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Motivations for Queer Women of Color to Join Culturally Based Sororities

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Abstract

This critical narrative inquiry explored the motivations for Queer Women of Color to join culturally based sororities. Using Muñoz’s concept of disidentifications, we found that participants made strategic decisions when navigating the sorority membership process as well as in deciding what organization to join. Findings showed the importance of race/ethnicity, sexuality and gender, and other important connections to individual identities in participants’ motivations. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Culturally based sororities and fraternities¹ are a subsection of identity-based organizations that merge together foundational values of racial/ethnic uplift alongside Greek-letter culture (Gee & Seoh, 2020; Minthorn & Youngbull, 2020; Miranda et al., 2020). These include, but are not limited to, those within historically Native American and

¹ The term culturally based sororities and fraternities also includes LGBTQ-based organizations. This study focused specifically on those whose purpose focused on racially and ethnically minoritized people.

Indigenous organizations, the National APIDA Panhellenic Association (NAPA), the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations (NALFO), the National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGCC), and historically Black sororities and fraternities within the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). Culturally based sororities and fraternities differ in their structures and rituals from historically white organizations, which largely results from their commitments to serving Communities of Color (Torbenson, 2009). Consequently, culturally based sororities and fraternities hold an important role in providing affirming spaces for Students of Color.

Although culturally based sororities and fraternities were founded to center members' racial and ethnic identities, it is necessary to recognize that members may hold other minoritized identities that shape the experiences they have in these groups. For instance, campus spaces created to attend to minoritized groups such as Students of Color may inadvertently overlook the needs of those who are People of Color *and* queer or transgender (Duran, 2019). As an extension of this point, scholars have examined how culturally based sororities and fraternities perpetuate oppressive ideologies that reinforce heterosexism, gendered expectations, and transphobia (e.g., DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Garcia & Duran, 2020; Jenkins, 2012; Litterte & Hodge, 2012; M. C. Tran & Chang, 2013). This scholarship has predominantly addressed the experiences of Queer Men of Color, and little is known about Queer Women of Color within culturally based sororities.

Considering that queer people may face hostilities within sororities concerning their sexuality and gender performance, we set out to explore the motivations of Queer Women of Color who join culturally based sororities. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What motivates Queer Women of Color to join culturally based sororities?
2. In what ways do Queer Women of Color's racial/ethnic identities, gender performance, and sexuality inform their decision to join a culturally based sorority?

Literature Review

Three lines of research informed our present exploration. First we looked to studies that examined the role of culturally based sororities in members' collegiate experiences and then, more specifically, scholarship that centered on motivations to join culturally based sororities. We then investigated research that focused on dynamics around sexuality and gender within culturally based sororities.

Culturally Based Sororities

Culturally based sororities and fraternities share many characteristics with historically white sorority and fraternity life (SFL) organizations such as the adoption of organizational colors, mascots, and rituals; however, members of culturally based groups often recognize their organizations as different from those considered historically white (Arellano, 2020; Garcia, 2019). Studies focused on the experiences of culturally based sorority and fraternity members showed these individuals, like other Students of Color, faced racism at their institutions (Orta et al., 2019; M. Tran & Chang, 2019). Given hostile campus climates, these organizations are often pivotal for connecting students to a community (Garcia, 2020b).

One way culturally based sororities and fraternities instill a sense of community among members is through their use of familial language, referring to members as siblings, sisters, brothers, hermanas, and hermanos (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; M. Tran & Chang, 2019). Although historically white organizations adopt similar language, familial connections may be stronger within culturally based organizations because they tend to be smaller in size (Garcia, 2019; M. Tran & Chang, 2019). Additionally, culturally based sororities and fraternities emerged to lift up the racial and ethnic identities of Communities of Color, which serves as a unifying force in further connecting members (Garcia, 2020a; Guardia & Evans, 2008). In addition to a sense of community and racial/ethnic affirmation, culturally based sororities and fraternities provide members supports needed to navigate academic experiences (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Orta et al., 2019). Furthermore, members receive leadership building opportunities within the organizations, their

campus community, and beyond their institution (Garcia, 2020a; M. C. Tran & Chang, 2013).

The benefits of these organizations also parallel findings from studies on members' motivations to join culturally based sororities. These include desiring family and community bonds, developmental supports, and a sense of belonging (Arellano, 2020; Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014). Additional motivations include the influence of role models and family members that were also members of culturally based sororities (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014), a draw to organizational values (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014), and feelings of isolation within the campus community (Arellano, 2020; M. C. Tran & Chang, 2013).

Gender and Sexuality within Culturally-Based Sororities

Literature on culturally based SFL organizations has mainly focused on their influence on students' racial and ethnic identities, but little scholarship has examined the role of sexuality and gender within these groups. Research that exists demonstrates how culturally based sororities and fraternities can affirm members' racial and ethnic identities while also reinforcing homophobia, heteronormativity, and unproductive masculinities and femininities (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Garcia & Duran, 2020; Jenkins, 2012; Means & Jaeger, 2013; M. C. Tran & Chang, 2013). For instance, Garcia and Duran's (2020) study on Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities found that participants witnessed and sometimes took part in actions perpetuating hegemonic masculinities. Findings not only pointed to problematic behaviors experienced as members but also that perceptions of sexuality and gender performance informed who was selected to become a member. This reality was also reflected in Means and Jaeger's (2013) findings, in which Black gay men attending HBCUs did not think NPHC fraternities would extend membership to them because of their sexuality. Forms of sexual and gender oppression that manifest within culturally based organizations are also tied to societal racism and stereotyping. For instance, M. C. Tran and Chang (2013) found that members of Asian American fraternities embodied hegemonic masculinities to compensate for the racialized stereotypes of Asian American men as being nerds or weak.

The large focus of this scholarship has been on the experiences of men in culturally based fraternities while scant research has centered on Queer Women of Color in culturally based sororities. Lirte and Hodge (2012) offered a notable exception. Their study explored members of historically Black sororities' views of gender performance and sexuality in relation to organizational membership. Similar to studies on queer men within culturally based fraternities, findings showed that individuals "perceived to be often overly masculine or 'butch'" were deemed "incompatible" with the sorority (p. 691).

Theoretical Framework

Within this study, we employed Muñoz's (1999) work on Queers of Color, and especially his work on disidentifications. Disidentification refers to ways Queer People of Color navigate dominant ideologies in an approach "that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (p. 11). Importantly, although Queer People of Color are agentic when employing disidentificatory behaviors, these actions stem from systemic oppression, "Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 161). We found his scholarship to be informative as we considered what motivated participants in this study to join a culturally based sorority considering the "cultural logics of heteronormativity [and] white supremacy" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5) that may be reinforced within sororities. We reasoned that Queer Women of Color may have adopted disidentificatory actions to navigate pursuing membership in organizations that were founded to serve some identities while perhaps minimizing others (e.g., sexuality).

Methodology

We used critical narrative inquiry (Barone, 1992) to explore the motivations of Queer Women of Color to join culturally based sororities. Narrative inquiry is a methodology that recognizes that stories provide important insight to how individuals experience the world

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). More specifically, our choice to use critical narrative inquiry stemmed from our recognition of oppressive systems that inform people's lives (Barone, 1992). We realized that using a narrative approach alone would not attend to systems of power, meaning that we needed to be intentional in weaving in this attention throughout.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

We intended to recruit up to 25 participants that represented diverse racial/ethnic identities and organizational affiliations, opting to use criterion and maximum variation sampling (Mertens, 2010). Participant criteria required that participants identify as a Queer Woman of Color and as a culturally based sorority member. Because we were interested in exploring members' motivations to join, we allowed individuals that were currently completing their undergraduate as well as graduates. Following our study, we realized that a limitation of our recruitment was that even though we would have welcomed transgender women to be a part of this study, we should have been explicit in stating that transgender women could participate. We shared information to participate through higher education listservs and social media platforms. Once individuals expressed interest, they completed a demographic form to allow us to engage in maximum variation sampling. In the end, a total of 20 women completed the demographic form who all fit the criteria. **Table 1** offers demographic information for each participant.

Data Collection

Data collection included two 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews with each participant and a reflective journal activity. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and explored an array of topics related to participants' sorority and pre-college experiences. Aligning with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we asked participants to share stories about their early college experiences and any influences that informed their motivations to join their sororities. Examples of questions included: What were your perceptions of sorority and fraternity life before joining your sorority? What caused you to choose to join

Table 1 Demographic Information of Queer Women of Color (Reported on Demographic Form)

<i>Pseudonym^a</i>	<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Organization type</i>	<i>Undergraduate or years since undergraduate</i>
Adrian	She/her	Black/African American	Lesbian	Multicultural	4-6 years
Alethia	She/her	Asian American	Lesbian	Asian interest	1-3 years
Alice	She/her	African American	Queer	NPHC	7-9 years
Assata	She/her	Black	Queer	NPHC	1-3 years
Cecelia	She/her	Native American	Bisexual	Native	Undergraduate
Chance	She/her	Black/African American	Pansexual	NPHC	4-6 years
Erica	She/her	Asian	Bisexual	Latina interest	1-3 years
Fuerza	She/her	Latina	Pansexual	Latina interest	Undergraduate
Jennifer	She/her	African American	Queer	NPHC	1-3 years
Juliet	She/her	Vietnamese	Bisexual	Asian Interest	Undergraduate
Kiara	She/her	Black	Bisexual	NPHC	10 years or more
Luz	She/her	Mexicana/Latinx	Bisexual	Asian Interest	1-3 years
Mahogany	She/her	Caribbean American	Lesbian	NPHC	10 years or more
Maia	She/her	White/Filipino	Queer	Asian Interest	Undergraduate
Maria	She/her	Mexican/White	Bisexual	Latina Interest	1-3 years
Mimi	She/her	Asian	Bisexual	Asian Interest	Undergraduate
Nell	She/her	African American	Lesbian/bisexual (hard to answer)	NPHC	10 years or more
Nicole	She/her	Black	Pansexual	NPHC	1-3 years
Tia	She/her	African American	Lesbian	NPHC	4-6 years
Victoria	They/them	Black	Queer	NPHC	7-9 years

a. Pseudonyms were selected by the participants.

a culturally based sorority instead of other student organization options? In what ways did your identities affect your draw to the organization or cause worries? Following the first interview, participants completed a reflective journal to prompt further reflection on their experiences and that we used to craft questions for the second interview. For instance, one question from the journal prompted participants to reflect, “How did the first interview reveal certain ideas or concepts that you had not yet thought about? What would you like to explore further?” This question in particular offered participants the opportunity to further reflect on why they pursued membership in their culturally based sorority while other questions prompted them to make explicit connections to their identities as Queer Women of Color, which we discussed in detail during the second interview. Notably, five participants did not complete the journal activity or second interview due to time constraints and other undisclosed conflicts.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

We began data analysis by constructing narratives for each participant from interview transcripts. These narratives were chronologically constructed, focusing on their pre-college experiences and what led them to join their sorority. We reviewed the narratives using thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008), first constructing annotations reflecting our interpretation of participant stories in relation to our research questions. Throughout our review, we remained attentive to our critical approach, recognizing dynamics around power and oppression (Barone, 1992). We worked collaboratively to debrief our annotations and develop themes.

Qualitative researchers should take measures to enhance the trustworthiness of their study (Jones et al., 2014). We attended to trustworthiness in the following ways. We documented our research process in detail and worked collaboratively to triangulate our interpretations. We also provided rich quotes from participants’ experiences to enhance the transferability of the findings. Additionally, we engaged in reflexivity, recognizing ways our positionalities informed our perspectives and research design.

Researcher Positionality

Crystal Garcia identifies as a Latina and white, cisgender, heterosexual woman that is a member of a historically white sorority. Much of her research focuses on the experiences of minoritized college students with a particular emphasis on sorority and fraternity life. Throughout this project, she reflected on the fact that she does not share many of the same identities and experiences as the participants in this study. She was intentional in engaging in reflection, consistently debriefing her interpretations of participant experiences with Antonio. Antonio Duran identifies as a queer cisgender Latino man who is not affiliated with an SFL organization. He has been committed to supporting Queer People of Color in higher education through his scholarship, as well as in his role advising a culturally based fraternity on his campus. To this project, he brought his understanding of Queer of Color experiences, while at the same time considering how his unaffiliated status may have shaped his assertions and interpretations.

Findings

In understanding the motivations of Queer Women of Color to join culturally based sororities, participants discussed how race/ethnicity informed their sorority selection while discussing how their sexuality and gender played a role in this process. Moreover, individuals shared how their motivations stemmed from a desire to find community and family-like connections.

The Role of Race and Ethnicity in Sorority Selection

The fact that culturally based sororities were made to affirm members' racial and ethnic identities was prominent in participants' motivations to join. This was particularly the case in that participants recognized their culturally based sororities as affirming spaces unlike other predominantly white organizations. Furthermore, in joining their sororities, participants also had to debunk stereotypes they believed applied to all sororities and recognize culturally based sororities as distinct from historically white sororities.

Culturally-Based Sororities as Distinct from Organizations Deemed as White Spaces.

Maria did not join her Latina-based sorority until her senior year, a time she wanted to be intentional in connecting with other Women of Color, saying, “I felt like I was kind of coming to this realization about my identity a little bit late. I wanted to make those connections with more Women of Color and learn more about myself through the sorority.” For Maria, joining a culturally based sorority was an important way she connected with her racial identity, which she did not believe would be the case if she had joined a historically white sorority: “I did have this sort of sense of People of Color don’t generally join Panhellenic organizations.” Similar to Maria, many other participants mentioned the lack of racial/ethnic diversity within Panhellenic sororities as a push away from those organizations and toward culturally based groups.

Panhellenic sororities were not the only spaces participants did not feel would be racial/ ethnically affirming. As Luz illuminated, when participants considered joining LGBTQ based sororities or campus organizations, they often expressed that these spaces did not center race/ ethnicity as sexuality “becomes their whole identity.” This sentiment led Luz to state, “I don’t want to be associated with the queer sorority just because being Latina is still important to me, and if I join, then that’s going to be erased by my whole sexuality.” Distinct from historically white sororities and LGBTQ sororities and organizations, participants’ sororities were spaces in which others shared their identities as Women of Color and celebrated those identities.

Debunking Myths and Understanding Culturally Based Sororities.

Furthermore, participants shared that they did not know that culturally based sororities existed prior to being exposed to them in college, if they did not know someone that was affiliated. As a result, an important part of their motivations to join culturally based sororities was learning more about SFL and their sorority more specifically. Several participants that attended historically white institutions, including Alethia, Cecilia, and Chance, explained that they originally did not

have intentions to join a sorority because they believed they were all predominantly white and about partying. For instance, Alethia shared that prior to joining her Asian sorority, she did not plan on being a part of SFL: “I didn’t know that culturally based Greek organization existed on campus. I just knew of like the predominantly white Greek organizations. And I was completely turned off.” In the second semester of her first year, she learned about her sorority at a tabling event through the campus Asian American Association: “I started to realize, oh, this is what the organization does on campus ... And I was like, they’re kind of breaking that stereotypical narrative that you would hear about Greek life.” For Alethia, debunking perceptions of Greek life as primarily white and as a party scene was an important draw to her sorority.

Similar to Alethia, Cecelia began her college experience only knowing about historically white sororities and she shared her concerns: “They partied a lot. They had to pay a lot of money to be within the organization.” More importantly, their memberships’ lack of racial and ethnic diversity was a signal that she would not belong.

When you look at them, there’s no People of Color ... I felt like I wouldn’t have been ... acknowledged and seen there except for, “Oh, we need someone for a picture. Oh, here’s our diverse group,” and it’s the one Native American that they have.

Cecelia became aware of her historically Native American sorority through informational flyers and e-mails. She attended informational meetings for the sorority where her previous conceptions about sororities were debunked: “Our sorority is significantly less expensive than all other sororities I’ve ever heard of We don’t really party ... A lot of ours is community service that we do and we focus on, we do a lot of study halls.” Like Alethia, Cecelia’s exposure to the aims of her sorority helped her to envision a different narrative about what sororities are and do.

Echoing Alethia and Cecelia’s experiences, Chance entered college and “didn’t really have a lot of knowledge about Black sorority and fraternities because nobody in my family’s Greek at all.” Furthermore, in terms of historically white sororities, Chance thought they “seemed unsafe and it seemed like not the space that I want to be in.” She further explained, “I don’t know if I’m going to be the only Black person

in this sorority at this time ... Plus, it seemed very ... elitist.” Similar to many other participants, Chance expressed concerns about joining a historically white sorority, alluding to the racial hostilities she worried about facing from the members. Chance then became familiar with her NPHC sorority:

I realized it wasn't all parties. And there was a lot more business than social There is a lot of just positive images of women who are in these sororities, on my campus. And I was like, “Oh, this seems okay ... And they're very nice.”

Reflected in stories like Chance's, racial/ethnic identities were prominent in participants' motivations to join a culturally based sorority. Yet another important aspect of participants' experiences was the role of sexuality and gender performance.

The Role of Sexuality and Gender Performance in Sorority Selection

Only seven participants intentionally made their queer identities known during the time they pursued membership in their sorority while the other 13 did not. Of those seven individuals, three were members of an Asian American sorority (Alethia, Juliet, and Mimi), two were members of a Latina sorority (Fuerza and Maria), one was a member of a multicultural sorority (Adrian), and one was a member of an NPHC sorority (Assata). This section unpacks ways some participants felt their sorority affirmed their full selves as Queer Women of Color and perspectives from others that received messages their being queer did not have a place either in the chapter or within sororities outside of their own.

Determining Which Sororities Were More Affirming of Queer People.

The members that were out chose their chapters in part because they were more affirming of their sexuality and gender performance than other sororities. For example, Juliet's preconceived notions of queer people's experiences within historically white sororities gave her fears about whether her intersecting Asian and queer identities would be accepted:

Panhellenic is mostly white straight girls I just didn't feel myself being able to fit in. Most of the people who bullied me were white and were straight, so I just didn't feel like I would be putting myself in a good situation if I did rush Panhellenic.

Instead, Juliet met an Asian-based sorority that responded positively to her sexuality. She was up front about this with the members from the start of her process: "I was like, 'I am bisexual. If that's a problem, I'm not going to rush. It's okay.' And they said it was fine. They're like, we're diverse, we're open to diversity." Juliet recognized her sorority as a place that would welcome diversity not only in terms of race and ethnicity but also sexuality; this was in contrast to what she thought would be possible within a Panhellenic sorority.

In Mimi's case, she received signals that her identities and commitments to social justice were affirmed within the Asian interest sorority she was deciding on joining. She recalled sharing her pride in advocating for LGBT people with the sisters: "I was very transparent about that being [LGBTQ was] an important part of my identity, and seeing how just affirming and accepting and warm the sisters were, I was like, 'Okay, this is probably the place for me.'" Mimi not only felt safe to share that she engaged in advocacy for queer and transgender people with her potential sisters but also received affirmations from the way they responded to her.

As previously noted, some participants felt that their sororities were more affirming of their sexuality and, for those that were more masculine presenting, their gender performance. This was not necessarily the case for all culturally based sororities. Adrian, for instance, received messages that NPHC organizations broadly would not affirm her sexuality. In spite of these messages, Adrian attended an NPHC sorority interest meeting where she was directed "to wear business casual attire," leading her to wear a suit and get strange looks from members. In stark contrast to her experience within the NPHC sorority interest meeting, when she attended an informational meeting for her multicultural sorority, the members "complimented me. They made me feel like, even though I didn't look like any of them, I could still be one of them, and I think that's what stuck with me." Furthermore, the members of her sorority showed that even though none of the current members identified as queer, they supported queer students: "They would come to Spectrum meetings for no reason ... just

because they wanted to come and have a conversation ... I think that's what attracted me to them." Witnessing examples of inclusive behaviors from members was important in Adrian's choice to join her sorority. Even though she initially considered joining an NPHC sorority, she ultimately believed her MGC organization was more accepting of who she was.

Navigating the Decision to Be Out while Joining a Culturally Based Sorority.

The other 13 individuals chose not to disclose their sexuality for various reasons. For example, a few participants chose not to disclose their sexuality because they did not feel it was pertinent information when weighing the potential ramifications they could face. This was the case for Ericka, who initially opted not to disclose her sexuality:

I just assumed, I'm going to be me and that's probably what they're going to like me for ... I could see a lot of people having fears of people. I could imagine I could be worried like, "Oh well are they going to judge me because I like girls and I'm in an all-girl sorority."

Although Ericka was unsure of how her sisters would view her queer identity, she later found that it provided a space that not only allowed her to exist as a Queer Woman of Color but to explore it further.

Assata was the only NPHC member in this study who disclosed her sexuality to her sisters as she pursued membership. She considered other NPHC sororities, but ultimately decided on her particular organization because "all the women were totally different ... they were originally the ones that had, at least where I saw, visibly queer women." Assata noted that her chapter did not have many queer women, but the presence of at least some queer members was an indicator that this was a place where she could belong. In contrast to Assata, Tia decided not to be forthcoming about her sexuality, explaining that it was something she could choose to share or conceal: "I'm gonna always be Black and like I said I can't hide that, but with my sexuality, depending on the room I'm in, I don't necessarily have to throw that into the mix." The worry of being denied admission into her sorority on the basis of sexuality caused Tia to keep her sexuality

a secret. Similarly, prior to joining her sorority, Jennifer did not think her queerness could be part of her experience:

I didn't see [my sorority] as a place where I would feel comfortable exploring queerness or even advocating for it in some ways, too ... Quite frankly, I feel like my perception as maybe that this wasn't a place for ... my queerness.

Jennifer accepted that she would have to compartmentalize her sexuality to join her sorority and was willing to do so because of all the other benefits membership offered her as a Woman of Color.

Victoria was one participant that chose not to hide her queer identity while pursuing NPHC membership as an undergrad but was denied membership and had to later join a graduate chapter. Growing up, she learned a lot about NPHC organizations because her mom and grandmother were members of her sorority. When she first attempted to join during her senior year, "there were no other representations of their members who dressed and looked like me or were openly queer." Victoria did not try to conceal her sexuality or more masculine-of-center gender performance when she sought membership. Even though she chose to be her authentic self while pursuing membership, she worried this would affect her ability to become a member, "I was concerned that I wouldn't make it because I was gay. And so I ended up not making it, but I don't know why." Victoria couldn't know if her sexuality was part of the decision not to extend membership to her. She later joined a graduate chapter of the same sorority, and in this case her queerness " ... didn't show up then because now it's a group of people and women who don't really know me or get to see me on a daily basis. They only would see me ... in that setting." Although Victoria was accepted in the graduate chapter, she did not assert that this was because the members embraced her sexuality and gender identities.

Family, Community, and Leadership

Participants were also drawn to their particular sororities for other reasons that intersected with their identities. Some members, like Mahogany and Alice, knew they would join culturally based sororities before college. For others, learning about the organizations helped them

to develop an appreciation for their sorority's values, including their emphasis on familial connections that spanned across the nation and the world, serving communities, and leadership development.

The vast majority of participants emphasized the importance of sisterhood in their decision to join their sorority, which was a distinguishing characteristic from other organizations. Fuerza for one expressed her attraction to the idea of forming a family with other Women of Color specifically through her Latina-based sorority: "I wanted to be around people that ensured that I was safe, and that I could ensure that they were safe. Just the idea of sisterhood, and I'm very big on family ... so having another family." Like Fuerza, Nell highlighted the importance of finding family through her NPHC sorority: "Growing up as an only child, you know, that whole sisterhood idea was amazing to me." The sister-like relationships participants found within their sororities served as a strong motivation for these individuals to join their organizations and, for some, to continue their active memberships for years after they graduated.

As indicated in Fuerza's reflection, cultural values informed the need for a sense of family for many participants. This was the case for Alethia who expressed her desire to find a family stemmed from her Asian culture, "Within the Asian community, like growing up, like family is everything." Her sorority offered membership "who understood that to have familial ties to build those bonds was something that was so important for me." In addition, finding a sense of family away from her biological family was important to Alethia because her family was not accepting of her queerness. As a result, joining Alethia's Asian sorority was also about "finding those people that I felt close enough that I can disclose what I was going through." Alethia's statements highlight unique ways participants' race/ethnicity and sexuality informed how participants envisioned a sense of family within their sororities.

Participants further recognized that joining a sorority meant that they would not only connect with individuals in their chapter during a particular time, but that these bonds would last a lifetime and link them to a broader network of sisters. Maria reflected: "I also was really drawn to the fact that people stayed involved after they graduated." Likewise, Nicole expressed the worldwide network was crucial to her decision as well as the founding principles of the organization,

“just knowing that the organization is more than just my campus. It’s the entire world.”

In addition to connecting to a family-like group, many participants also reflected on the appeal of their sorority’s commitment to serving communities. For some like Kiara, this manifested in organizational service engagement: “I said, ‘Well, I like what this one stands for. What they were doing, they were doing a lot of community service and things like that ...’ That’s what changed my mind, led me in that direction.” Others were inspired by the sorority’s engagement in advocacy and activism. Victoria shared:

I think one of the things that I found that I really liked was that my organization was always at the forefront of political movements. And have foresight and being able to make a move within the community ...

Distinct from many other student organizations, these forms of community engagement were often a reflection of their organization’s dedication to minoritized communities.

Finally, participants’ motivations to join were driven by leadership opportunities within the organization and the level of involvement of sorority members on campus. Luz recalled looking up to a notable member of her sorority that was highly involved in leadership on campus.

I had another friend too who was really involved with the sorority, but she also used a lot of the tactics from the sorority to be involved with the Vietnamese Student Association. She was the president and ... that really inspired me, seeing my friends actually use the tactics from the sorority to build up their resume and build up their personal growth. That’s what I wanted.

In addition to these connections to involvement on campus, participants were impressed with how organizations shaped leadership abilities. Maria shared that she appreciated the sorority’s emphasis on individuality within the group.

A lot of our intake process is very much about ... becoming more confident, becoming someone who is proud of

themselves, embracing your identity and embracing your individuality ... I think that really plays into how we view issues surrounding People of Color and Women of Color in that we really want to promote strength and diversity and all of that stuff.

Like Maria, other participants embraced the opportunities to develop as Women of Color leaders on campus. For some, this also meant advocating for the queer community in those roles; for others this meant centering their racial/ethnic identities until they felt safe to allow others to see their full selves as Queer Women of Color.

Discussion & Implications

Findings from this study expand on previous SFL literature providing insight to the motivations for Queer Women of Color to join culturally based sororities. Here we discuss highlights in relation to previous scholarship and particularly Muñoz's (1999) work. Throughout, we offer implications for students, SFL campus-based professionals, upper level campus administrators, and (inter)national sorority leadership.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants emphasized their choice to join a culturally based sorority hinged on the sorority's commitment to People of Color. This was even the case for participants that joined an organization whose founding identities did not match their own, reaffirming previous studies that articulate the significance of race and ethnicity in culturally based SFL (Arellano, 2020; Garcia, 2020a, 2020b; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Orta et al., 2019). Even further, participants' stories showed that they not only viewed culturally based sororities as welcoming to their race/ethnicity but also identified historically white sororities and even LGBTQ based organizations as spaces that were not. This finding underscores important questions regarding when and how a space embodies whiteness to the point that it is not seen as a place for Students of Color—a point future research studies should further unpack.

In addition to examining why organizations are seen as white space and unwelcoming to Students of Color, our first finding also reifies the importance of supporting culturally based sororities and fraternities specifically. If indeed institutions continue to espouse their

commitment to supporting Students of Color, upper-level administration must recognize the important role culturally based sororities can play in affirming the identities of Students of Color and follow up those sentiments with tangible support for these groups. Financially, that means providing a budget for MGC and NPHC chapters and dedicated professionals to work with these groups. Other support beyond financial include promoting organizational initiatives to the greater campus and showing up to programming culturally based sororities host—this extends to historically white SFL groups as well as the greater campus community.

In terms of participants' queer identities, all individuals in this study engaged in disidentification (Muñoz, 1999), making choices of what to reveal about themselves and what to conceal while pursuing sorority membership; these decisions influenced their motivations to join their sororities in different ways. Some individuals sought membership in organizations while being explicit about their queer identities. These participants recognized and were intentional in locating an organization that was affirming of members' sexualities. While these individuals recognized that sorority life was not wholly accepting of their identity as a Queer Woman of Color, they engaged with SFL culture in a way that "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Yet we were surprised to find that 13 participants did not disclose their sexuality to their chapters as they joined their sororities. This finding highlights that members of culturally based sororities, spaces that were created to affirm the identities and experiences of Women of Color, can face hostilities from these groups based on their sexuality and gender.

In contrast to those that found their sorority to be affirming of their sexuality and gender performance, other participants that were openly queer while pursuing membership received messages from sorority members that were hostile to their identities. These individuals either chose to join another more affirming chapter or, in the case of Victoria, were denied membership but later joined the same organization through a graduate chapter. Victoria's experience as well as the coldness that Adrian navigated within the NPHC chapter interest meeting she attended show some alignment with Literte and Hodge's (2012) findings wherein NPHC sorority women

were found to conflate prospective members' gender identities with their sexuality and make membership decisions based on those perceptions. Future studies should further unpack the experiences of Transgender Women of Color and cisgender Women of Color whose gender performance is deemed as masculine in their pursuit of sorority membership.

Most participants chose to conceal parts of their identities as they pursued membership within their sorority, most of whom expressed uncertainty about how members would respond— similar to the experiences of Black gay men considering membership within NPHCs as shared by Means and Jaeger (2013). Some individuals felt safe to reveal these aspects of themselves later while others continued to keep their sexuality separate from their sorority. Regardless, it is evident that campuses as a whole, and sorority and fraternity life communities in particular, have much work to do to ensure students do not have to strategize being their authentic selves or fear ramifications if their queer identities are known. These findings carry important implications for members of culturally based sororities, campus-based professionals, and (inter)national organization leadership. First it is imperative that these groups recognize that queer members are forced to make strategic decisions while navigating the prospect of joining a sorority as well as their membership experience, which amounts to “managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 161). When making the choice to join a culturally based sorority, participants sometimes weighed the benefits of membership in comparison to sacrifices they made of themselves to be in those spaces. Campus-based professionals and (inter)national organization leadership must engage members in both formal and informal discussions regarding ways they understand queer identities and how their interactions, organizational practices, policies, and culture are influenced by those perceptions. Further, professionals and organizational leadership can lead the membership through an examination and reimagining of policies and practices that perpetuate harm to queer members.

Finally, there are considerations for practice and research based on participants' reflections on the importance of family, community, and leadership. First, SFL communities should consider what leadership opportunities they provide students and whether these experiences

align with cultural values for Asian American, Black, Indigenous, Latinx/a/o communities and other People of Color. Additional research is needed to explore students' experiences with SFL leadership development and the extent to which campuses offer opportunities made explicitly for culturally based sororities. Furthermore, organizations and campus-based professionals should consider which opportunities are afforded to student organizations to work with Communities of Color outside of fundraising. These community engagement opportunities are important; institutional leadership and campus-based SFL professionals should help students establish these relationships. Finally, SFL communities should engage in conversations about the connection between sorority familial values and racial/ethnic identities, an area future research can further explore.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings suggest that culturally-based sororities play an important role in connecting Women of Color to campuses, and some organizations are more intentional in communicating their support for their queer members. Although these findings illuminate that participants overall found immense value in their sororities in relation to their racial/ethnic identities, they also show there is work to be done to ensure that culturally based sororities are spaces that affirm queer members.

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Funding This work was supported by the ACPA Commission for Student Involvement.

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