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## GAY AND GREEK: THE DEPLOYMENT OF GENDER BY GAY MEN IN FRATERNITY AND SORORITY LIFE

*This paper explores the deployment of gender by gay males in fraternities. Using data from 17 qualitative interviews, it is suggested that there are strict rules of hegemonic masculinity embedded in fraternity life where members value heterosexuality. This leads gay men in fraternities to conceal behavior socially labeled as “gay” and therefore non-masculine. Gay members create special intragroup networks within their organizations where they aim to find validation and support that they may not receive from the rest of their brothers. The author argues that gay men’s experiences in fraternities influence how these men choose to strategically deploy their gender.*

### **Introduction**

In an exploratory article written for the colligate section of USA TODAY, Nicole Glass (2012) highlights various statistical data that suggests fraternity and sorority life is more than the commonly accepted stereotypes of heavy drinking and partying, sexual harassment, hazing, and white elitism. With 85 percent of Fortune 500 companies being led by former fraternity and sorority life individuals, a graduation rate 20 percent higher than that of non-affiliated college students, and over 9 million active members nationally, Glass (2012) suggests that there is great promise surrounding fraternity and sorority life across the nation. This may be the case, but is that promise equally distributed for all members? Do members of different sexual orientations experience heightened discrimination within their respective organizations? And, how might this discrimination influence the decisions these sexual minorities make when it comes to their gender identity and expression?

In this paper I explore the various ways in which gay men’s experiences in fraternities shape their gender deployment. This view of gender builds on previous literature that suggests that gender is something individuals “do;” by our actions we indicate to others our gender identity (Kessler & McKenna, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). I further this argument by suggesting that individuals in institutions may deploy gender by “doing gender” in strategic ways

so that they may attain certain benefits given only to those who do their gender “correctly.” This leads to claims that “because x does this, x is a real man and because y doesn’t do that, y is not a real man,” where the “this” and the “that” can be replaced with different rules of how men are “supposed” to act. Individuals’ supposed gender identity, then, is rewarded based on how well it fits with an institution’s accepted notions of manhood and who a man should be. Viewing gender as a deployment is consistent with previous scholarship (Mazzei & O’Brien, 2009) that argues that gender is something that is actively and strategically done by an individual so that their supposed gender identity will gain them some institutional benefit(s). I use “deploy gender” and “do gender” interchangeably throughout the paper to illustrate the relationality of the two terms, with “deployment” simply meaning “doing” but in more specific, strategic ways.

By focusing on the ways in which gay men deploy their gender after joining a fraternity, I aim to shed light on the various ways gender expression can be shaped by the institutions one is a part of. This study explores one main question: How do the experiences of gay men in fraternity and sorority life influence the ways in which they deploy their gender? I aim to answer this question by looking at both the ways in which these men choose to express their gender, as well as offering arguments of how, within fraternity and sorority life, these choices are unique to gay men due to their distinctive experiences as being both gay and members of a fraternity.

Studying the ways in which these men deploy their gender is of great importance to student services professionals, for fraternal organizations’ national headquarters, as well as academics interested in gender expressions of college students (Edwards & Jones, 2009). By researching the lived experiences of those who identify as gay in fraternity and sorority life these student affairs professionals will be able to better meet the unique needs of fraternity members that are not straight. Although the literature is quite extensive on gender and sexual deployment for

individuals outside of this particular institution, the empirical research is sparse when it comes to these topics in the context of fraternity and sorority life. As fraternities are often viewed as sites of hegemonic, hyper-masculinity (Anderson, 2007), research into gender and sexuality within a fraternity and sorority life context may offer new and valuable insight into how an institutional setting can affect choices surrounding gender and sexual expression. I will argue that there are two distinct areas in which gay men's experiences in fraternities differ from the experiences of straight men who are part of the same institution: their concealing of behavior socially labeled as "too gay" and therefore non-masculine; and, the special intragroup networking done by gay members. This is not to say that the straight men included in this study do not undergo the same gender policing when their gender is not seen as masculine enough; however, gay men's experiences with gender policing are heightened within the institution of fraternity and sorority life because their sexuality is one facet of their identity that is already in contrast with the normative behavior expected of men so the gay men tend to compensate more by displaying more masculine behaviors. These two areas are highlighted and discussed in relation to the role they play in how gay men within fraternities choose to deploy their gender. These areas are complicated by the special relationships each individual chapter has with their members, their national headquarters, and their campus partners.

## **Literature Review**

Fraternities have the ability to be spaces where great enmity is experienced by gay men, but also have the ability to be an institution in which great brotherhood, social development and growth is experienced (Case, 1996; Anderson, 2007). Previous literature has shown that many gay men benefit from being members of Greek letter organizations on college campuses around

the nation (Anderson, 2007; Rankin, Hesp, & Weber, 2013; Case, 1996; Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005); though, much of the same research has also shown that gay men may experience heightened discrimination within their chapter. The sparse literature that explores the experiences of gay men and college fraternities highlights how gay men feel once they have gained membership in their fraternity. This literature is full of stories of exclusion or acceptance, often focusing heavily on how these men compartmentalize (Tillapaugh, 2013) or cope (Trump & Wallace, 2006) with being gay and being a member of a fraternity. There is also research that highlights the importance of inclusive environments for gay college students as identity formation in college is a major milestone in one's life; one's sexual identity development often occurs and thrives during their college experience (Stevens, 2004). The intersections of gender and sexuality for gay men in fraternities needs to be interrogated to fully recognize the role that being an out gay man in a fraternity has on the development and later deployment of each fraternity man's other identities.

In order to understand an unequal gender system, one must also interrogate the role that heterosexuality and heteronormativity play in the creation of a system that values certain gender expressions over others. This advocates that "understanding the persistence of gender inequality necessitates an understanding of the relationality between heterosexuality and gender" (Schilt & Westbrook, 443). In essence, this gender system is one that subordinates certain deployments of gender, while simultaneously valuing and promoting heterosexuality, especially in the hyper-masculine fraternity. Understanding the multiplicities of one's identity is needed to fully recognize one's holistic identity development, and the role that privilege and power play in that development (Tillapaugh, 2013).

It is suggested that there are various ways in which our gender is actively done, often due to the continued socialization of children and adults into gendered beings (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This doing of gender is based on systemic hegemonic norms and expectations where society promotes “normative” behavior (Connell, 1995). For the system of hegemonic masculinity, the behavior that is thought to maintain hegemonic status is what all of other subordinate expressions of gender are compared to. Gay men may display a “front stage” way of acting that is consistent with these hegemonic masculine expectations of their gender expression, while their “back stage” ways of acting may be easier to do when surrounded by other gay members (Goffman, 1959). Gay men may also utilize “covering” in which they are openly gay but do a lot of work, including certain expressions of gender, to hide it (Eliaison, 1996).

One of the major aspects of hegemonic masculinity is a strict rejection of homosexuality. This rejection may be due to the social belief that homosexuals exhibit a “penetrated masculinity” (Pascoe, 2005). This penetrated masculinity is a display of gender that is void of all power which leads men to police themselves and others because men are supposed to be the ones to exhibit power (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2008; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Pascoe, 2005). Thus, a homosexual identity for fraternity men should not be thought of as simply a display of sexuality but may also be thought of as a subordinate form of gender expression because of the social belief that homosexuality represents a penetrated masculinity, understanding that power does not exist for the penetrated (Bersani, 1987). Instead, for gay men within fraternities, expressing the “heteropatriarchal white masculinity” (Ward, 2008) may allow them to benefit from being in a fraternity by displaying the gender expression that is expected of them, even if their sexuality does not fit within those expectations.

Organizations each have a level of agency in creating their own definition of hegemonic masculinity that is contingent on having an organizational culture which promotes a unified set of beliefs (Anderson, 2007). While this organizational agency is not outside the larger gender system, it often adapts within the gender system and then maintains its own set of customary gendered behaviors. Hegemonic constructions of gender become extremely complex as hegemonic status often varies by context and institution (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This suggests that fraternities may then set up their own rules of “normal” which either accept or deny homosexual-identified members. This organizational agency, though, does not mitigate the plethora of other contexts where sexuality-based inequality may exist. So, organizations have agency to decide their inclusiveness but there are still other social norms and narratives that may influence or affect one’s sense of belonging in a fraternity. When one’s sexuality is at odds with the normative culture of heterosexuality both within their chapter and within the larger social context, an individual has to compartmentalize, or decide how to deal with, the mixed, sometimes different, messages on appropriate gender behavior (Tillapaugh, 2013).

The truth of the matter remains that men who rush as out gay men are often denied membership within fraternities (Rankin, Hesp, & Weber, 2013). This has the ability to lead fraternities without any out gay men to further their heterosexual exclusivity as the absence of gay men has the potential to cultivate hostility towards gay members being actively recruited (Anderson, 2007). Conversely, having open gay brothers may aid in shifting organizational culture to be more inclusive while concurrently creating space for other out gay men to feel welcome and affirmed (Trump & Wallace, 2006; Anderson, 2007). Once gay men join there is a higher likelihood that gay men will feel comfortable being themselves because having gay

friends who share some of the same experiences correlates with a healthier, positive gay identity (Frale, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997).

Fraternalities are sites where brotherhood, leadership, and chivalry towards women<sup>1</sup> are promoted and valued, however it is important to acknowledge that these values exist in a context of heteronormativity (Trump & Wallace, 2006; Anderson, 2007). The expectations associated with heterosexuality create a system in which there are imbalances of privilege and power (Ingraham, 1994). Those with the power and privilege are those who fulfill the expectations associated with heterosexuality, while those failing to meet the expectations are often subordinated and discriminated against (Connell, 1995). Gay men may not fulfill the gendered and sexual expectations needed to join fraternities and may be discriminated against. Still, a 1996 fraternity and sorority life survey suggests that almost 20 years ago approximately 6 percent of fraternity men identified as gay or bisexual (Case, 1996). However, about two-thirds of them were not out about those identities. This suggests that gay men are more likely to be recruited when their gay identity is not known, or more specifically, when their sexuality is seen as aligning with the societal expectation of heterosexuality. This survey also suggested that even after joining, 70 percent of the gay male respondents still chose not to come out within their fraternity due to the heterosexist and homophobic nature of the organization. This phenomenon of staying in the closet may be due to the rejection of homosexuality which is often a defining piece of brotherhood (Yeung, Stompler, & Wharton, 2006).

The literature suggests that straight and the gay men do their gender in ways that they believe will benefit them. The hegemonic norms of masculinity within fraternities are created by

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<sup>1</sup> 1 It should be noted that although chivalry towards women is a value of many fraternities sexual assault remains a large problem within fraternity and sorority life (Boswell and Spade 1996).

individual members collectively deciding what is appropriate gender behavior for their chapter. Gay men in fraternities may police their gender and deploy more masculine behaviors because their sexuality is already at odds with the heteronormative expectations of the chapter. For gay members who do not have a heterosexual identity, they may display these more masculine behaviors so that their brothers will “accept” them. I argue that gay members have certain unique experiences because their sexuality diverges from the heteronormative expectations of the fraternity. In order to compensate for this inconsistency gay men will utilize a “front stage” of hegemonic masculinity that serves as a repudiation of a penetrated masculinity. Gay men set up intra-group counter-networks where their “back stage” ways of acting in ways that may not be seen as masculine are allowed and accepted; however, in these spaces normative masculine behavior may not be as accepted.

## **Methods**

Individuals were recruited for this study based on their gender, sexual orientation, and involvement in a Greek letter organization at a large state school in the Midwest. Males identifying as either gay or straight were selected to participate. The fraternity and sorority life community makes up approximately 7 percent of the student population at the university and all of the participants selected were members of fraternities in the university’s Interfraternity Council (IFC). Non-male identified members, members identifying as something other than gay or straight, and members of other Greek letter councils were excluded from the study.<sup>2</sup> Other Greek letter councils, such as the Multicultural Greek Council, were excluded to control as much as possible for the values each chapter stands for. Values often vary greatly between each

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<sup>2</sup> Although I recognize the need to understand the experiences of women and other often excluded identities in academic scholarship, their exclusion is due to the scope of the study: understanding gender deployment by gay males in social fraternities

council, but not much between chapters within each council. The inclusion of other councils may further complicate data as the recruitment practices, membership rituals, and membership expectations vary greatly between the IFC and other councils on the school's campus.

Men were recruited through convenience, snow-ball sampling. There were 17 participants, representing near all of the 10 IFC fraternities on campus; eleven self-identified as gay and six self-identified as straight. No demographic information other than the participants' sexuality was recorded to ensure confidentiality. The names of the participants were removed with participant-chosen aliases being assigned to each. All participants were fully active members with some of the participants holding positions on their executive board. None of the participants included were still in their "new member period," though some had recently been initiated, having been a member for no longer than a semester. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, I asked these men about their experiences being members in their respective fraternities. Participant responses were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Coding focused on how gender is deployed by participants through "socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of [the] masculine" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 126). This display of doing gender is seen through actions, dress, and other social cues that indicate gender; I coded for each of these social cues. I ordered the coded data into categories by theme. The thematic data that follows highlights significant insights that aid in understanding the experiences of gay men and straight men in this stereotypically hyper-masculine and heterosexist institution.

It should be acknowledged that access to participants was facilitated by my involvement as an active member and president of a fraternity as well as my involvement in the gay activist community at the university. Negotiating the role between being the gay president of one of the

fraternities as well as the researcher is important to recognize in this study as it may have complicated data collection more than if the researcher did not occupy an “insider status.” Similar to Ferguson’s (2001) and Anderson’s (2007) negotiations of their roles in their respective studies, there were both positives and negatives in maintaining an insider position in this study. On one hand some may have felt more apt to share certain experiences because I am in a similar situation where I am able to understand and relate to their experiences, on the other hand the participants may have censored some of their experiences to highlight the more productive parts of their respective fraternities. I aimed to ensure that all members felt open to share their experiences in a safe, confidential, and judgment-free environment by using inclusive and positive language and tone. Due to the smaller sample size and that all participants come from the same university and council (IFC), generalizations based on the data should be done with caution. Still, the data provides valuable insight as to how a group of (gay) men experience fraternity culture, and how that culture influences their decisions when it comes to how they deploy their gender.

### **Straight Idealization: Suppressing the “Gay”**

*“It did kind of preserve my more heterosexual ways of acting. I don’t feel comfortable always saying what I want to, when I want to.” - Robbie*

For Robbie, by not expressing his “gay” ways of acting, he was able to hold on to a sense of comfort. His gender expression is shaped by finding that comfort; however, it may simultaneously be limiting his sexuality development as he was not given the space to formulate his identity. Robbie goes on to say that “not that it really changed anything, it was just another group where I had to check everything I said. I have to do that a lot of times outside of my organization, but this is one place that I feel like it is not appropriate [behavior].” Although these

experiences are not unique to fraternity and sorority life, it appears that the heteronormative fraternity may not provide an opportunity for gay men to deploy their gender as they chose. Fraternities may, instead, be another place where gay men need to adhere to social cues of what is appropriate masculine behavior. The pressure of what is appropriate gender behavior is reiterated to gay members by informing them how they must act to feel like “a part of the team.” By not displaying his possible “gay” ways of acting Robbie is able to maintain the status of an “acceptable gay;” the ways in which he deploys his gender allow him to benefit because he is not showing behavior that is believed to be consistent with a subordinate penetrated masculinity.

These social guidelines as to how the fraternities expect their men to act are often understood as pieces of hegemonic masculinity; dress is one of these social guidelines. Oliver, another one of the gay participants says that “I wouldn’t let myself wear that [sweater] during rush week if that makes sense because I feel like that is too gay. That’s like one thing I have stigmatized against...I wouldn’t wear it during rush week because I feel like I might get some slack for it.” All participants, both gay and straight, in the study described how their dress was influenced by their chapter. Gay men, such as Oliver, police their dress because it may be seen as “too gay” and non-masculine. Straight men police their dress because of the fraternity’s “frat life” expectations as described by Jack, one of the straight participants who argues that “I definitely see that as a thing that people start changing the way they dress as they join a fraternity. I see that as almost a thing that you have to do.” This highlights that hegemonic masculinity is understood in its promotion of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980) in which there is a strong rejection of homosexuality as can be seen by the possible reaction from Oliver’s fraternity should he wear clothing that would be considered gay. Here, it seems then, that there is a conflation of sexuality and gender. One’s clothing decisions, which are often thought of as one

of the rituals of doing gender are also indicators of sexuality (West and Zimmerman, 1986). When an individual fails to meet the gendered expectations when it comes to their clothing choices, their sexuality becomes the focal point of discussion, leading some to articulate that certain actions and behaviors are just “too gay for straight fraternity guys to be okay with” as Ian, a gay participant puts it.

Ian goes on to say that “everything we do as gay guys is under scrutiny, like is this the time we’re going to mess up and do something that the chapter says enough is enough and completely turns their back on us? It’s a reality that we play this line as gay men, and we have to be careful we don’t overstep it.” These sentiments of “playing the line” of being “too gay” or portraying flamboyance were reiterated by the majority of the gay men interview in the study. Many of the gay men feared that they would no longer be accepted in the chapter if they did something considered to be “too gay,” or feminine, by their brothers. This leads the gay men in fraternities to police their behavior so that they can maintain their status as an active, accepted brother. For all the men expressing behavior that is not consistent with hegemonic norms, there may be repercussions such as alienation, discrimination, and exclusion; however, this alienation, discrimination, and exclusion is heightened for gay men because their gay identity is already not consistent with the heteronormative expectations. They deploy their gender based on what they believe the chapter wants to see from them, and often times this highlights the heteronormative climate of fraternities. Gay participants in this study consistently highlighted how their involvement within fraternity and sorority life informed them on the appropriate behavior associated with being a member of the fraternity and sorority life community. “In that regard Greek Life forced me to conform into a straight male because if you act completely flamboyant people will judge me or something like that” described Clark, another gay participant, “being in

Greek Life I have to be the stereotypical frat guy, who is not gay, who wears Sperry's and short shorts and button downs and acts fratty." Those who fall outside of these ideals, such as the flamboyant man, are judged for their deployment of gender that is not consistent with the socially determined hegemonic masculinity standards that are expected from a man in a fraternity. This suggests that flamboyance may signal the deployment of gender that may be categorized as feminine, which in turn is used to make judgments of the individual's sexuality. All of these men are openly gay, so they are not aiming to change the way their fraternity views their sexuality. What they are doing, then, is portraying a gender expression that fulfills the expectations of the chapter. They believe that they are under a microscope because their sexuality is not a part of the normative narrative within their fraternities, so they try to compensate and display a masculinity that is void of femininity, that is void of a penetrated masculinity, that is only consistent with hegemonic standards of normative masculine behavior.

The agency of the institution to determine its own set of appropriate gendered behavior is reliant on the collective wants of each of the members within the organization. Though the ability of each organization to define its own norms operates within the larger system of gender norms and behavior, the organization still has the ability to adapt and reshape what those norms are for the chapter. This can be seen above where Clark illustrates an image of a "frat guy" who "wears short shorts," something that may not be considered normative in terms of masculinity for men in the general public, but in fraternities is normative. Jason, a straight participant, also describes how this individual agency may, or may not, translate into institutional agency:

*"We just [gave a bid] to a gay guy, and I would say I am trying to do the best job at making him feel welcome coming in with open arms....I see other members not reaching out in that way, but that could just be them not being social."*

Although Jason may personally be committed to creating an inclusive environment for this new member, there must be an institutional, group commitment to change the terms of hegemonic norms. On the one hand Jason is aiming to create an environment where this gay new member feels welcome regardless of his sexuality. On the other hand, others within the organization may not be as keen on inviting a gay man into their brotherhood that may not meet their hegemonic expectations of heterosexuality. Is this new member “allowed” to portray a gender that highlights his gay sexuality because Jason accepts and welcomes him? Or, is it that this new member must downplay his “gayness” and portray gendered behavior that strictly displays masculinity that is not a penetrated masculinity? Elijah, another gay participant says that “there is acceptance up until a point and even when the majority of my brothers may be accepting there are still members that need to be told be careful where you’re stepping.” These members remain a part of a larger gender and sexuality system that rejects homosexuality, and they often bring these beliefs into the organization because “they haven’t been exposed to this atmosphere where there are open gay people,” furthered Elijah.

As previously stated it is important to acknowledge that although gender identity and sexual identity are different, an individual’s identities are tied together and each one needs to be understood in relation to the other (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Thus, in order to understand why fraternities may refuse gay men a position in their brotherhood, an interrogation of each gay man’s gender expression must also be undertaken. A fraternity’s rejection of a gay man may be due to his refusal to adhere to a heteronormative deployment of gender. This also suggests, then, that gay men who exhibit more masculine tendencies will have an easier time joining an organization. Dominic, one of the gay participants articulates that if a potential new member “is flamboyantly gay they would be more liable to no vote that person. I sometimes wonder if I had

been more flamboyant, if my voice had been different, would I have gotten a bid?" This sentiment highlights this phenomenon by suggesting that for fraternity men a rejection of homosexuality is actually more about an individual's gender deployment and less about their sexuality.

### **Intragroup Networks: Sticking With What You Know**

A coping strategy employed by those whose gender expression and sexual orientation may be in contrast with societal norms is the creation and utilization of an intragroup social network for coping with what they may identify as heterosexism and homophobia (Carter, 2007). "It's like there is a clique within my fraternity of straight people and gay people, and okay, we will mingle a little bit but I have no desire to hang out with you, and be best friends with you. I don't have anything in common with you" says Clark as he describes the organizational culture of his fraternity. For Clark and the other gay participants this intragroup social network is what allows them to feel welcome within the fraternity. Clark is highlighting the role that his social network played in his sense of belonging within the organization. His choice to not hang out with his straight brothers, and rather focus on his relationships and time with his gay brothers, suggests that the gay network within his fraternity was a group in which he did not feel he needed to deploy a gender that could only be viewed as a strict rejection of a penetrated masculinity.

Clark later goes on to say that "I didn't really know how to talk to my straight brothers, there is no mutual connection there. I know that you're straight, you know that I am gay. We can force some small talk here, but I would rather just talk to my gay brothers instead." Why then, would these men want to be a part of an organization in which they don't speak with a large proportion of their brothers? Ian says that he remains a part of his fraternity because "even

though I don't talk to the straight guys in Greek Life very often, I still get a lot out of being Greek. I am able to network, to have a great time, and work on my leadership. I just had to find the other gay guys and it became easier to enjoy my time." Ian's sentiments show that being a member of a fraternity may have large benefits for gay men, even if they choose to find their "clique" or "niche" of other gay guys within their chapter, and not take part in the entire brotherhood.

All of the gay men in the study articulated that their sense of belonging within the chapter is contingent on there being other gay men within the fraternity. "I never felt out of place being gay because there were brothers that were gay, and then I never felt like I didn't belong," Tyler, a gay participant, comments. "Now, I wouldn't say that I don't feel like I belong, but I probably wouldn't have joined if the dynamics we have now were what we had when I joined." These responses suggest that these gay men utilize a space within their organizations for gay members to exhibit gendered behaviors that would socially be labeled as gay. This space allows for individuals to share common interests and common experiences based upon their shared identities (Tatum 1997; Carter 2007). What is important to point out is the pervasiveness of sexuality in these gay men's identity. For them, even though they have the majority of their identities in common with the entire brotherhood (i.e. gender identity, geographical location, fraternity affiliation, racial identity, etc.) their sexual orientation of being gay separates them so much in their own mind it is as if they set up voluntary segregation within their chapter. Being gay and being in a fraternity makes the experiences of these men unique from their straight brothers; this separate space gives these gay men a sense of belonging as they believe that they are benefitting from their involvement in the brotherhood, though, their belonging may be solely in relation to the presence of this intragroup counter-space. They set up these counter-spaces

with other gay men, because they share a gay identity, not recognizing that they share more identities with the majority of the people within their chapter. Ryan, a gay participant, argues that these spaces “were times where everyone was just super gay and super flamboyant and everyone loved it.” While this may mean that gay men who exhibit more feminine qualities will benefit from these spaces, it may also mean that gay men who exhibit more “straight,” or stereotypically masculine displays of gender, will not benefit as much. Still, for the gay men included in this study, these counter-spaces highlight a component of how their experiences in their fraternity impacts their gender deployment, but also highlights the complexity of hegemonic masculinity where the standards change even depending on the group they are with from their chapter. For one group within the chapter that may mean acting “super straight,” but for another it may mean acting “super gay.”

*“I feel like some of the straight brothers, especially those who are hyper-masculine, will look at a gay potential new member and just wonder whether he will fit in. Not saying they don’t like him and wouldn’t want to be friends with him but they just see a small number of gay students, who most are about to graduate. They wouldn’t want to bring someone into the organization that wouldn’t fit in.” - Oliver*

Oliver articulates that without this intragroup counter-space there might fail to be a spot for gay men within their fraternities. Both Tyler and Oliver pointed to recruitment as being an arena within the fraternity which can be influenced by the presence, or absence, of other gay members. Gay men may not feel that they have a place in the chapter if they do not see active gay members within a particular chapter. Gay men set up groups within their fraternities to meet their own needs of validation and support, but they may simultaneously be sending a message to potential new gay members that their fraternity is open and accepting of sexual minorities. This is

important because it suggests that, without a group of gay men within the fraternity, the likelihood that a gay man will feel welcome is low. The articulation from the gay male participants that they joined because of other gay men suggests that the acceptance and imagery of active gay men is needed to build an organizational culture that is accepting of homosexuality.

“One of the main things that I learned after joining were that there were so many other gay men of my same affiliation across the nation. We’re all friends on Facebook and there is a group of over 800 of us” says Ian. Daniel, another gay participant from a different affiliation also brings up social media websites that connect “past national presidents in that page. There’s anyone [from our national organization] that identifies as QBT (queer, bisexual, transgender) on that page to connect.” This bringing together of gay members adds to the intragroup networks that may be present within each of the participants’ individual chapters. It takes it from a local phenomenon and places it on a national scale, which can lead to members feeling acceptance from the national organization as a whole, and not just their chapter. Ryan says that “I felt like when I saw there was more than just me, I was more apt to engage with other chapters and feel like I was wanted for who I was not who they wanted me to be.” These national fraternity pages allow gay members to connect and feel welcome even when they may not feel that way within their own chapter. Ryan continues by saying that he “didn’t have to pretend to be straight like I sometimes do around my straight brothers. We share laughs and inappropriate gay humor online, and then we will bring it up at national conferences when all the gays get together to talk about our home chapters.” Even within these circles of gay brothers on a national level there is a heightened feeling of acceptance where these gay men don’t have to deploy a certain hegemonic masculinity, but instead are able to portray their gender identity as they please without being judged or excluded for being “too gay.” Though, it may also mean that gay men who exhibit

masculine behaviors might be policed within these groups for displaying gender that is “too straight.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study highlights some of the lived realities of gay men who are Greek, shedding light onto the experiences that make gay men’s time in fraternity and sorority life distinctive because their sexuality is not consistent with the system of hegemonic masculinity that promotes and rewards heterosexuality. Moving from their experiences, I have shown various ways in which their unique experiences lead them to deploy their gender in strategic ways so that they are able to benefit from being an affirmed and welcome member within their respective chapters. The results of this study should not be taken as generalizable, but as an addition to the literature that demonstrates possible experiences of gay men in fraternities as well as adding to discourses surrounding the ways in which individuals do gender and do sexuality in institutional settings.

The data of this study compliments prior research on gender and sexuality by suggesting that the social inhibitors that influence gender expression in individuals take on unique forms in institutional settings. This also adds to the current body of work on hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005; Yeung, Stombler, & Wharton, 2006) that suggests that hegemonic masculinity is socially constructed and has different meanings in different spaces. Hegemonic masculinity within a fraternity context is shaped by the individual members with each fraternity having the agency to adapt its own set of appropriate gender behavior guidelines. Although each fraternity within the IFC may have different rituals and different members, each fraternity tends to promote the becoming of an “improved man” in more or less words. These values influence the decisions the men in this study, straight or gay, make when deciding how to express their gender based on what becoming that “improved man” looks

like. For out gay men this may mean taking on leadership positions and overachieving (Case, 1996; Johnson, 1996) to ensure that they are valued members of the fraternity, but it may also mean that they begin to police each other's gender to meet the expected norms of the group.

The data drawn on here suggests that the presence of gay men within fraternities, whether in leadership positions or not, help other gay men feel they have a place within the chapter. These men set up intragroup identity-affirming counter-spaces (Tatum, 1997; Carter, 2007) in which they are able to share common interests and experiences based on their identities. If these counter-spaces do not exist, gay men may not want to join the fraternity, nor would the fraternity actively pursue gay men, because they may not "fit in" with the straight men in the chapter. It appears that heteronormative spaces, such as a fraternity, define who gets to "fit in" based on each individual's deployment of gender that is consistent, or not, with the chapter's gendered expectations. These counter-spaces allow gay members to affirm their identities within their national organizations, too, as many of the participants articulated the existence of a national gay network within their organization.

It is suggested by the data that gender coding and policing from others serve to be "gender enforcers" and teach everyone within each chapter what is acceptable gendered behavior (Tillapaugh, 2013). The enforcement of certain gendered behavior may lead gay individuals to restrict themselves; that is to say that gay members will confine themselves in the context of what is and what isn't appropriate gender behavior. This analysis indicates that some gay men will try to act "straight" to fulfill the expectations on gender set forth by their fraternities. By acting "straight" these gay men are "doing gender" and "doing sexuality" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in ways that are consistent with the heterosexist and homophobic organizational culture

their chapter promotes. At the core, they are really distancing themselves from being associated with a subordinate penetrated masculinity.

Fraternity and sorority life may add great positives to gay men's college experience and prepare them for the "real world," however, at the same time there are embedded inequities in fraternity and sorority life that promote certain expressions of gender and sexuality over others. The gay men included in this study are all out gay men, and don't aim to alter their sexuality. Instead, these men police their gender to meet the expectations set forth for them by their heteronormative fraternities. By adhering to the rules of hegemonic masculinity within their fraternities they are able to obtain the benefits that the other (non-gay) members are able to acquire. Though this is not any different than contexts outside of fraternity and sorority life, the often believed-to-be heterosexist and homophobic fraternity system may be an institution in which the need to fit the hegemonic expectations may be heightened. The fraternity system can easily influence the gender expression of gay men by shaping and redefining the rules of normative behavior. The system of hyper-masculinity may be one of inclusion, but may also be one of inclusion only on certain grounds, grounds in which one must adhere to the gendered expectations of the fraternity. This is for both straight and gay men, but due to sexuality being inextricably tied with gender (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), there is an added layer of consequence for gay men who maintain an identity that is in contrast to the heteronormative expectations of the fraternity.

Possible further research on gender in fraternity and sorority life may look at how this system operates for other councils such as the MGC or National PanHellenic Council, where racial and ethnic identities are often the center point of group collaboration and involvement. Is it that the gendered expectations are even greater for gay men of color in a hyper-masculine

institution? Possible further research could also include individuals from other sexualities, such as bisexual or pansexual, and compare their experiences to the experiences of gay and straight individuals within fraternity and sorority life. This would add to the canon of literature of how individuals of “subordinate” sexualities experience gender within a system. The lesbian and transgender fraternity and sorority life experience is also extremely under researched and needs more attention. What is apparent is that more research is needed to understand gender within the system of fraternity and sorority life and this study only adds to this body of knowledge, but does not end it. By studying these systems we are more able to address the issues that the students face within the system. There needs to be more work done to address how to make fraternity life more inclusive for all individuals, regardless of their sexuality and their gender identity and expression so students do not feel they need to conceal or alter their gender behavior to feel like valued members of their organization.

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