found out I got rejected. I went to her and was like, Hey, I'm not sure what's going on. I don't know what the next step in the process is. It's been it's been a little bit of time and I'm not sure what I should be doing. And she seemed really surprised that I had not heard back and basically was letting me know like, if you haven't heard back by now, you didn't make it. So like, I never actually got like any kind of formal communication or even if we're being honest, informal communication from anyone who was active in that chapter, about like, my application status. And so, we kind of had one conversation and in that conversation, she was just, like, supportive and I really appreciated her being as supportive as she was. But um, yeah, that was that was my one, I would say, person who was like helping or who I guess helped me process everything in that moment.

Britt described reaching out to a family friend who had served as her sponsor:

The only person that I really talked to was my sponsor. So, she was someone who was a member of the organization but was not a member of that chapter. And so, she like wrote my letter of recommendation and everything. And so, she was the one who actually found out on my behalf, that the chapter had completed intake,

because if y'all remember, from my story, like I had seen pictures on Facebook and like had heard rumblings like, oh, the chapter had like a stroll through the quad probate like nothing was advertised. And so, I texted her and I was just like, hey, like, have you heard anything? And she's like, give me a few minutes and I'll find something out and I don't know who she contacted. But within like, maybe 5 minutes, literally 5 minutes. She called me she's like, yes, like the chapter completed intake, like prepare yourself for the next line. And then 2 weeks later, we found out the chapter was suspended for hazing.

Britt was grateful her sponsor helped connect the dots in the moment, but she admitted they had not spoken since. Britt shared:

Um, but yeah, like I, when I say like, support, I mean, she was the person who initially informed me, um, but it's crazy because that happened like 10 years ago, and I still haven't had the nerve to talk to her about the sorority again. Even though like I am navigating, going through potentially, hopefully, maybe going through this experience again. Now granted, I'm in a whole 'nother state. Um, but in the years since like, when she was president of a local graduate chapter, she like, personally invited me to events at her chapter, but like, I still have not been able to talk to her about anything.

Britt went on to shout out her other non-Greek friends for supporting her:

But besides her, I mean, I did have like a few friends who were also like not Greek, who I talked to about, you know, just my thoughts and my feelings, who I leaned on. I found that in those in that moment in those couple of days and weeks

afterwards, it was a lot easier to talk to non-Greeks than it was to talk to Greeks. Um, I felt like they understood better, like their rejection. And I felt like their mindset was more in the mindset that I had, just like anger. And just frustration. I felt like they were able to better commiserate with that.

Monique shared she did not feel supported despite her family ties:

I can kind of relate to that where I didn't really have any support. My sister is part of the sorority in a different chapter, but we have yet to really even discuss that whole experience for me, which is kind of weird. I think I need to muster up some courage to talk to her about that.

In addition to not feeling supported by her sister, Monique also reflected on how challenging it was to maintain certain friendships following the rejection experience:

But going through the process and not making it and then my friends making it that's where I lost a sense of belonging. So, you know, what I'm saying? That's where I lost that feeling of belonging. So, like I said, like everybody I hung out with, you know, the main people I hung around. The whole thing with my roommate—something happened I don't really know but we just disconnected, and she was my best friend too.

Her inability to put her finger on what exactly happened with her roommate supports a notion shared earlier that participants were in a constant negotiation between Black U' and their rejection experiences every day. Penny added she got some verbal affirmations from friends here and there, but it was not the support she wanted:

But, um, I think as far as for of course, my friends, like, will say things like, you know, they're missing out, blah, blah. You know, the cliché, the cliché stuff, but I feel like when I look back, that's kind of like not this. I mean, oh, yeah. Then that's not the support that I want it. Like, the support I wanted was why?

A lot of the other participants agreed. A simple rationale could have made all the difference. Samantha added the way she thought about support then is not how she thinks about it now:

I don't know if I would have if I even understood the concept of support. At that age, in a way that I understand it now, like in a way that deepen friendships and connections with different types of people and we're being critical of our relationships and holding each other accountable and talking about what support looks like at this age. I was not anywhere near thinking about those things then. I think I told a lot of people, I got the cliché stuff, too, you know, it's their loss and it was wasn't meant to be. I think for me, it wasn't non Greeks that I found that I felt most supported by I was actually Greek men. I feel like I was surprised to be affirmed by them. A few people. I just remember having conversations with Greek men and them affirming like nah this is some messed up stuff and saying that chapter is whack anyway or just kind of making me feel better. I think. I will also say there was some other girls who were rejected with me that I think it was just an interesting dynamic with those girls where we didn't, we weren't necessarily friends before, but at this point had this kind of shared secret or understanding.

Like Britt, Samantha never followed up with her recommender after the rejection. She shared:

So that was interesting, but I definitely never talked to my recommenders like one of my recommenders was like a distant cousin. Obviously, I told her and I think I don't even remember she said, maybe like, oh, you know this happens. Try again. And then my other recommender, who was a staff member at the institution, I don't know if we ever talked about it again. I think I might have started to avoid her like the plague because there was conspiracy theories around her writing bad recommendation letters for girls, like agreeing to serve as a recommender but then in the letter not recommending them, obviously that was just hearsay, but I don't think I knew what to say to her at that time.

Monique was the only participant who sought out mental health services. In previous studies on sorority rejection, researchers called for institutions to ensure students experiencing rejection had access to mental health services (Kiray, 2018). Monique said:

And like in my experience, I actually did reach out to mental health resources on campus, but in my situation, I couldn't necessarily tell them what was wrong because in my mind, I'm still like, well, I don't want them to get their, you know, letters taken. I don't want the chapter to be destroyed, you know, so I'm still trying to save them but at the same time I need mental health help. So that was that was a crazy situation for real.

What Monique described reminded me of another element of the hidden curriculum: loyalty. Following her rejection experience, she struggled to prioritize her needs over the

organization. There is something to be said about the subtle and often unnamed expectation of loyalty associated with Black sororities and how one is expected to “perform.” Monique was in a limbo of sorts, constantly debating whether to choose herself or the sorority. Collectively, participants received little to no support from the institution, Black U’ (their peers), or the BGLOs. And yet, the cultural norms and hidden curriculum of performance still extended to them. Even though you have been rejected, it is still the expectation that you exude integrity, privacy, and loyalty. The expectation of performance or the idea that rejected people need to act a certain way, created a heightened sense of visibility and invisibility, as evidenced by participants' narratives.

In this finding, I unearthed key elements that make Black sorority rejection distinct from other types of rejection. As Black students attending PWIs, the ecosystem of Black U’ can play a prominent role in creating a sense of belonging. When a student experiences sorority rejection from a BGLO, they are unable to disentangle their lives from the sorority. After engaging with sororities through recruitment and social events, the students know what BGLOs can provide: a sisterhood, yet they are not a part of it. Students who have experienced sorority rejection within the context of Black U’ are constantly reminded of their rejection and status as nonmembers. Additionally, they must endure what can feel like a very public experience, with little to no structured forms of support from the university or their peers.

The Aftermath of Black Sorority Rejection

The second research question guiding this study asked: What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black

sorority at a PWI? I saved this dialogue for the sista circles because I wanted participants to be in a communal space as they reflected on these topics. I did my best to preserve the conversations as they happened, so some of the quotes are long with them being dialogic. What we have learned about sorority rejection thus far is that it is not a one-time thing. Black students attending PWIs are already experiencing an environment that is largely unsafe and unsupportive. When a Black student joins a subcommunity like Black U' and makes connections, takes on leadership roles, etc., there can be a sense of belonging. When you choose to pursue membership in a BGLO, you are attempting to deepen your connections. Sorority rejection in the context of Black U' can also feel like a rejection from Black U'. After reviewing the transcripts, I concluded the primary strategy most participants used to navigate their social circles following rejection was survival and self-preservation. Although these strategies were not explicitly named, the absence of elevating specific tools and resources highlighted participants' resilience. The aftermath of Black sorority rejection consists of an ongoing sense of rejection. It is far beyond a letter or informal notification; it is perpetual and non-linear.

The following finding includes five themes that help illustrate how participants navigated social circles after their Black sorority rejection experience. Theme 1, "Performing for Black U Post Rejection," offers narratives regarding how participants navigated social circles following their rejection experience. Theme 2, "How Did We Get Here?" gave insight into how participants problematized their experiences with BGLOs. Theme 3, "Moving Forward," reveals how, if at all, participants could move on and move forward from their rejection experiences. Theme 4, "Still Seeking Sisterhood," discusses

a question people who experience rejection are often asked, “Would you ever try again?” Lastly, Theme 5 wraps up this section with word cloud visuals comprised of participants’ final reflections. Together, these subthemes tell the story of “what happened next” following the rejection experience. Collectively, the themes provide insight into what social circle navigation following the rejection entailed for participants.

Performing for Black U’ After Sorority Rejection

I established that Black U’ is pervasive in the first main finding. Depending on the school, you may make your introduction during orientation week or later, but the message is usually the same. Black U’ is where you can go to find belonging and support. Moreover, BGLOs within Black U’ are where you want to be. BGLOs have even more to offer students; go to an event to find out. Once a student decides they want to enter a lifetime relationship with BGLOs, they apply. Per participants’ narratives, almost no one realizes the full gravity of the rejection until after it happens.

When you apply, there is a lot of denial; most people do not even think of the ramifications of not getting in. Unfortunately, the culture of Black U’ warrants that you are expected to act a certain way even after rejection. This subtheme highlights the various ways participants were expected to “perform” within Black U’ after they experienced sorority rejection. To continue the job analogy introduced earlier, we see these same expectations in the job market. Some companies are known to receive thousands of applications for one job. If you find yourself among the numbers of those who did not even make it to the screening call, you are expected to tell yourself it was not meant to be and move on. If a similar company posts the same position in the job market,

you are encouraged to apply. Additionally, it is not uncommon for a company to keep you in their candidate pool and reach out if other opportunities align with your skillset. For a sorority rejection experience, however, pursuing membership in another BGLO would be inappropriate. Moreover, the sorority recruitment process has no “candidate pool” equivalent. If you are interested in pursuing membership in the same sorority again, you have to go through the formal application process again.

There is a saying in Black communities regarding some members of BGLOs: “Some people get in and make the organization their whole lives and personalities.” When people say this, they are alluding that these members have nothing else to talk about, no additional hobbies, interests, etc. which has negative connotations. These comments speak to the hidden curriculum mentioned earlier which illustrates that implicit norms can impact members too. Nonetheless, as for Samantha, she shared her rejection experience became her whole personality. She admitted she had never really experienced rejection before and could not fathom that for once in her life, her efforts did not yield the outcome she desired. Ultimately, she ended up engaging in another BGLO faux pas, telling people about her experience. She shared, “So, I was just kind of obsessed. Everybody knew my story at this point. Because what was discretion to me? I was burned, and so everyone kind of knew that I had been rejected and didn't really know why.”

Whereas Samantha willingly shared her own story with others, some participants did not quite understand how others came to know about their experience. The decisions Penny made while navigating the uncertainty of her future with the organization had even

bigger implications than she had imagined. During the sista circle, Penny gave multiple examples of how her rejection would be thrown in her face or how people would try to rationalize the organization's decision:

When that rejection came and people found out all of the nasty details that were involved. People were like, I don't like her and people feel some type of way about you. People saying stuff like, you know, now we know why she didn't get in and I'm like, but just before you were gonna say hey, like literally a month ago you were saying something different.

Navigating these interactions was hard for Penny. The rejection experience created a level of hypervisibility for participants among their peers and within themselves. For Nadia, the reality of her rejection became apparent when people began to avoid her socially. She felt she had done everything right during her application process and even recalled checking in with her RA and a graduate advisor of the organization. However, during the rush process, the sorority did not shy away from letting it be known that they felt disrespected by her incomplete application. Nadia shared:

After the rush, everybody was mad at me. And I didn't know what was going on. So yea, I found out from my RA that I didn't get in and they never actually told me. Um, but from that point forward, nobody would fucking talk to me.

Following the rejection, not only did her relationships change with certain people, but her relationship with her institution also changed. Although she was confused about her rejection from the sorority she pursued, she did not really know what to do next. She reflected:

It was like, they told people and I don't know if they told people but like, what narrative they told, like I was too embarrassed to really address it. If we're being honest. Like I was just like, hopefully if I keep my head down, it'll pass. If I keep my head down and I'm not trying to be abrasive or aggressive, it'll pass, and it didn't. I felt like all the things that defined my college experience to that point, went away. Everything that I like loved about college, no longer existed.

In this case, Nadia mentioned just wanting to keep her head down, which demonstrates how the rejection experience can force people to perform with a sense of hypervisibility and even invisibility. I asked her if other things were going on socially or if she thought the rejection led to this new social distance she was experiencing, and she responded:

And this sorority thing was just almost one of many kinds of social things. That felt connected, but that kind of created a domino effect. Yeah. Because these communities are so interconnected. I don't think that I can really pull them apart if that makes sense.

She named that everything felt interconnected, which speaks to the pervasiveness of the subcommunity she was a part of. Following the rejection, it was hard to tell the difference between cause and effect when things happened. For Samantha, she experienced a new social distance as well, stating:

I definitely think the girls who got in on this specific line I was trying to get on there was some distance obviously, whether that was forced or just assumed that that was what needed to happen. I don't know but some of my friends I would say like two or three, they immediately became distant.

Something about the rejection experience makes you so unsure of yourself. Participants frequently phrased things in a way that made it clear they were just making assumptions or were not totally sure. Even in retrospect, you could tell the aftermath of the rejection experience was less about the “truth” and more about how participants had to contort themselves to continue navigating their lives at their institutions. When some of Samantha’s friends stopped talking to her as much, it may have been because they began the process of joining a sorority, which involves spending a lot of time with your new sorority members. Alternatively, it could have been because the relationship may have become awkward or for some totally unrelated reason. Unfortunately, without knowing the truth, Samantha ascribed this outcome as being just another consequence of her rejection.

Other participants experienced a hypervisibility of sorts within their campus communities as well. Penny discussed how she felt alienated after her rejection experience:

And I even think about like, the like, at a PWI like you're already hyper-visible as a Black person in predominately white spaces but being hyper-visible within your own community is a whole ‘nother type of alienation, almost like not alienation, but like it's a whole different type being hyper-visible as a Black person being hyper-visible. And like around other Black people where you're, you know, supposed to kind of blend in like everyone's just wondering, like, we're all Black. We're all here, but you being hyper-visible and that is like a whole ‘nother form of like, anxiety.

Like the other participants, Monique felt like everyone on campus knew her situation. She shared, “I felt like everybody already knew and then. So then it's like, now I'm just like a weird nigga. You know what I'm saying? like kind of like almost like I'm marked or something.” I took a deep sigh when Monique used the word “marked.” It felt incredibly powerful because the rejection experience can be hard to describe. People often try to minimize rejection by saying it is inevitable and that you should just trust that things happen as they should. Being labeled an outcast is devastating when you are 19 or 20 years old, exploring a new college campus, and trying to fit in. For some of these participants, Black U’ is all they have. Based on these narratives, we can see how participants found themselves in a constant negotiation between their communities and their rejection experiences every day. This subtheme helps to illustrate what social circle navigation entailed in the immediate aftermath of the rejection experience.

How Did We Get Here?

When participants were brought together for the sista circles, they opened up and began to take charge of the conversation. Although everyone opted to remain off camera, the conversation was still rich. After sharing some context regarding their rejection experiences with one another, they began to have a lively debate about the founding of BGLOs. This topic was not something I anticipated coming up, but I am glad I captured it. Culturally speaking, speaking critically about historic Black cultural institutions such as the Black church and BGLOs in public can be taboo. It reminds me of something my mother used to say, “what happens in this house stays in the house.” I always took this quote to mean that we (as Black people) value privacy, but also, we should be able to

work out our own problems amongst ourselves. Following slavery and Jim Crow, Black people wanted to show white people they were civilized and capable of being professional as defined by white norms. When you have been rejected from a BGLO, some people may write you off as bitter if you have something negative to say about the organization. In the sista circle, because there was a shared experience, there were fewer concerns about judgment and seemingly no assumptions of bitterness, and thus, participants could have an uninhibited and critical conversation about BGLOs.

Before getting into the conversation, I want to highlight that these narratives largely consist of reflections that came later in life to participants. Whereas earlier sections offer participants' best guess of their immediate reactions post-rejection, this conversation gives insight into what was a long ongoing reflective process. As previously acknowledged, rejection does not just end when you leave your university. It is something you carry perpetually. As time passes, there are ways you may begin to critique these organizations in a manner that would not have fit into the context and culture of the university you attended. Being able to problematize these organizations appeared to be a part of how participants healed, made meaning of their experiences, and moved forward. First up, Britt spoke about feeling marginalized by the process:

Let's think about like why these organizations were created, right? Because, like, historically, the white counterparts like barred Black students from acceptance. So, these organizations at their foundation and core were created as spaces for Black students for fellowship, for brotherhood, or sisterhood, or service for the community. And yes, while memberships shouldn't be, like, easy, it shouldn't be

like you know, you just sign a piece of paper and you're automatically a member. It shouldn't be so stringent and so difficult of a process. You know, for people and especially if you're someone who may be neuro-atypical, first generation, or not know what is the right thing to say or do, like, it can be an even added layer that is, even more marginalizing for an organization that is supposed to help the already marginalized.

Nadia had a different perspective:

So, I guess not to necessarily push against you Britt, but I think yes, that was my initial understanding of these organizations. But you eventually learn that that's not actually why they all were started. Like when you learn the Iotas started so that they could be more politically active because the other orgs didn't want to be, like, a lot of their actual goals were not to be inclusive. Their goals were not to necessarily be a safe space for Black students but to be, I guess, a more specific type of space for a specific type of Black student. But that's not, I guess, how they how they promote themselves. And I think that if there was a greater understanding even within the Black community of like what these orgs are actually intending to do. I think it would be a greater understanding of young hopefuls who are looking to join these orgs to get a greater understanding of, do you fit that mold? Do you fit what they're actually looking to do? Not necessarily what they are stating on paper to get funding to maintain their nonprofit status, etc., etc. Like, what's their actual goal? Why are they here? And why do they think they're unique? And do you kind of align with that? And I think, for me,

kind of getting a deeper understanding there. I don't necessarily know if I did. And so it's not to excuse them, but more so to say that they are, I guess, advertising under false pretenses.

The conversation took a turn when Nadia offered her take on the purpose of these organizations. Samantha likened some of the dynamics to the Jim Crow era of segregation. At this point, participants were vibing off one another. Samantha shared:

I've had conversations with Greek people that have said something along similar lines, like you know, well maybe this isn't the organization for you. Or, every organization isn't for everybody. And those statements upset me because I feel like it reminds me of like, Jim Crow, segregation of Black people being like we want to get on the train and white people being like, well, this ain't the train for you maybe you need to get on the colored train or build your own train. And so it just feels like yes, folks are trying to be exclusive and set those parameters but to what point do folks need to think about evolving?

Samantha seemed optimistic despite her harrowing views and beckoned the organizations to consider evolving to be with the times. Nadia expanded on her earlier point that the organizations may be misrepresenting themselves:

I think they are misrepresenting themselves and coming off as more holistic and more altruistic than they actually are. And when you are pretending to be one thing, but you're actually another. You can't reform if you're not actually accepting who you are, and people don't understand who you are at your core. So, like, I think like in general, the first step to making changes like accepting, right,

and if they're deciding that they are one thing and they not, they actually aren't.

Then how can they evolve if they don't even know what they're evolving? From?

Monique added that she does not think being exclusive is a bad thing:

I just think that they have the right to be exclusive. But at the same time, Black people, especially on PWI we don't have the privilege to be exclusive. We can't ex any of our people out, you know, based on frivolous criteria. We're already, especially at PWIs, standing out already being a Black person on campus. Then like you said, you get cut out of another group you're supposed to be in. You're naturally you know, supposed to be a part of the Black people groups on campus. So, I don't think we have the ability—like we're not gonna get far cutting each other out is what I'm saying. Like it's so many [white people]—we're so outnumbered on these campuses. And in the United States period, when we break ourselves down into these little groups, we're just, you know, cutting ourselves out.

Samantha posed a question to the group:

All historically Black sororities were not founded at predominantly white institutions, I think the first three were founded at HBCUs. So, would it be safe to say once again, that because they were founded in historically Black, predominately Black environments that that was not a part of, you know, their consideration? Does that make a difference to your thought pattern?

Nadia responded:

If we're being honest, like they aren't thinking about the further implications because at an HBCU you are not I guess alienated from the entire community. You're just alienated from parts of said community. Because there are other areas where you can experience your Blackness on that campus, and at a PWI I think there's just there's a limitation if you want to be in an exclusively Black space, you're probably going to be interacting with Black Greeks if there are Black Greek letter orgs.

Penny pondered whether students at this age should be making decisions about membership.

I mean, yeah, it does sound kind of obscure to me to have an 18 to 20 something year old make a choice for life, which is why they their undergraduate, would you like to emphasize the importance for undergraduate chapters to keep up with the times because yeah, back in whatever year in like 20 century like, it was normal like that because you know, at that time, 18 years are getting married. 18-year-old, so making a lifelong decision was like a thing of the times you know what I'm saying when those when these organizations were created, and I'm sure how they, their founders had other reasons to like we want to have social connections for life. Like that makes sense. But again, I think it was normal for people to make lifelong decisions at that age, like people were having children at a younger age who were, you know, doing so many things at a younger age, but now during this time, that just doesn't make sense for people because people are not making decisions like that their age.

The conversation led to calling other Black structures into question. Penny brought up a well-known national Black leadership organization, Jack and Jill:

I just think this is not even [specific to] just D9 organizations but there's a lot of structures that Black people have created for themselves like Jack and Jill and stuff like that. Like I need to reconcile with the systems of oppression that they uphold that they think they're trying to tear down but in their processes, they uphold it to like classism, elitist elitism, colorism, homophobia, transphobia, all the things that they oppose. And I think that hidden curriculum is an obvious part of classism, like for a first gen student—they wouldn't know who to go to, where to go, like, what to do, who folks are so I just think that's kind of what it comes down to is like, people. Not like these orgs because they have like a lot of influence in our community, but just like, also as individuals thinking about, okay, I join this organization because they aim for service to all mankind, for the African American community, Black community, whatever. But it's obvious, like an obvious disservice, actually, when you're upholding the same structures that you know, the white man and white people in general continuously uphold today.

There were collective “yeahs” and “yeps” from the other participants. Monique agreed, saying, “I mean, but she's right 100% And that's kind of what I was saying earlier with not having the privilege to do that, like these groups are, are mirroring exactly what has happened to us.” Penny chimed in:

Maybe this is not like something that can be attained because whether the university doesn't want to get involved or they don't want the university involved.

I just feel like these [BGLO members] know what they can do. Like, these people know what they could do. And they should be doing it. People saying our experiences are just a bad egg situation is just like one note. They're like, there's one bad apple and obviously, no, this is systemic. And that's what I'm saying. Like we're being too nice to Greek life. These people are collegiate organizations. They have access to so many—so much research and they should be using this. Like there are people who do research on Black students socialization, people do research on queer students socialization, like, people are giving you the literature, people are giving you the tools to put into practice and you're not doing it. So, I'm like, it's same thing with the police. Literally so many abolitionist organizations have literal actual, like tangible research out there for like the police to understand why their policing is not doing well for communities. Why Black and brown communities are like [this isn't working]. There's literature out there. Of course, I know people don't read and that's also a problem.

Penny talked about how Greek life puts Black folks in a difficult position because it enables us to harm one another.

But I just don't have any sympathy for [Greeks.] I understand because like Monique mentioned earlier, I don't want to “tell” because, you know, these are my people like you know their organization could be at risk being on this campus. And it's like, I hate that we have to be in that position. Because it's like, you are harming me, but I don't want to harm you back.

Penny's narrative taps into a larger cultural phenomenon in Black Greek life and Black culture. We are expected to unite against external oppressions such as a restrictive policy prohibiting how Black Greeks can engage on campus or something more significant like policy brutality. On the flip side, the cultural norms regarding how we, as Black people, unite against those who cause harm in our own communities are less clear. Penny continued reflecting on the tensions that exist in Black culture:

If I see a Black person stealing from a store, I'm not gonna call the police. That's like, what, what does that do for me? So, I'm like, you know, of course we should have that, you know, empathy. toward our people, but at the same time, there are resources out there for you to understand why [anti-Black oppression] is a systemic issue across, you know, all of the United States and then some.

Penny wanted to empathize with her Black peers, but her patience had worn thin. She named anti-Black oppression as a systemic issue and thus questioned why Black Greeks would harm other Black people:

It's not just this [Greek organization] chapter. People are dying. Like people are dying across America because of hazing in Greek life. Right? It's just I don't know. I just think there's research and literature out there on like, Black student belonging, Black student socialization, all these things. And these orgs should be using it to progress with the times. And progress, like I don't know if these orgs will never not be relevant. But I honestly could see in the near future, specifically for undergraduate chapters, them becoming less and less relevant, because they

don't keep up with the times and I feel like that's something they should be thinking about.

Penny felt Black Greeks could have a much larger impact on society, but instead, people are still subjected to deadly hazing practices. She cited several areas of research inquiry that could be leveraged by BGLOs to “remain relevant.” Participants could have easily gone on, but time was not on our side. I was happy I could provide a space for this kind of dialogue. Holding space for participants where they could be critical of Black cultural institutions without judgment or fear of retaliation became a necessary component of the sista circles. When you identify as someone rejected from a BGLO, your opinion can automatically seem tainted with bitterness, depending on who you are talking to. In this space, I could tell participants were not bitter but disappointed. Back in their undergraduate days, a sacred trust was broken. Participants were “sold a dream,” told if they joined a BGLO, they would get sisterhood. They were subject to numerous interactions that led them to believe, “This is where I belong.” The disappointment and mistrust were further amplified when little to no social support was offered following the rejection. It was one thing to receive the notice of rejection and another to realize there was no one to help you work through it. Despite this distrust, participants were able to move forward.

Moving Forward

After the conversation in which participants problematized BGLOs and discussed their original intentions, I was curious whether they felt they had healed or moved on from the experience. Some people, especially BGLO members, may read the last section

and think, “These participants are still pressed.” Culturally, when someone is pressed, they are overly concerned and bitter about something. Although strong opinions were presented, referencing Black feminist epistemology allowed me to implore participants not to shy away from emotion. When prompted, almost all participants felt they grew in some way following their rejection experiences. Findings in this subtheme illustrate the rejection experience catalyzed growth.

When discussing the aftermath of their rejection experiences, I noted not everything shared was negative. Some participants regarded their rejection experience as a saving grace. Despite how disruptive the experience was, participants could reflect on some of the positive elements that came after their rejection experiences. Participants’ reflections revealed additional strategies they engaged in to navigate their social circles following the rejection experience. For some participants, these strategies became clearer after time had passed. Penny was the first to acknowledge she acted out of character while pursuing membership in an organization:

I think I experienced a lot of growth from it. And I was glad that my situation worked out the way it did, because I feel like I was turning into a really nasty human being and after I went to therapy, and so I'm just like, yeah, that was like, not I was not being a good person. And like, of course, I don't want to blame my actions on anyone because I do what I do. But I feel like a lot of what was going on like the secrets the pre hazing the all the bullshit was just like, I needed to take a step. back and be like, This is not me.

She went on to talk about gaining a new friend group:

I had a whole new group of friends that had stemmed, and it was very authentic friendship too, something that I feel like matters because like I felt cold, very cold, at the time. Like, I always tell them like I'm so glad that it worked out the way it did for me because I don't think I would be trying to get a PhD in like critical studies, I don't think I would be trying to be a critical scholar at all. Like I think I would just be conforming to a lot of things.

Like Penny, Britt felt like the process brought out a different side of her. She found the rejection to be incredibly humbling, sharing:

But very similar to you, Penny, I think it was a blessing in disguise because I also was a nasty little girl. Like, I was always people who like, I believe my blank didn't stink. I like drank the Kool Aid that people were like, Oh, you would make a great blah, blah blah and being rejected was a very humbling experience that I needed. Like I needed to be humbled. I needed to be brought down to earth and like I needed that rejection. I think if I had if I think if I had become a member, I would have become one of the most insufferable people like you would have ever met. And I needed that humbling experience.

Another participant, Nadia, left the country shortly after her rejection experience. Given the state of her social life at the time, pursuing an opportunity to teach English in a different country seemed like a good idea. She reflected:

I think that it absolutely changed the course of my life. I think that I would probably potentially still be working in [a different field]. But like, similar to how other women on this call stated, I had kind of a pivot. I ended up leaving the

country after it. And kind of that traveling did some soul-searching for me and kind of changed my perspective on who I was and who I want it to be and how I wanted to impact the world. Blah, blah, blah. Came back to campus and there was like, there was absolutely a shift.

For Nadia, creating some distance between herself and the school was a strategy that led her to be able to do some soul-searching and better herself. For another participant, her healing journey was not so Black and white. Monique felt conflicted. Although she was able to reflect on some ways she grew as a person, she recognized she did not need to go through a hazing experience to reach those same outcomes, sharing:

But I think it changed me as a person like I like I said, I went through basically the whole process, and I actually got a name and that name does really describe me today. So, if I had to say anything it did bring out my personality that I carry today which is very upfront, and kind of like a leader type of personality. So, I'm happy about that, but I could have went out without that experience for sure.

Monique discussed how it was hard to believe that this experience happened for a reason:

Back then I was very, very exhausted. So, if anything I did let it defeat me. I will also say, and this may sound so messed up, but I'm seeing the people that did these things to me, seeing them complete their goals is like, Oh, okay. I gotta go hard, you know what I'm saying? Because clearly what you did to me isn't affecting you.

Monique's experience ultimately encouraged her to “go harder” in life. Seeing the BGLO members responsible for her unfortunate hazing experience excel in life served as a

motivation to succeed. Other participants agreed seeing the people in these organizations can bring up feelings. These honest, unfiltered admissions brought forth participants' beautiful humanity. Although some could look back and take lessons from their experiences, others were still navigating complex emotions.

Some relationships damaged throughout the totality of the rejection experience were never repaired. Nonetheless, these narratives revealed the rejection experience was not "the end of the world," instead, it marked the beginning of a new chapter for participants. Although it appeared to have come at different moments for each participant, there came a time when they all felt liberated from the expectations of performing that they had to navigate when being on campus. Once they were no longer concerned with public perception, they could move forward.

Still Seeking Sisterhood

Usually, when you share you have been rejected from a BGLO, the follow-up question is often, did you ever think about trying again or pursuing a graduate chapter? In the world of BGLOs, there are two routes to membership: one at the undergraduate level and a post-undergraduate or graduate level. For 3 of the 5 participants, the sororities they pursued ended up getting suspended from campus, eliminating their chances of trying again before completing their undergraduate degree. If these organizations had not been removed from campus, navigating conversations regarding one's desire to "try again" would have been par for the course for these participants. Graduating did not mean questions about "trying again" stopped. For some participants, depending on their career fields and lifestyles, questions about their affiliation or intention to become affiliated with

a BGLO came up at times. The hidden curriculum does not end after college, although it becomes more ambiguous. For example, detailing your rejection experience or problematizing BGLOs in your response to a questioner is not as taboo as it would be within Black U's confines. However, that is not to say you become fully free of cultural norms. If you share your rejection experience with someone, it may come as a shock or it may be the first time someone is hearing of the phenomenon because BGLO rejection is not something we talk about culturally. In my preparation for the sista circles, I did not have any prompts regarding participants' desire to "try again." It was actually a participant who brought this conversation to the group.

In the sista circle, Britt stood out from other participants when she shared she tried to pursue membership in the sorority from which she had been rejected previously.

Britt shared:

I'm not sure if I'm the only one but I am still wanting to pursue membership in this organization. And I'm not sure if I'm the only one. And for me like I do want to give myself one more genuine effort now that I am in a different headspace. I have more knowledge I am more mature and graduate process is different. And so I am even though I went through that rejection process, like the organization has, like never left my heart and so it's something that I still want to pursue now even if I'm rejected again. Okay, like you know, at least I gave it an honest shot, you know, and I can at least at that point, say like, okay, you know, I try, like genuinely tried. But I do want to pursue, you know, and I have been doing the things for the last 1½ years, almost 2 years to pursue membership. And hopefully,

we'll just see what happens like, you know, I'm not necessarily positive because you just never know what's going to happen. It's you know, I've just never even though like I did not risk getting membership as an undergrad, I never long-term let that deter me from you know, eventually still seeking membership.

For some, Britt's tenacity represents hope. She recognized her previous experience did not go as planned, yet she still found value in pursuing membership. Other participants did not feel the same way. Samantha responded first and said she would not try again.

It won't be me. I don't think mentally I could withstand that kind of even putting myself out there. I'm very much like rejection of various like, even applying for jobs gives me anxiety because I'm like, I know I meet all these requirements. I know I could excel at this organization if you hire me, and then of course you don't get the job and I'm just like, I hate to hear that. I don't think I could go through those hoops again and it not work out. Like I don't know, if I could be prepared and I feel like for me going through that I had to be prepared for all outcomes. And I don't know how I could prepare myself for that outcome after everything I've been through. With you know, trying multiple times already.

Samantha was the only participant who attempted or submitted multiple applications to a sorority. By her own admission, her multiple attempts at obtaining membership created anxiety. She was afraid to put herself back into a position that might end in rejection again especially if it required "hoops." Samantha was the type of person who associated efforts with outcomes. However, sorority recruitment was not a linear process and thus, it

did not lend itself well to this kind of thinking. It was clear Samantha could not rationalize the risk involved with “trying again.” Nadia had an interesting take as well:

I don't think I could do that again. Like I don't want to. For me, I think that I have a career in a very specific field. And I would want to understand how this could impact me. Like I think that before I do a lot of things now I ask how it's going to serve me. And also how much of my energy is it going to take and is it going to be worth it? Like I'm engaged now I want children in the near future. I want to make more money at work like I'm like I'm focused on certain things, right? That I wasn't focused on when I was what 18/19/20 going through this. So for me, it doesn't have the value now that it had when I was younger.

Nadia went on to talk about why she would not be interested in engaging in another rigid, secretive process as an adult:

Like as recently as last year, I had two friends actually cross into separate grad chapters in separate states. One of them is like a really good friend of mine who I met as an adult. And just, [trying again] never came up so I never talked about it. And then when she crossed, it was into the same organization I was rejected from. She then reached out to me and was like, Hey, yo, you should do this. I really think that this could be really good for you, blah, blah, blah. And I was like, absolutely not like but I think before I said absolutely not. I kind of asked her questions like Okay, so like, what are you getting out of this? Like, Are you still searching for sisterhood, networking, blah, blah, blah. And if it's similar benefits to when I was 19/20. I can get those things somewhere else without the stress and

the headache of having to follow such rigid, secretive guidelines. Like it just seems like it's gonna take so much more from me than it's gonna get and I think that it absolutely can have a positive impact. But if we're being honest, I also don't want to look dumb again. Like I'm like, okay, so how do I look going from well over a decade later, trying again, putting forth all this effort in my adult life when I could be focusing on honestly anything else and having the same group of people, as like more mature adults give me the same answer. Like I just feel like I could not take how I make myself look in that situation on top of just like, what is the real value?

Penny was not necessarily opposed to the idea of trying again.

Yeah, I'm just thinking like, I'm still I'm still young. I'm 23. So, I'm definitely still very young. So right now, I just feel like I'm like, like, I am not totally, like opposed to it, but I just need to like, I feel like I still need to get my footing on who I am as a Black person and a Black woman. And then I think I'll be more ready to like, Oh, this is something that I might want to take up again, because I do have family members also in these in like these organizations. So, it's like really hard to avoid questions and just talk about it overall. But yeah, I just still feel like I'm just still figuring out who I am as like a person.

Monique was completely opposed as she reflected on her hazing experience:

Yeah, no, I'm good on it. I feel what Nadia was saying like for me, it doesn't really serve a purpose. And also like I said, like my experience, my experience was very traumatic. So, like, you know, I was slapped and had to drink weird shit

and be, you know, a semi-doormat for however long. So yeah, no, I'm completely opposed.

The overwhelming disinterest in trying again brought forth many current-day critiques of BGLOs by participants. Beyond that, some participants admitted to just wanting to save face and were not willing to be put in a position to be potentially rejected again. As for Britt, her narrative represents hope. She never lost sight of her goal, and despite these organizations' real and valid shortcomings, she still sees value. I hope that her second pursuit is successful as I believe she would be a wonderful asset to any organization.

Conclusively, the aftermath of Black sorority rejection consisted of immediate impacts and reflections as well as those that came later. Sorority rejection for participants was not experienced as a one-off. In the months following their rejection experiences, participants struggled to adhere to the Black U' cultural norms and expectations. Balancing a sense of belonging and leadership within Black U' became at odds with being rejected. Without proper guidance and support, participants took matters into their own hands. Some made mistakes and struggled socially; others struggled to separate their needs from those of the BGLOs. In the end, by the time we came together for a sista circle, it was clear everyone had found their way to move forward. For one participant, that meant trying to pursue membership again. For other participants, it meant being comfortable with problematizing BGLOs and recognizing your opinions are warranted and valid. To bring the study to a close, participants were invited to offer one final reflection.

Summary and Conclusion

In addition to the individual interviews and two sista circles, participants were asked to complete a short survey asking them to reflect on their experiences. Although this third form of data collection was always a part of the initial methodology, it was envisioned to be something participants cocreated that would take shape during the other data collection phases. At the end of each interview, I asked participants for their input to inform what this final reflection activity would consist of. We discussed various ideas such as putting together a music playlist, cocreating some form of art, or simply submitting words and phrases to be input into a word cloud. Four of the five participants were vehemently against engaging in something that would result in an additional life-long reminder of their rejection experiences. There was no interest in attaching songs to this experience either. Collectively, creating a word cloud was elevated as the safest option that would not result in a physical reminder of their rejection experiences or participation in this study. Based on this feedback, two questions were composed. Question 1 asked, “What are some words and/or phrases that describe your experience with sorority rejection?” Twenty words and phrases were submitted and input into a word cloud generator. Figure 3 displays the final product. Question 2 asked participants, “What are some words or phrases that describe how this research study experience was for you?” Fifteen words and phrases were submitted and are reflected in Figure 4. These two questions felt like the perfect way to round out this chapter, so I used the findings from the word cloud to shape the Summary and Conclusion.

Chapter 4 provided introductory backgrounds to participants of the study to allow the reader to contextualize their experiences further. Next, three major findings were identified that supported Research Question 1, and one major finding supported both Research Questions 1 and 2. Responses from participants' individual interviews and sista circles supported the notion that the Black sorority rejection experience can best be understood by unpacking the before, during, and after states. Together, these three phases helped to illustrate the nonlinear nature of the sorority rejection experience. Simultaneously, participants' narratives were framed within the structures they navigated, including the larger institution and the smaller Black community. Excerpts from the interview and sista circle transcripts supported the frameworks and subsequent themes.

This exploratory qualitative inquiry explored the Black sorority rejection experiences of Black women who attended PWIs for their undergraduate studies. I used BFT and SCM to honor participants' lived experiences and invited them to be in community with other Black women. The three findings shed light on how this group of participants made meaning of their sorority rejection experiences. Finding 1, "The Pervasiveness of Black U'," emphasizes that Black students attending PWIs have to navigate worlds within worlds. As for the Black women participants in this study, they reflected on their experiences navigating Black womanhood, Black cultural institutions, and white supremacist structures simultaneously. These elements laid the foundation for their introduction to and interest in Black Greek life as well as the subsequent rejection. Participant excerpts revealed how inextricably connected BGLOs and Black communities can be at PWIs. Finding 2, Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection,

emphasizes that the experience of Black sorority rejection may look different than that of non-Black students pursuing non-historically Black fraternities and sororities. Unique cultural nuances were presented that complicate what could be regarded as a normal part of collegiate life, social rejection. When asked to describe their sorority rejection experiences in a few words, two words were over-emphasized when compared to the others as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Question 1 Word Cloud



The themes of the second main finding support the notion that the early years of undergrad are filled with lots of changes and development. Each subsection encompassed many social interactions that participants struggled to make sense of in their younger years. To me, the emphasized words in the visual offer a very clear insight into the emotional impact of a sorority rejection experience. Some of the smaller words in the visual also display a high level of emotional intensity tied to their reflections.

“Apathetic,” for example, represents how a participant felt the organization and its members acted toward her following her rejection which brings us to the last and final finding, The Aftermath of Black Sorority Rejection. The final finding offers the bulk of

the findings related to post rejection experiences and social circle navigation. In this section, participants offered their reflections regarding social circle navigation in the context of Black U'. Their narratives highlighted how rejection from a BGLO can feel like a rejection from Black U' as well. Additionally, participants discussed the historical underpinnings of BGLOs and reflected on how they were able to move forward from the experience. For some, participating in this research study brought forth an additional element of healing. When asked to share words related to their experiences participating in this research study, the most emphasized word was "healing" as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Question 2 Word Cloud



As a researcher, this is precisely what I hoped participants would feel. I wanted to create a space where participants could feel validated in all of their emotions and thought processes. No two participants had the same experience or opinions, and yet, the research experience was still said to be "helpful" and "insightful." Going into data collection, I was not sure how many participants I would be able to engage. I feared what would happen if I got 100 responses versus two responses. Ultimately, I was joined by four other Black women to have a conversation about an experience not often discussed. The

other words like “community,” “empowered,” and “comforting” felt validating. SCM seeks to facilitate research and knowledge creation in a way that promotes authenticity and a sense of “togetherness.” As a researcher and participant, I submitted the phrase “eye-opening” because I learned so much from the other participants. I am grateful my research study could serve as the conclusion and provide closure for those who still needed it. Other participants found themselves still seeking sisterhood. The final finding concluded with participants' thoughts regarding whether they would ever try pursuing sorority membership again. For the participant still interested in pursuing sorority membership, she represents a word not visualized in the word cloud: hope.

In the next chapter, I discuss and interpret the three main findings I identified in this chapter. The discussion will tie each key finding to the research questions and theoretical framework, as well as any relevant literature. In response to the study’s findings, implications for higher education professionals and BGLO leaders are offered that are informed by participants. Suggestions for future research inquiries are also shared.

Chapter Five: Discussion And Implications

In this chapter, I begin by reviewing the study's problem statement and purpose. I then offer my reflections as a researcher-participant. The discussion of the findings reiterates how the Black women involved in this study, including myself, made meaning of their sorority rejection experiences. Lastly, I combine the findings and elements of the literature review to discuss student affairs practice and research implications.

Review of Problem Statement

Black sororities are often elevated in the literature as a retention tool and site of resistance for Black women students navigating oppression. Although there continues to be significant interest in joining Black sororities, interest does not guarantee membership. Thus, there is a growing number of women who have attempted to gain membership but were not successful in their pursuit. Previous studies exploring sorority rejection in collegiate settings warn college administrators of potential adverse effects associated with this experience. Sadly, these studies omit Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), and their findings cannot be neatly applied to BGLOs due to the variance in recruitment and membership intake processes between the councils. Suppose one experiences rejection from a Black sorority while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI). In that case, it is unlikely that the organization will continue to serve as a retention tool and site of development for that student. Additionally, the literature tells us Black women

students are known to create their own structures of support to navigate oppression and thus, may find themselves under the radar of college administrators (Everett & Croom, 2017). Due to this ability to “struggle successfully,” I fear there may be an even larger gap in support for Black women students than college administrators realize.

Purpose of Study

This study aimed to expand the collective standpoint of Black women found in higher education literature by exploring the phenomenon of Black women being rejected by Black sororities while attending PWIs. A qualitative exploratory inquiry approach allowed me to design a study that elevated Black women as the authors of their own lived experiences without any constraints on the data collection and analysis process. I then selected the *sista circle methodology (SCM)* and method, which serve as both a research methodology and support group for examining Black women’s lived experiences (Johnson, 2015). Using snowball sampling, I secured four additional people to join me as participants in the study for a total of five. Participants were from the southern and midwestern regions of the United States, and all attended PWIs for their undergraduate studies.

Data from individual interviews, two *sista circles*, and one reflection survey were analyzed to inform three main findings. By using BFT and Collins’s (2000) standpoint theory, I tapped into the rich tradition of storytelling to allow participants to serve as instruments and creators of knowledge. As broad findings and smaller themes emerged during analysis, I began to see throughlines in the data that truly represented a collective standpoint among participants regarding their experiences with Black sorority rejection.

Discussion of Research Questions

In this section, I provide an overview of the findings and discuss the findings' relationship to the research questions that directed the study. The findings were structured in a way that represented participants' experiences before sorority rejection, while they experienced sorority rejection, and after they experienced sorority rejection. The findings focused on participants' navigation of the oppressive structures and hierarchies within predominantly white and Black cultural institutions. Findings addressed the research questions by providing insight into the sorority rejection experiences of Black women attending PWIs and reveal implications for future student affairs practice.

The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority during their undergraduate studies at a predominantly white institution?

RQ2: What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution?

The three main findings represent three phases, the first, "The Pervasiveness of Black U" chronicles participants' experiences as Black students attending PWIs and gives insight into participants' lives before they pursued sorority membership. The second finding, "Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection," brings together components that encompass the rejection experience's totality. Lastly, the third finding, "The Aftermath of Black Sorority Rejection" explores how participants navigated social

circles and life at large following this experience. Excerpts from the individual interviews, sista circles, and reflection survey submissions supported each of the findings.

In response to Research Question 1, the Black women who participated in this study identified various elements that came together to define the meaning of their sorority rejection experiences. The foundational element is the acknowledgment that Black communities at PWIs maintain their own culture and norms in which BGLOs are inexplicably linked, which informed participants' self-perception and interest in BGLOs. Moreover, Black sorority rejection is a unique experience that is distinct from other types of rejection due to its nonlinear, communal, yet isolating nature, which hindered participants' ability to disentangle their lives from the sorority rejection experience. Lastly, participants' abilities to maintain social standing and a sense of belonging within their respective institutional communities were at odds with their rejection experience, leading to immediate and long-term social and emotional challenges. Further discussion of the findings will be offered following a short researcher reflection.

Researcher Reflection

As mentioned in my researcher positionality statement, I shared that the impetus for this research inquiry was of my own sorority rejection experience from a BGLO during my undergraduate studies. Traditional qualitative methodologies encourage researchers to journal and address any bias they may have regarding the inquiry accordingly. I, however, selected a theoretical framework and methodology that honored my identities and experiences in a way that allowed me to serve as both researcher and participant. Because of this unique role, I opted to share my reflections on this process.

I knew going into the recruitment process that I needed to set my expectations low. Rejection is not generally something anyone wants to discuss, let alone Black sorority rejection. When I first conceived of my study (before even applying to a doctoral program), I envisioned myself casting a wide net and talking to women from multiple decades of experience. Once I got a research methods class or two under my belt, I realized it might be unfeasible timewise to have such an open criterion. Further conversation with my faculty also challenged me to consider how much variation exists over time in the college experience and Greek experience. From there, I narrowed down my criteria to a 10-year period. What came next, no one could have prepared me for. I received over 200 responses to my interest survey. The respondents were diverse and represented colleges from across the country as well as representation from all four historically Black sororities. I do not remember the exact moment, but there came a time when someone suggested I double check to ensure these were “real” responses. Upon further review, almost every response I received had a similar email naming convention. An additional investigation confirmed that these responses were coming from outside the United States. I was devastated, to say the least. For a split second, I thought my naysayers were wrong—that people would be open and interested in discussing their sorority rejection experiences. Realizing only 5 or 6 of my responses were from “real” people swept in like a dark cloud. The low numbers confirmed my worst fears.

When referencing traditional positivist approaches to research that ask researchers to be neutral and detached, Collins (1990) dismissed such criteria and stated for Black women to engage in such practices would ask us to “objectify ourselves, devalue our

emotional life, displace our motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic, and professional power” (p. 256). With this and other Black feminist framings in mind, I chose a method and methodology that aligned with this thinking: SCM. First designed and leveraged by Johnson in 2015, the initial application was used to study mentoring and support among Black women teachers. One key notable difference between this inaugural study and mine was that the sista circles took place in person, and mine took place online. Although I still felt like I could achieve the sense of connection and community I intended, I believed coming together in person would have created an even stronger bond. When reading about Johnson’s inaugural SCM study, she spoke of bringing participants together at someone’s home and sharing a meal when they came together. For my study, participants opted to remain off camera in the sista circle sessions. Although I could certainly guess what drove everyone’s decision, having a dialogue with participants with only my face on the screen was probably not what Johnson had in mind. When I think about whether I would have been able to convince participants to meet in person about this topic, I think it would have been a hard sell. A virtual meeting was a hard sell. I think this topic requires privacy, unless the research inquiry takes place at a specific campus or with a specific chapter where there is already familiarity between participants.

After data collection, when I began to review the transcripts and re-listen to the audio recording, I found it very challenging to code. Every element of my conversation with participants seemed important. Some of my initial drafts of Chapter 4 had as many

as eight major findings, reflective of my belief that every finding was “major.” Upon further reflection, I had to disentangle my personal thoughts on what is important from the intended scope of the study. Having had the experience I researched, serving as a participant while being the researcher proved to be a harder expedition than I imagined. To ensure trustworthiness, I had to consistently refer to my research questions and theoretical framework to get back on track. Journaling my reflections and checking in with friends and colleagues who were Greek helped me decipher what of my inferences were common knowledge versus something specific to the Black or Greek culture.

In closing, as someone not a member of a BGLO but writing about them indirectly, I experienced imposter syndrome throughout my research process. I questioned whether I, as a nonmember, had the “right” to write about these organizations, to be critical of them. After much consideration, I decided to move forward, inspired by the work of authors like Deborah Elizabeth Whaley (author of *Disciplining Women*) and Maria D. Hernandez (author of *Sisterhood Beyond the Ivory Tower: An Exploration of Black Sorority Alumnae Membership*), non-Greek women writing about Greek topics. Beyond my status as a nonmember, I also mulled over my intent to be critical of BGLOs within my proposed study. Again, I questioned if I had the “right” to be critical of organizations I was not a part of. Some of my Greek friends and colleagues made it very clear they did not think I had the right. They told me there was “so much” I did not and could not know about various BGLO processes as a nonmember. To those responses, I said, “That is kind of the point.” As nonmembers, as people who attempted to join the ranks of these organizations but whose attempts were denied, we do not know what we

do not know. Hearing these remarks did not affect me too much as I was focused on completing my study and graduating. These comments did not negatively affect my relationships, it just caused me to pivot and set up boundaries as needed. As women who were rejected, not having access to information does not strip us of our ability to make meaning of our experiences. I want to end my reflection with a quote from Black, queer author, hooks (2014), that I shared in an earlier section: “Internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation” (p. xiv). I think there is much to be learned from those who saw value in the missions and visions of BGLOs but who were prevented from becoming a part of the legacy for inexplicable reasons.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

This section describes the findings and elaborate on each theme and their connections to the literature and theoretical framework. I reflect on the similarities and dissimilarities between participants and address any affirmations and contradictions between the findings and the literature accordingly.

The Pervasiveness of Black U'

Related to Research Question 1, I was interested in how Black women experienced sorority rejection in a PWI context. Having spent some time attending both a historically Black university and a PWI, I recalled some key differences in the student engagement experience. Because the earliest matriculation of Black women into PWIs, Black women have encountered many barriers to their collegiate success. In 1991, Allen et al. found Black women attending PWIs had lower academic aspirations, less than ideal relationships with faculty, and overall dissatisfaction with their collegiate experiences.

Additional research published by Winkle-Wagner (2009) almost 2 decades later described the Black woman's college experience as a "perpetual homelessness" (p. 9), highlighting various tensions and conflicts with campus norms unique to Black women. Recognizing that attending a PWI for college can be like a battlefield, Black students began to come together to form their own structures of support.

My Black U'

In the participant profiles shared in Chapters 3 and 4, I indicated some participants identified as members of the LGBTQ community or were first-generation students. During the initial one-on-one interviews, I asked participants to share their salient identities and bring these identities forward. At this point in the data collection process, it was not clear whether these identities would come up in later conversations with participants regarding their rejection experiences. As it turns out, none of the LGBTQ-identified participants mentioned this identity while discussing their rejection experiences beyond Monique reflecting on her motivations for joining. Monique shared, as a masculine-presenting woman, she wanted to push herself out of her comfort zone.

Although it was not mentioned explicitly, connections between first-generation identity and challenges navigating the "hidden curriculum" explored in Chapter 4 could be inferred. In Chapter 4, I introduced a hypothetical Black community at a PWI called "Black U'" because references to this community were so salient in participants' narratives. In many ways, Black U' represents a legacy or rite of passage for Black students attending PWIs. For participants in my study, Black U' was a world within a world, a small community with its own culture and norms. Black U' became the vacuum

in which all subsequent collegiate experiences were affected. Black U' acted as a lifeline, offering Black students affirmation and support when needed, as it is not uncommon for Black students to seek community with other Black students to cope with systemic oppression and marginalization (Hannon et al., 2016). When the responsibility of offering this level of support to Black students rests on the shoulders of their peers and not the institution, things can go wrong in countless ways.

When referencing Black campus communities as subcultures at PWIs, Ferguson (2019) stated, "Black students expressed the need to create their own community on campus because they were not made to feel at one with the [larger] campus community" (p. 93). The Black women I interviewed named their Black identities at the beginning of the study in a way that illustrated the hyper-awareness they experienced while attending PWIs. As students, my participants sought community in Black U' and some were more successful than others. Participants who were unable to find community in Black U' experienced a decreased sense of belonging. In 2008, Museus wrote about the limited options for students of color attending PWIs to find belonging on campus. One option is to assimilate into the dominant campus culture, which can cause one to separate from their cultural identity. The other option is to gain membership into a racial subculture (Museus, 2008). My participants' narratives supported this finding that a racial subcommunity is instrumental in facilitating belonging for Black women students.

Navigating Campus Engagement to Belong

What I found most intriguing was *how* a racial subcommunity like Black U' facilitated belonging largely through leadership and engagement opportunities.

Researchers have long suggested a positive correlation between student involvement and persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975). However, other scholars like Guiffrida (2003) were wary of persistence models expecting students of color to assimilate into an institution to find belonging. Rather than opt to assimilate, many of my participants opted to join Black U' where their cultures were intentionally included and centered. Black U' appeared to be a double-edged sword for some participants though. Whereas other students attending PWIs may have been able to simply exist and still feel a sense of belonging because their cultures were centered in the very fabric of the institution, students in Black U' were compelled to "do their part" to uplift themselves and their communities. As humans, we all have an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); however, as Black women students attending PWIs, my participants had an additional desire to seek belonging as a means of survival. In other words, with Black U' serving as the gateway, the Black women of my study had to navigate varying levels of campus engagement to belong. This affirms the scholarship of Shabazz (2015) who stated how Black women "experience college by getting involved plays a key role in their persistence" (p. 28).

BGLOs and Black U' Are Inextricably Linked

In their narratives, participants highlighted a social hierarchy within Black U' in which members of BGLOs sat on top. According to the literature, this hierarchy within Black subcommunities is not new. Malone (1999) found both BGLO members and nonmembers had a significant familiarity with Black Greek culture and saw it as a conduit for power and influence. Research from Brown et al. (2021) also found BGLOs

“exhibit significant influence in the Black undergraduate community” (p. 11). My research furthers this conversation by showing Black subcommunities at PWIs are pervasive and inextricably linked to BGLOs when they are present on campus.

Touchpoints with BGLOs, such as those taking place during 1st-year orientation or other types of programming, seemed to serve two purposes for my participants. The first was to facilitate social connection; the second was to recruit new members. For most participants, the more they interacted and observed BGLOs, the more they became interested in pursuing membership.

Brown et al. (2021) called for future research to explore how interactions with subcommunities may impact the academic expectations and social climate within an institution's overall Black student body. The deep connection between Black U' and BGLOs proved to have a negative effect on participants following their rejection experiences. Communities once regarded as being friendly and open became divisive and unfriendly once Greek affiliations were not secured. Multiple scholars have uplifted the importance of identity-based networks and clubs as key elements of Black women's collegiate success (Domingue, 2015; Greene, 2020; Shabazz, 2014). However, in the case of my participants, identity-based clubs also became a source of harm. Although my participants initially looked to Black sororities as a powerful sisterhood in which their identities would be celebrated, their networks would expand, and their communities would grow, their experiences with these organizations shifted the moment they did not gain membership. The thought of not getting in was not at the forefront of their minds as they navigated the recruitment process.

Relationship to Theoretical Framework

BFT (Collins, 2000) recognizes Black women occupy a unique role in society, serving as “outsiders within.” The earliest notions of this dynamic date back to the days in which Black women served in domestic roles within the homes of white families. Collins (1986) wrote of how the Black women were in close proximity to the white families, gaining rare insight enough to be considered an “insider” though remaining “outsiders” at the same time. Leveraging the “outsider within” dynamic to describe the sociological significance of Black women’s standpoint, Collins (1986) asserted a certain “creativity” can stem from this experience of marginality. When listening to my participants’ narratives, I saw a similar “outsider within” dynamic playing out in their experiences. As Black women, they experienced gendered racism at the systemic and interpersonal level within their everyday lives, but then once they began attending PWIs, they experienced marginality at the institutional level. Once welcomed into the subcommunity, Black U’, the Black women experienced a temporary relief because the ways Black U’ recreated systems of oppression were yet to be revealed. After being exposed to Black sororities, the Black women were led to believe that even greater protection from gendered racism was possible by joining an organization created by and for Black women. At this point, participants had an initial experience of being an outsider within. In Black U’, the social hierarchy put students who were not members of BGLOs in a subjugated position. As students engaged in Black U’, participants experienced some resemblance of community; however, as nonmembers of BGLOs, there was a part of Black U’ they could not access. Once their attempts to secure membership in BGLOs

were unsuccessful, my participants remained subjugated within Black U' as nonmembers and "rejects" in some instances.

As a researcher using BFT, it was more important for me to uplift my participants as theorists and knowledge producers (Clemons, 2019). Black women who have experienced sorority rejection while attending PWIs offer a unique standpoint that can help us better understand the social dynamics of Black communities at PWIs and add to the totality of research exploring social rejection and the support of Black women students. I feel BFT expertly calls attention to the many ways Black women experience oppression at the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, etc. Yet, narratives of how Black women experience these oppressions at the hands of other Black women are less present in the literature. As a theoretical framework, BFT invited me to validate the nuanced experiences of myself as a researcher and my participants. By naming their identities as Black women who were rejected and describing how they persisted by leading within and outside of Black U' at their campuses, participants substantiated themselves as "whole people in all of their complexities" (Lorde, 2007, p. 117).

Differences Between Black Sorority Rejection and Other Types of Sorority Rejection

The findings highlight that while the experience of Black sorority rejection is notably different than other types of sorority rejection, there were similar outcomes to that of the women who experienced rejection from white sororities. Chapman (2008) completed a study of one institution's National Panhellenic Council (NPC) recruitment process and offered a primer on the components. Over 6 days, potential new members are

invited to visit each active chapter at designated times. Each new member receives a personalized schedule. Insights gained from this study's participants detail various events and leadership opportunities students must engage in to be considered Black sorority "material." Instead of taking place in a week's span, potential new members of Black sororities could spend 1 to 3 years in a recruitment period. Black women who want to pursue membership in the same organization will likely form their own bonds or feuds as they continue to see each other at the organization's events. Simultaneously, Black students not engaged in a formal or informal recruitment process but are connected to Black U' are likely to be aware of who *is* engaging making the experience feel communal in a way that is like that of the NPC process. The communal nature of engaging in the recruitment process and subsequently being rejected made it harder for participants to process their rejection experiences and move on.

In the NPC process, the last night of recruitment is when potential new members (PNMs) decide which chapter they most want to join and for chapters to decide which PNMs they want to offer an invitation to membership. Concluding the recruitment process is Bid Day, where PNMs learn which sorority has offered them a bid. If a PNM chose to list only one sorority and that sorority did not invite them to membership, this would result in rejection. In Chapman's (2008) study implications, she noted "incongruencies between expectations and realities could lead to a subsequent drop in self-esteem that could affect new recruits' mental health" (p. 45). Throughout the NPC recruitment week, PNMs began to envision themselves as members of the sororities they visited. If the PNMs' dreams do not come true on Bid Day, their self-esteem can be

negatively affected (Chapman, 2008). Likewise, when some of the Black women participants of this study learned of their rejection status in inadvertent ways, there were negative implications on their self-perception and social standing within Black U’.

Additionally, my findings support previous literature regarding the “draining and emotionally charged” (Kiray, 2018, p. 46) nature of participating in a sorority recruitment process. Data from interviews and sista circles suggested the formal and informal Black sorority rejection process is like that of the NPC recruitment process in that both recruitment processes can be experienced as draining and have negative emotional implications. Because BGLOs are so integrated into the social fabric of Black U’, rejection from a BGLO can feel like a rejection from Black U’. Feeling rejected from Black U’ can have serious repercussions on a student’s sense of belonging. Because PWIs often fail to provide structures of support for Black women, it is important that subcommunities like Black U’ remain a viable source of engagement and support.

A lack of clarity regarding the components of the recruitment process, expectations, and reasons why one was rejected all contributed to the feeling that participants were navigating a hidden curriculum. This finding aligns with previous sorority recruitment and rejection research completed by Kiray (2018) and Golden (2014). The Black women participants of this study reflected critically on their undergraduate rejection experiences, attempting to rationalize why the rejection was or was not something that made sense based on a host of criteria. Throughout all their narratives, a similar process map gave way to illustrate the various components of pursuing membership into a Black sorority. The various components of this process

involved education, mentorship, and social standing as reflected in the “Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection” finding.

The process map (see Figure 2), originally presented in Chapter 4, can help to demystify the components of a Black sorority recruitment process. Although high level, the process map identifies several cycles within a larger process. The first cycle involves interest and education. Findings from the interviews revealed that the motivating factors for pursuing membership in addition to one’s level of knowledge regarding the recruitment process inform how one makes meaning of their rejection experience. Participants who felt less educated about the components of the recruitment process and struggled to navigate the hidden curriculum, felt duped and set up for failure. Previous research on sorority rejection found participants had lingering questions and deep unresolved issues with their rejection status (Golden, 2014). Many participants in my study experienced high levels of confusion throughout the recruitment process and when they received news of their rejection, affirming those findings. “Confusion” also appeared in the word cloud in Chapter 4 in an emphasized manner indicating multiple participants used that word to describe how they felt about their rejection experience.

One big way the Black sorority recruitment process differs from that of the historically white sororities explored in other studies is that you can only express interest in and pursue membership in one sorority. Suppose you are attending a campus with more than one historically Black sorority present, once you express interest in one sorority, attempting to pursue another one on that campus is culturally inappropriate. While this expectation is not formally written down anywhere, it is one of many elements

of the hidden curriculum surrounding the BGLO recruitment process. Throughout the interviews, participants shared stories about choosing the “one” sorority they would pursue. Once rejected, thoughts of pursuing another sorority at the same institution were never considered. Additionally, many chapters of the Black sororities participants pursued were banned from their campuses the following semesters, eliminating their attempts to gain membership in that sorority’s chapter before graduating. Conversely, the cultural norm of single selection (when you only choose one sorority) is frowned upon in the world of historically white sororities. Potential new members are cautioned against only selecting one sorority because this can highly decrease their chances of getting a bid on Bid Day.

After expressing interest in one of the Black sororities, participants entered an informal recruitment process with that sorority’s chapter on campus. Some of the chapters had specific expectations such as making calls or obtaining certain leadership positions. Hernandez’s (2007) study mentioned participants in her study exploring women’s experiences in Black sororities were asked to “enter an interest group prior to their membership where they were expected to do the same [community service] work as the sisters” (p. 207). My participants did not have to join formal interest groups, though some were convinced they needed a certain amount of community service and leadership experience. At this point, participants knew their behavior was being observed, hence the “period of observation” listed on the process map. Relying on unwritten cultural norms, the limited information provided by the chapter, and rumors, participants persisted up until they submitted their formal applications to the sororities. For at least one participant,

she engaged in a pre-hazing process in which she met up to engage in secret rituals with other PNM's. Much research on BGLOs surrounds ongoing hazing practices despite it being against the policies of all nine BGLOs (Kimbrough, 2005). This one participant's experience confirms much of what other scholarship has said: Hazing practices persist despite being banned (Lee-Olukoya, 2018; Parks & Mutsiya, 2018; Wilson, 2018).

Notably absent from participants' narratives was any mention of fraternity and sorority life professionals. When asked about mentorship, some participants named fellow peer mentors and resident assistants; however, no student affairs staff were mentioned. When historically white sororities conduct their recruitment processes, the fraternity and sorority life (FSL) office is heavily involved. If students have questions about the rush process, they can go to their FSL office for answers (Garcia et al., 2022). Students interested in pursuing membership in a BGLO are lucky if anyone in the FSL office has any professional expertise or is personally affiliated. In some instances, such as Nadia's, even adult mentor figures on campus with personal affiliations are unreliable and can steer PNM's in the wrong direction. Without specific support professionals, PNM's of Black sororities are forced to traverse the hidden curriculum of BGLOs on their own. Since BGLOs are often a large component of the Black subcommunities students form when attending PWIs, not having dedicated FSL staff to support BGLOs aligns with other patterns of PWIs failing to support Black students (Ferguson, 2019).

Defining the Experience of Black Sorority Rejection

When exploring the meaning Black women ascribe to their experiences of sorority rejection, narratives from participants revealed various elements that comprise

the Black sorority rejection experience. One of the first qualitative studies exploring the phenomenon of sorority rejection found a “salient theme throughout the interviews was the women created meaning out of their experience of rejection” (Kiray, 2018, p. 93). For the Black women of my study, the collegiate environment in which they experienced sorority rejection heavily influenced how they made meaning.

Communal Experience

As established in existing literature, Black subcommunities have been regarded as integral to the success of Black women students attending PWIs (Hannon et al., 2016; Miles et al., 2011; Museus, 2008). However, for the Black women in my study, the small, tight-knit Black communities they were a part of at their PWIs grew to be a source of harm and threat to their collegiate success. Ultimately, being a part of Black U’ made their sorority rejection an unwanted communal experience. Participants shared stories of how everyone in their community seemed to know their fate. Unlike other experiences of rejection, the Black women in this study could not separate themselves from these communities as they were inseparably connected due to the nature of the PWI context. Participants did not realize this until after they were rejected, left to navigate campus in a seemingly “perpetually unaffiliated” state. I argue previous research has oversimplified the social dynamics between Greeks and non-Greeks within the Black community. For example, Brown et al. (2021) stated BGLOs help Black students “achieve satisfactory out-of-classroom experiences” (p. 36) by fostering cultural space for Black students. Although this was true for my participants before they pursued membership in a Black sorority, it was not necessarily true after. Following their unsuccessful attempts at gaining

membership in a Black sorority, my participants used language such as “marked” to describe their interactions with Black social circles following the rejection experience. This finding complicates our understanding of the role of Black subcommunities in supporting Black women students at PWIs. It appears that Black sororities can be sources of support if you are a member, as Hannon et al. (2016) inferred. The same could even be true if you are not affiliated and have not attempted to become affiliated yet or have no interest in becoming an affiliate. For Black women who are not affiliated and have tried to become affiliated, my findings infer that they can develop an adversarial relationship with Black sororities.

Seeking Sisterhood

In a study that examined the motivations of Black and Latino students who joined fraternities and sororities, McCall (2007) found many students were interested in gaining new relationships with their peers. Additional studies also affirmed friendship and support are some of the primary motivators for joining Black sororities (Jennings, 2017; Malone, 1999). Findings from my study affirmed some of my participants pursued membership in a Black sorority because they were interested in expanding their communities and were looking for additional sources of support. One participant, not seeking community, admitted she was seeking validation. After surveying 59 women about their motivations for joining a Black sorority, only 26% of Jennings’s (2017) study participants indicated they joined the sorority for acceptance or tolerance. In her dissertation, she said acceptance represented “inclusivity and support” (p. 79) for

participants. So, although seeking acceptance and validation is not everyone's main source of motivation, it can be a source for some.

Existing literature has indicated Black women must navigate many challenges while attending PWIs informed by their experiences with gendered racism (Hannon et al., 2016; Shahid et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Recognizing Black women seek acceptance, community, and support, among other motivating factors when they pursue membership in Black sororities, is important to note because there are very few places Black women can hope to get these same benefits when attending PWIs. As noted in Chapter 4, "seeking sisterhood" encompassed acceptance, community, and support, which infers for participants that these characteristics are synonymous. Although there may be women's groups and Black student unions, Black sororities are often the only structured organizations that center Black women (Canty, 2021). Black women who experience rejection from Black sororities may find themselves without other options on campus that can provide the same type of support and sisterhood. This finding is very concerning as many institutions may look to the presence of Black sororities as "solving the problem" of collegiate engagement and support for Black women. However, my participants highlighted that these organizations' presence is not enough.

Hidden Curriculum

From the moment my participants expressed interest in joining a Black sorority through receiving the news that they were rejected, they were navigating a hidden curriculum. Their narratives revealed a collection of implicit and explicit social and cultural messages, rules, and expectations related to their interactions with BGLOs during

the recruitment process and following the rejection. The cultural norms surrounding BGLOs can be attributed to their reputation of elitism, defined as the “belief that some things are only for a few people who have special qualities or abilities” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2023, n.p.). Early research exploring the establishment and evolution of Black Greek life regarded the organizations as elitist (Frazier, 1957; Graham, 1999). Of the nine organizational members of the Divine Nine, Kimbrough (2003) stated organizations founded after the first Black sorority and Black fraternity, such as Phi Beta Sigma and Iota Phi Theta, were founded to be non-elitist. This points to the notion that some BGLOs may be culturally regarded as being more elitist than others. Additionally, these assertions showcase a long history of BGLOs being associated with elitism. One author, Smith (2015), posited BGLOs serve to manifest and reproduce middle-class values, which can be harmful to Black communities. Smith’s (2015) research supported earlier research by Frazier (1957), who posited the Black middle class would never be successful because they continue to seek acceptance from the mainstream U.S. society and have modeled their social codes around the white middle class.

The confusion my participants experienced when attempting to navigate these unwritten rules parallels those of the unwritten rules and expectations Black students must navigate when attending PWIs. When Black women first matriculated at PWIs, they were unwelcome and were relegated to the margins by white women and Black men (Smith, 2015). Historically, Black women relied on one another to survive and persist through their collegiate studies. Findings of my research represent a shift in the relationships Black women have with one another while attending PWIs. Although Black

sororities can be sources of networking, mentorship, and support (Whitehead, 2019), it appears these benefits do not always extend to nonmembers. More research is needed to fully understand the social dynamics between Black women unaffiliated with Black sororities and those who are. Some scholars have already begun to posit a declining interest in Greek life, surveying students who are not affiliated about their attitudes toward Greek life (Anderson & Smith, 2016; Shirley, 2014). Some scholars such as Shirley (2014) have noted some people are not interested in joining Greek organizations because they feel the organizations and their members lack values. Although this may be the case for some, we cannot assume these opinions reflect those who are not affiliated but who attempted to become affiliated with Greek organizations. Per my participants, there is a population of Black women who still see value in these organizations and what they stand for in addition to the benefits they offer. Yet, they find themselves disregarded by these organizations.

Little to No Support

Another way Black sororities seemed to perpetuate elitism was through the lack of support available to potential new members throughout the recruitment process. One by one, participants detailed the various relationships, or lack thereof, with women they expected to guide them through the process. If participants were lucky enough to know a member in the sorority they were pursuing, they trusted their limited guidance only to be led astray. It became clear there were additional cultural norms and rules informing how and if members of the sororities could help potential new members navigate the process. If someone was a member of an organization but not affiliated with the specific chapter

or if they were no longer an active member of that chapter, there was a gray area. When I discussed this finding with the BGLO members in my circle, they shared that depending on the organization, you are sometimes encouraged to only observe but not to guide. Even the Black women in participants' lives who were willing to help as much as they could felt limited because they joined different organizations or were from other institutions so their experiences navigating expectations to get in might vary considerably. Historically white sororities and fraternities, often have student affairs professionals who are available to guide students through those recruitment processes. Similar structures for BGLOs do not usually exist. If someone happens to attend an institution with a dedicated support professional who oversees BGLOs, they are often serving as a resource for the BGLOs rather than for potential new members. It is no secret that BGLOs often feel under supported by Greek life offices compared to their historically white organization peers (Garcia, 2022; George, 2023; Smith, 2022). The same can also be said for how Greek life professionals feel under supported in their efforts to support BGLOs (George, 2023).

Another surprise to participants following their rejection experiences was how other BGLO members and students within Black U' interacted with them. Although some participants felt their friends attempted to be supportive, the relationships with friends moving on in membership intake processes became strained. One participant recalled being frustrated at the lack of intervention from her peers after she experienced a hazing ritual. Numerous studies (Lee-Olukoya, 2010; Parks & Mutsiya, 2018; Williams, 1992) have named that despite hazing being banned, many BGLO members and nonmembers

alike still hold favorable attitudes toward hazing and believe it plays a positive role in the recruitment process. When you have to navigate your rejection experience publicly and in an environment where people may agree with the organization's decision, there can be negative impacts on one's self-esteem, as demonstrated by my findings. Lastly, another element of the recruitment process participants felt was the least supportive was that they were not given a rationale for their rejection. Some participants knew there was a chance they might not receive an invitation to membership. However, even those participants felt not receiving a reason was incongruent with these organizations' espoused values (e.g., racial uplift, sisterhood).

Relationship to Theoretical Framework

To some, feminist and womanist thought is evident in the histories of Black sororities, specifically as it relates to elevating the status of Black women in society (Neumann, 2008). Participants' experiences in this study indicated Black sororities may have deviated from these feminist roots. Based on extensive research into the histories of all four historically Black sororities, Neumann (2008) found, in the 1940s and 1950s, Black sorority women believed themselves to represent “the educated elite within the Black community” and thus, “bore the responsibility for the betterment of the race” (p. 172.). Throughout history, initiatives focused on highlighting the accomplishments of Black women, encouraging the pursuit of education, and celebrating Black beauty through cotillion programs were some ways Black sororities engaged in racial uplift (Neumann, 2008). From my experiences in college, I remember attending community service events hosted by Black sororities and events focused on Black women's health

and well-being. It is unclear why feminist and womanist approaches to recruiting and rejecting potential new members are not in place. Whereas broad efforts to uplift the race are present in these sororities' programming and philanthropic efforts, they are abysmal regarding their recruitment and rejection practices.

BFT implores us to consider how Black women navigate society within a matrix of domination comprising varying combinations of oppression (Collins, 2000). Recognizing that the needs of Black women were excluded from historical women's and feminist movements, in addition to some Black movements with patriarchal foundations, was not lost on the early founders and members of Black sororities. However, efforts to address the oppression of Black women at this scale seemed to coexist simultaneously as exclusive and oppressive approaches to membership (Henderson, 2021). Just as Black sororities have a history of and current commitment to racial uplift, there is also a history and current presence of hazing and exclusion of Black women who do not "fit the mold" (Lee-Olukoya, 2010).

In Collins's (2000) writing, she argued the matrix of domination involves oppression within four domains: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. More research is needed to explore how instances of harm and oppression that target Black women and stem from Black women legitimize or problematize the notion of a matrix of domination. One participant in the last *sista* circle added an additional nuance to her rejection experience. She shared although she had never been diagnosed, she was almost positive she was neurodiverse, a label inclusive of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I offer a recommendation tied to this later in Chapter 5,

however, it is also relevant as I talk about the matrix of domination. When Black women have other intersecting identities, such as having disabilities, identifying as LGBTQ, or belong to a minoritized faith tradition, it is likely they experience higher levels of oppression.

Much Black feminist writing has explored how Black women are relegated to a subjugated status by forces of white supremacy and patriarchy within the broader society and the academy. By bringing to light the various components that comprise my participants' Black sorority rejection experience, several examples displayed how Black men and women participated in the social subjugation of a group of Black women. In a study on the perpetuation of stereotypes within Black sororities, Tindall et al. (2011) shared, when they began the research project, a fraternity member approached a member of the research team and said, “Doing this research perpetuates the ugliness within NPHC organizations” (p. 47). My research study's goal is like Tindall et al.'s: to explore and investigate relevant topics surrounding historically Black sororities. BFT calls for continued research for and by Black women (Collins, 2000). Whereas there was little to no existing research on the Black sorority rejection experiences of Black women before this study, there will be at least one project moving forward that sheds light on these experiences and reveals implications for future practice.

The Aftermath of Sorority Rejection

The second research question that guided this study explored what strategies Black women used to navigate social circles following their Black sorority rejection experiences while attending a PWI. Through my data analysis, I revealed the nonlinear

nature of sorority rejection and a heavy reliance on internal resilience. In other words, the rejection experience was perpetual, causing participants to leverage different strategies depending on the context and amount of time passed. Engaging in the *sista* circles within the research study helped facilitate reflection and provided closure for some participants as demonstrated in the second word cloud presented in Chapter 4.

Performing for Black U'

I previously established that there is a hidden curriculum and set of cultural norms surrounding BGLOs. Participants exposed how those cultural norms extended to behavioral expectations following news of their rejection. The behavioral expectations were such that participants constantly negotiated between managing their rejection experiences and their roles within their campus communities. A decline in one's sense of belonging and mental health were two outcomes participants experienced while navigating their social circles following rejection. Maintaining a sense of belonging for students of color is imperative to their collegiate success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). When Black women are left to navigate their experiences of rejection without support from their peers or the institution, they feel disconnected from their communities and institutions. My study illustrates how the Black subcommunities at participants' PWIs and the Black sororities that rejected them negatively impacted their sense of belonging, which conflicts with existing literature. Studies that frame Black communities and BGLOs as supportive and contributing to Black students' sense of belonging (Hannon et al., 2016; Hernandez, 2007; Mitchell, 2012) only tell half the story.

How Did We Get Here?

Something unexpected that came out of the sista circles was the opportunity to be critical of BGLOs without judgment. Culturally speaking, speaking negatively about historic Black cultural institutions and figures such as BGLOs, Malcolm X, and the Black church in public settings is frowned upon. It felt important to capture and elevate the various critiques participants shared upon reflecting on their experiences. During the immediate aftermath of one's rejection experience, while remaining in the same collegiate setting, any critique of BGLOs will be attributed to bitterness tied to being rejected. The sista circle allowed for a space of reflection that genuinely captured participants' emotions and truths. There was an evident pain in participants' stories. Many of them had been sold a dream, convinced they were worthy of a spot in the coveted sisterhoods of Black sororities. The main takeaway from this finding is that despite being rejected, participants never stopped caring about the plight of Black people and their cultural institutions. It was frustrating for participants to see how BGLOs contributed to the harm of Black people.

There is a tendency for oppressed people to absorb the values of the oppressor (Fletcher, 2006; Freire, 2020). Some scholars have explored the duality of being both an oppressor and oppressed (Almeida, 2017; Fletcher, 2006). A call to action lies through participants' shared frustrations and critiques of BGLOs. Participants acknowledged some rejection is inevitable as everyone who applies is not likely to be accepted. However, they dream of more compassionate and feminist approaches to rejection from BGLOs that do not further subjugate fellow Black people.

Moving Forward

Due to participants' resilience, they made meaning of their experiences and move forward. For many participants, their rejection experiences marked the beginning of new chapters. The rejection experience was a catalyst of sorts, propelling participants in directions they all felt were for the best in the end. This finding contributes to existing literature exploring sorority rejection that reported participants found resolution and acceptance in their situations (Golden, 2014; Kiray, 2018). One key element that appeared to play a role in Black women's ability to move past their rejection experiences was reaching a point where they were no longer concerned about what others thought of them. For some, this disassociation came while they were still attending college, and for others, it came later. Although I am not surprised participants were resilient, I long for the days when Black women do not have to rely on their resilience to survive in PWI contexts. Scholars such as Everett and Croom (2017) highlighted the resourcefulness of Black women when confronted with various collegiate challenges. Unfortunately, rejection from Black sororities represents yet another challenge Black women must prepare for if they intend to pursue membership while attending college.

Still Seeking Sisterhood

One aspect that distinguishes Black sororities from historically white sororities is the expectation that you commit to lifelong engagement with the organization. I think this has positive and negative connotations with Black women rejected by Black sororities. On one hand, this aspect represents a "lifelong" opportunity to pursue membership. If you cannot join during your undergraduate studies, you can pursue membership at the

alumni/graduate level. On the other hand, experiencing rejection from an organization you had intended to make a lifelong commitment to can add additional intensity to the meaning-making process. For most participants in this study, the organizations' chapters they had pursued were suspended from campus, eliminating their ability to "try again" before graduating. One participant did try again multiple times on her campus to no avail. As an adult who is many years removed from undergraduate studies, the question of affiliation to BGLOs is one you can encounter throughout your lifetime. Participants agreed, for Black women who have experienced rejection, this can be an awkward conversation to navigate. Jennings (2017) reminded readers, "Despite the efforts made, only a select few will earn the privilege of joining a Black Greek Letter Sorority in her undergraduate experience" (p. 6). Statements like these recognize a certain exclusivity tied to gaining membership in a Black sorority.

Only one participant admitted to wanting to join a Black sorority through the alumnae/graduate process. Other participants took turns sharing why they did not want to "try again." Some of the reasons shared were maintaining good mental health, no longer seeing value in the affiliation, and not wanting to navigate another secretive process with a hidden curriculum. Monique, the one participant who experienced hazing at the undergraduate level, said she could not get past the trauma she experienced to give the organization another chance. Despite most participants' disinterest, the literature has continued to shed light on the benefits associated with BGLO affiliation, even at the alumni/graduate level. Being affiliated does appear to give members access to social capital nonmembers can never tap into (Whitehead, 2019). Moreover, affiliation with

Black sororities can have positive implications on one's professional career through networking, the development of leadership skills, and the facilitation of a sense of belonging (Whitehead, 2019), so it is no wonder participants like Britt still saw value in pursuing membership. One participant, Penny, shared she was not opposed to it but felt she needed to be more grounded in her own identity before adding an additional layer of organizational identity.

Relationship to Theoretical Framework

Findings supporting Research Question 2 largely came from the dialogues within the sista circles. BFT supports the use of sista circles as they align with the epistemological tenet that Black women engage in meaning making through dialogue (Collins, 2000). A collective standpoint was revealed as the Black women came together to discuss their shared experience of sorority rejection. Although no two participants had identical experiences and opinions, the nuances of their stories contributed to a shared consciousness. For example, all participants navigated their rejection experiences within the context of PWIs. This shared context meant they all had to deal with how gendered racism informed how they had to resist or conform to the expectations of assimilation on these campuses.

My participants are scholars, even if they do not realize it. Their ability to share their rejection experiences with me, a stranger, and one another with a high degree of vulnerability and conviction illustrates how Black women can leverage their lived experiences to make meaning. I do believe I did BFT justice by creating a forum for Black women to tell their own stories. Through the sista circles, participants could talk

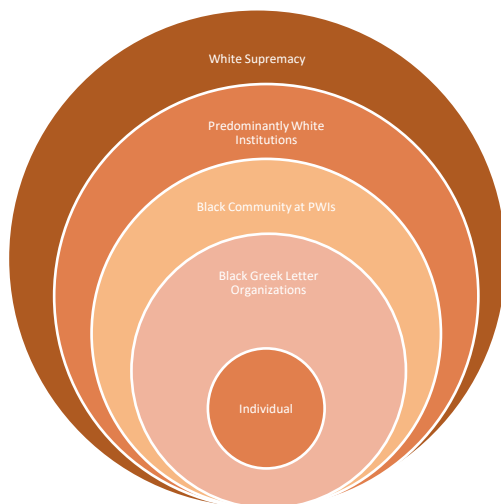
about the topic of sorority rejection in a way that helped each participant contribute to a refined collective voice. Had we not been limited by the constraints of time and anonymity through pseudonyms, I am optimistic that this group of Black women could have continued the conversation and connection.

Layers

In the first main finding of Chapter 4, I introduced a visual to describe the various layers that informed participants' identity development and socialization as they navigated Black U'. I find it fitting to end the discussion of the findings with a return to the visual. In Chapter 4, I presented the graphic in a way that illustrated white supremacy influences, the PWI context, Black communities at PWIs, and BGLOs as layers that informed how participants made meaning of their sorority rejection experiences. I want to offer a more nuanced perspective, presenting the elements as components of concentric circles instead of layers in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Concentric Circles of Influence



At first glance, the concentric circle visual reminds me of a model stemming from the public health discipline, the social-ecological model. According to Aronica et al. (2023), the social-ecological model used to inform public health interventions “takes into consideration the individual, and their affiliations to people, organizations, and their community at large to be effective” (n.p.). For participants of this study, the layers of the concentric circle represent the external influences that informed how they made meaning of their sorority rejection experiences. Compared to the social-ecological model, my model showcases “white supremacy” at the outer layer to represent how society is informed by white supremacy, laying the foundation for the individual participants to experience gendered racism at the interpersonal and structural level throughout their lives. The PWI represents the school community at large or, in social-ecological terms, is a culmination of various organizations and subcommunities. At the next level, the Black community at PWIs represents a subcommunity made up of smaller organizations and communities in a similar manner. Next, we have BGLOs, representing the organizational level within the social-ecological model. Organizations can reach different people throughout the community. Lastly, in the diagram, you see the individual at the center, representing the social-ecological model's individual and interpersonal level. In a public health context, these levels help professionals think through the best way to introduce interventions in manners that are effective and culturally relevant. In the context of Black sorority rejection, these levels can help student affairs professionals visualize the relationships between these organizations and communities differently.

In the first main finding, I spoke about the interconnectedness of Black U' and BGLOs. When there is no conflict present, the relationship between this community and this organization can positively impact the engagement and retention of Black students attending PWIs. However, when a conflict between students and these organizations or communities does arise, such as when one experiences sorority rejection, this level of interconnectedness can become a precedent for the further marginalization of Black students at PWIs. The social-ecological model recognizes certain relationships have great value and influence on the individual and their behavior. In this diagram, the Black subcommunity has the strongest influence on shaping how participants make meaning of their experiences. In the second main finding, I illustrated how participants sought stronger relationships to increase their sense of belonging but were partially unaware that some relationships were inaccessible unless they were successful in obtaining membership in a Black sorority. Because the context of the PWI already makes it hard for Black women to make connections, when they encounter a sisterhood that has barriers to entry, it can have negative effects on their well-being and sense of belonging at the institution. Lastly, in the third main finding, I highlighted the difficulties participants encountered when navigating social spaces within the institution and beyond following their rejection experience. Their relationships with their peers and the Black subcommunity changed. In contrast, they still had to navigate broader oppressive structures at the institutional levels. Although not a 100% perfect fit, the socioecological model can be used to help understand the various influences shaping the meaning-making process of participants in this study.

Implications

PWIs are often unsuccessful in supporting their Black women students. Already used to being failed by society, Black women tend to create their own structures of support. For many Black women, engaging in Black subcommunities is one strategy often leveraged to persist in predominantly white environments. If you happen to be on a campus with active BGLOs, you may set your sights on joining one to further increase your sense of belonging. The women of this study were all led to pursue membership in Black sororities for different reasons, but all share in the collective experience of sorority rejection. Their collective sorority rejection experiences negatively affected their well-being and engagement on campus. This study was essential to conduct so I can ensure higher education literature that uplifts interactions within Black subcommunities and with BGLOs are inclusive of those who have experienced rejection within these contexts.

Findings of my study help identify a population of Black women not currently being served by higher education institutions. When peer-led support structures are no longer an option for Black women students, it is imperative that the institution step in to create other structures of support. Previous studies exploring sorority rejection did include BGLOs or center the experiences of Black women. The calls made by researchers to take the mental health implications of sorority recruitment and rush experience seriously also extend to this study. While there is often a layer of secrecy that looms over Greek recruitment processes, student affairs professionals must commit to educating themselves on how recruitment processes differ between Greek councils.

Subcommunities that serve students of color on predominantly white campuses are

fragile and deserve intentional support from student affairs administrators. Although peer-led subcommunities will always manifest organically on college campuses, student affairs administrators are still responsible for creating institutionalized support structures that can withstand student conflict and turnover.

Recommendations

When reflecting on how I would approach the recommendations section of my dissertation, I debated who should be the target audience. Many Greek-affiliated people have made it clear to me throughout my dissertation process that they do not believe non-Greeks should have a say in how or if BGLOs need to evolve. Yet, through the forum I created within my sista circles, my participants offered what I feel is valuable advice through the lens of their lived experiences. That said, I will start this section with recommendations as my participants offer them. Finally, I will end with my implications for student affairs, fraternity, and sorority life practice.

After sharing the limited avenues of support they experienced directly following their rejection experience, participants discussed what kinds of support they wished they received. With a listening ear, I began to frame participants' thoughts into recommendations for student affairs practice.

More Support for Students and Development Opportunities for Greek Organizations

Although it would be nearly impossible to get all BGLOs on the same page regarding their recruitment and membership intake processes, there remains some degree of autonomy within campus fraternity and sorority life offices to set policies and expectations. Based on what participants experienced, there may be an opportunity to

create more structures of support, development, and accountability for BGLO student leaders and advisors. BGLOs have not historically had the same access to funding as historically white sororities and, thus, do not necessarily have support structures to the same degree. One participant implored institutions to consider mandating all organizations planning to launch a recruitment or rush process to educate potential new members on mental health resources. Nadia shared:

Like at that age, being in college right after high school, you're really young typically. And so, I think it should be compulsory or at least encouraged that organizations share that the school offers free therapy that we have access to, etc. That information could be something that's given to all girls during the application process. I don't think they told me what I needed or what I could have done [after learning I was rejected] and I think some direction there could have been nice.

During the *sista* circles, participants talked about how they wished mental health resources were shared with the women rejected from sororities. Requiring all Greek organizations to share mental health resources at the onset of the recruitment or rush experience can help connect students to resources and make informed decisions. Chapman et al. (2008) suggested fraternity and sorority life professionals should strongly partner with campus mental health counselors. Being in constant communication so mental health counselors can be aware of important dates and timelines could help them prepare to support impacted students.

Additionally, the concept of training and development for Greek leaders and advisors was another suggestion elevated by a participant. Britt reflected:

I know on our side when I was working in Greek life; we would do our best to equip our 1st-year students, our 2nd-year students who were rising leaders within the organizations, and the advisors on how to be more empathetic with nonmembers, how to have conversations when they were recruiting, how sometimes just being nice. I always felt weird having to have that conversation of like, you just need to be nice to nonmembers, and for some students that was a foreign concept of having to be nice to nonmembers.

Training Greek leaders on topics like empathy could inform how they host events and engage with potential new members. Other development opportunities such as best practices in communication, how to host engaging events, etc. could also be helpful. One participant wanted to ensure any professionals expected to support Black women should be well versed in Black feminist approaches. Penny offered:

I think for one, the people who are picked to console Black women or be a part of that systemic support should be versed in Black feminist literature and Black feminist work overall because I think a lot of Black feminists write about humanizing Black women and I think rejection is a part of that experience of obviously being a human being. And if you're not versed on how to handle Black women with care and respect, and love then you're always gonna miss the mark. You're always gonna miss the mark.

Although this recommendation may be more challenging to implement, ensuring that fraternity and sorority professionals engage with Black feminist literature and other materials that provide education about the needs of Black women could create better support structures for students and BGLO leaders. Lastly, participants debated who ultimately held responsibility for how Greek organizations engage on campus. There was a general call for universities to create broad standards governing how Greek organizations engage with students on campus. Nadia shared, “So, if you can't handle a responsibility, then you shouldn't have that responsibility. If your university can't afford to have standards for Greek life, then you don't get to have Greek life. Because like this is a responsibility, right?”

Recognizing some participants' rejection experiences were harmful to varying degrees, there is a need for fraternity and sorority life professionals to understand the components of the Black sorority recruitment process fully. With a better understanding of the components, the professionals can be more proactive in preparing students to pursue membership and supporting students if their pursuits do not work out.

Accommodations for Students With Disabilities

As this group of participants was diverse, the lack of inclusion and accessibility within BGLO recruitment processes also came up during the sista circle. Britt shared:

Um, because I think now that I've gotten older and like I've never been tested or diagnosed or anything, but I think I probably do fall on like the autism spectrum and I'm someone who is a very regimented rule follower, you know, and I think

that's something back then when like when I didn't realize that about myself, that I needed structure, and I needed order.

This recommendation felt like wishful thinking to me because I have not known many non-disability-related student-led organizations to prioritize inclusion of people with disabilities in a thoughtful way. Nonetheless, capturing and uplifting in this section was imperative. Diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies at PWIs have taken off in recent years, leading to varying initiatives on campus. However, it is still being determined if these calls to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive have reached BGLOs or any fraternity and sorority for that matter. Requiring BGLOs to accommodate students with disabilities during recruitment can be one step toward accessibility and inclusion for all students. Depending on how or if an organization's national leadership emphasizes inclusion in this regard, organizations may need help from their institutional fraternity and sorority life offices to figure out how their processes and events need to change.

Mentorship

Lastly, in alignment with previous recommendations shared in studies exploring sorority rejection, there is an opportunity to provide more mentorship to potential new members interested in sororities. Nadia offered more ideas on how students could be better supported:

I think dreaming, maybe like a mentee who kind of walks you through the stuff that you can be walked through, or maybe someone who meets with you, or like maybe there's like an information session at the beginning of the year. And just the general one, "Hey, this is our Chapter Introduction. We want you to know

who we are and how our process goes.” Or maybe even more. I genuinely don't have an answer or deep answer for how to help when you don't know from the outside what you need to do to get on the inside.

Although many BGLOs do host chapter-specific introduction meetings, there could be value in hosting educational events that discuss the council at large or offer insight into the recruitment processes. Universities with existing mentorship programs for Black students may consider adding a curricular component that ensures all facets of pursuing membership in BGLOs are discussed. Moreover, fraternity and sorority life offices could establish short-term mentorship programs for students interested in BGLOs to mitigate hazing risks and provide a pathway for students to be connected to mental health resources if needed.

Invest in Full-Time Positions and Support Programs for Black Women and BGLOs

As I listened to participants articulate what they wish could have gone differently, my mind went back to the glaring reality of how much pressure to engage and retain Black women students lies on the shoulders of their peers. Although an institution does not have the power to determine who gets into sororities, institutions must ensure there are support structures beyond those that are peer led. This is not a new concept as many multicultural affairs offices host programs targeted to Black women such as Mizzou's Black Women Initiative, the University of Arizona Sista Chat, and Boston College's Black Women Matter Initiative. However, I rarely hear of programs that are well funded and have the proper staff support. If an institution has active BGLOs on campus, they should also invest in staff-led programs and offices supporting BGLOs. These initiatives

will likely live in multicultural or Black cultural centers as those are the units who tend to host racial identity-based programs however, these offices may consider appointing a minimum of one full-time role to support Black women specifically. Alternatively, I could also see these initiatives being successful under student success and retention offices as well. Wherever these initiatives live, facilitators should be intentional about creating a culture in which students feel comfortable talking about sorority rejection. In other words, the presence of these programs and initiatives will not make a difference to Black women navigating rejection experiences if they do not feel safe or comfortable bringing up these topics.

Additionally, my research established there are unique cultural nuances that BGLOs bring to PWIs. As some of my participants highlighted, fraternity and sorority life offices must commit to hiring and dedicating a full-time position to support BGLOs. I have seen structures where they identify graduate assistants to help BGLOs, and I am here to say more is needed. This full-time employee could even have a dual reporting line between the fraternity and sorority life office and the multicultural office given the pervasive ties between BGLOs and the Black community. In absence of dedicated staff support, Black women will continue to navigate sorority rejection in the shadows which can lead to a host of negative implications.

Lastly, with more dedicated support for BGLOs in FSL offices, more touchpoints should exist for students to connect with FSL professionals. Many participants did not see the FSL office as a resource when it came to navigating the unwritten rules and hidden curriculum of the BGLO recruitment process. Schools like the University of Southern

Mississippi have contact forms on their FSL office websites that encourage students to reach out if they or someone they know wants to know more about the FSL community on their campus. Although I am not aware of how often their contact form is used, I appreciate that it is easily accessible. If FSL offices consider implementing something like this I would recommend specific topic options or frequently asked questions (FAQs) such as, “What happens if I do not secure membership in an organization?” The mere presence of an FAQ like this on a website could start to shift the culture around rejection, indicating to students that the office is a resource to help them navigate their experiences.

Directions for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research were identified based on this study's research design and outcomes. When I think about the thousands of women who have likely been affected by sorority rejection, I would have loved to capture their stories. Future research exploring Black sorority rejection should include quantitative approaches, which might yield more engagement since it allows for a lower level of commitment and a higher level of anonymity. I would like to see what trends may exist in the data with a broader sample of participants who experienced rejection across different decades. Future research that is either quantitative or qualitative could also explore differences in experiences among women who pursued membership in the 1990s and early 2000s versus the 2010s and beyond, which was the case for this study. I know recruitment and engagement experiences with Black sororities looked different prior to the ban of hazing in 1990. Research inquiries that specifically explore the years surrounding 1990 may yield unique insights regarding Black sorority rejection.

Another consideration for future research could present an insider's point of view on rejection by engaging BGLO members who participated in recruitment processes that ended with some applicants being rejected. There is so much we do not know as outsiders that may go into a decision to reject someone from an organization. Acknowledging there is already a lot of research exploring the ongoing presence of hazing in BGLOs from the perspective of BGLO members, it may not be a stretch to ask members about this topic.

There is an opportunity for future research to explore the connections between sorority rejection and student retention, departure, and engagement. My study presented narratives from participants who had some time to reflect; however, future research could engage participants who experienced rejection within the last 6 months to a year to understand the immediate implications.

Lastly, my study focused on students who attended PWIs, but rejection from BGLOs can happen in many different contexts, including at HBCUs and the graduate level. Additional research is needed to explore how sorority rejection experiences may differ in the context of HBCUs or within a graduate process.

Conclusion

I have read scholarship about Black women's experiences in higher education for years and never saw myself reflected. I felt privileged to have attended institutions with BGLOs, thriving Black subcommunities, and even a student club for Black women, yet none of those structures and interventions made me feel supported after I experienced rejection from a Black sorority because I did not feel comfortable bringing my experience up. When I finally stumbled upon the research studies that explored rejection in white

sorority contexts, I felt somewhat validated. This *is* a problem. This *is* worthy of being studied. There *are* negative implications. It was not until I released my call for participants that I knew I was *not* alone. The continued study of Black women's experiences while attending PWIs is significant because Black women continue to endure race and gender-related stressors in these contexts. Moreover, I fear some stressors Black women experience are not even on the radar of student affairs professionals and those charged with our care and engagement. Critical theorists aim to challenge existing perspectives and systems of power (Bronner, 2011). For me, this entire research inquiry reveals the power of Black sororities at PWIs and offers a new perspective.

Many studies frame Black sororities as a source of support for Black women (Green, 2020; Hannon et al., 2016; Jennings, 2017). To an extent, this can be true. The narratives captured in these studies almost always come from the perspective of Black sorority members, offering a standpoint that does not include Black women who were unsuccessful in their attempts to gain membership in these organizations. Through this study, I hope Black women who have experienced sorority rejection can begin to see themselves in the literature. As Black women scholars, we must continue to be introspective and work to ensure the collective standpoint of Black women captured in the literature includes a wide array of Black women's experiences.

Black sororities boast hundreds of thousands of members and continue to play a prominent role in the racial uplift of the Black community. The purpose of this study was not to throw these organizations under the bus but instead to offer a call to action. Are we (those who have been rejected) less deserving of sisterhood and support? When the

BGLOs universities rely on to engage and support students are no longer an option, how does the institution step in? As an outsider, there is so much we do not know about the interworking of BGLO decision-making processes and structures. The collective experience of study participants could represent interactions with organizations that deviated from policy and expectation. Nonetheless, deviation appears to be the norm, and sometimes perception can be reality.

Humans all have an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is time for PWIs to step up their support of Black women and stop relying on peer-led structures to sustain entire marginalized communities. As with any organization, Black subcommunities and BGLOs are imperfect and must continue to evolve to meet the needs of Black students and community members. The same can be said for PWIs, which have consistently failed to support Black women students properly. Patton and Croom (2017) said it best: “Postsecondary institutions have been overwhelmingly irresponsible in addressing racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that affect Black women” (p. 3). This study reveals yet another way Black women experience harm in predominantly white contexts, often under the radar of student affairs professionals. I hope institutions commit to creating spaces of community, connection, and healing that allow Black women to show up in all of their complexities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Prescreening Survey

Below is the pre-screening survey that will be leveraged to gain informed consent and determine eligibility via Qualtrics.

A Study on Black Women's Sorority Rejection Experiences

Informed Consent Agreement

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in *A Study of NPHC Sorority Rejection*. You are being asked to be in this study because your participation will help me learn how to conduct survey research projects as I complete my doctoral degree. The study aims to understand how rejection from NPHC sororities is experienced by Black women who attended PWIs. Your participation is entirely voluntary, but it is crucial.

Description of Your Involvement

Your participation in this survey study will require less than 10 minutes of your time and will provide me with invaluable practice and experience in conducting survey research.

Benefits

You will not receive any payment for being in the study, nor will you be expected to pay any related costs. The benefits of being involved in this study include being able to help student affairs practitioners create better systems of support for students after they experience rejection from sorority life or other leadership roles. Most people find the opportunity to share their own experiences to be a positive and satisfying experience. If you would like a copy of the study results, I will be happy to provide one.

Risks or Discomforts

Potential risks of being involved include the possibility that recalling your experience may be upsetting. If this occurs, I can identify supportive care from an appropriate professional in your area.

Confidentiality

As the researcher, I will treat all information gathered for this study as confidential. Only I and my course instructor can access the information you provide. The instructor and I are required to keep your identity confidential. The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Voluntary Participation

Participating in this study is entirely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop anytime. If you choose to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed.

Essentially, the above document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm.

Q1 Do you accept the informed consent agreement?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q2 Do you identify as Black, African, or African-American?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q3 Do you identify as a woman?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4 Did you graduate from a 4-year predominantly White institution for your undergraduate degree between the years of 2012–2022?

For this study, a Predominantly White Institution is any institution of higher learning in which white students account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5 Please enter the name of the institution(s) you attended for your undergraduate studies.

Q6 How would you describe the local community you grew up in?

- Diverse/Mixed Race
- Predominantly Black
- Predominantly White

Q7 How would you describe the local community your higher education institution was in?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- City

Q8 Did you experience rejection from an NPHC sorority while attending a PWI? For purposes of this study, sorority rejection is defined as the process in which someone submits a formal application for membership to a sorority and receives a formal or informal notice of rejection in which you are not granted membership into the sorority.

The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sororities: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc., and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q9 If you recall, please select the sororities that were active at your higher education institution during the time of your matriculation.

- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.
- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.
- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.

Q10 Please select the sorority (ies) in which you pursued membership.

- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.
- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.
- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.

Q11 Are you a current member of an NPHC sorority?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q12

Are you interested in participating in an individual interview and two focus groups that explore the meaning Black women ascribe to rejection from Black sororities?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If Are you interested in participating in an individual interview or focus group that explores the m... = Yes

Q13 Please enter your contact information below.

- Email: (1) _____
- Phone number: (2) _____
- Time zone: (3) _____

Appendix B: One-on-One Interview Protocol

I will introduce myself and share more information about the study. After the participants introduce themselves, I will create space for them to informally ask me questions. Topics may range from our experiences with rejection, the cultures of the undergraduate schools we attended, and the presence of Divine Nine on our campuses. This interview aims to build rapport, gauge availability for the sista circle session, and answer any questions the participant may have.

Script:

Hello, my name is Jasmine Pulce, and I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in today's study. Within this study, I wish to explore the phenomenon of Black women's experiences with sorority rejection while attending PWIs.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to let me know at any time if you revoke your consent to participate. During both this interview and sista circle, you may choose to skip any question you do not wish to answer. Additionally, you may choose to end your participation in this study at any time.

This is the first interview, which will last 45–90 minutes. The interview will be followed by two sista circles scheduled at a later date. I will be utilizing the audio recording from today's interview to accurately capture your experiences and perspectives. I will subsequently destroy all audio recordings at the end of the research study. If you no longer wish to continue or answer a specific prompt at any time during our conversation, please feel free to request we move to the next question. Your responses will remain confidential and only referenced using your self-selected pseudonym. Do you agree to participate? Do you have any questions? Can I begin recording?

Personal Background:

1. In your survey response you identified as [insert identities]. Are there any other salient identities you would like to share such as sexual orientation or religion? Tell me more about what it means to you to hold the social identities you have?

Greek Life:

1. Tell me about your interest in Greek life.
2. Were you going to be the first Greek person in your immediate family?
3. Did you have a mentor or anyone to guide you through the process?

School context:

1. Tell me about the school you attended for your undergraduate studies.
 - a. How would you describe the Black community at your undergraduate institution?
 - b. How would you describe Black Greek life at your undergraduate institution?

- c. How much, if it all, did Black Greek Letter Organization dictate the Black social life at your institution?

Rejection:

1. Tell me about your rejection experience.
2. How would you describe your sense of feeling connected to and valued by people and communities at your school before your rejection experience?
3. How would you describe your sense of feeling connected to and valued by people and communities at your school after your rejection experience?
4. How would you describe your social life before your rejection experience?
5. How would you describe your social life after your rejection experience?

Wrap up:

1. Let's create pseudonyms for you and the school you attended.
2. To ease any anxieties about the sista circle, I would like to cocreate a participant profile for you that will be given to the other participants before the first session.
3. Given the following time blocks, please let me know your availability to participate in a sista circle.

Appendix C: Sista Circle 1 Protocol

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who attended a predominantly white institution and experienced rejection from a Black sorority. My research project focuses on the lived experience of rejection from a Black sorority in a predominantly white university. My study does not aim to evaluate your experience or condemn Black sororities. Instead, I am trying to learn more about the experience of rejection and hopefully create implications for sororities and student affairs professionals that is inclusive of these experiences.

RQ1: What meaning do Black women ascribe to their experiences of being rejected by a Black sorority during their undergraduate studies at a predominantly white institution?

Guiding Questions

Sense of belonging relates to feeling or being connected to and valued by people and communities (Strayhorn, 2019). Consider relationships with peers, staff, faculty, and other campus community members.

- Who and what were your connections?
- What was your sense of belonging following your rejection experience?

Healing Questions

“Instead of letting your hardships and failures discourage or exhaust you, let them inspire you; let them make you even hungrier to succeed.” – Michelle Obama.

- As Black women who have experienced sorority rejection, what does this quote mean to you?

Appendix D: Sister Circle 2 Protocol

RQ2: What strategies do Black women use to navigate social circles following a rejection experience from a Black sorority at a predominantly white institution?

- Who or what were your main sources of support in navigating your rejection experience?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Healing questions:

- What would it look like if you could create some form of mentoring or support for Black women who experience rejection?
- How was participating in these sista circles for you?

Appendix E: Reflection Survey

Reflecting on Your Research Study Experience

Q1 Thank you for taking the time to complete a short 2-question reflection survey. As a reminder, completion of this survey is required to receive a \$25 gift card.

Q3 Pseudonym

Q4 What are some words and/or short phrases that describe your experience with sorority rejection? (please separate words/phrases with a comma [,]) Your response(s) will be added to a word cloud with the other participants' answers.

Q2 What are some words that describe how this research study experience was for you? (please separate words with a comma [,]) Your response(s) will be added to a word cloud with the other participants' answers.