Body Image in Sorority Women and Risky Health Behaviors

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Abstract:

Sorority women were surveyed to examine body image issues and the health behaviors that result from these issues. The literature reviewed in this paper focused on how sororities create these body image disorders and how exercise is affected by these thoughts. We predicted, when studying Penn State Panhellenic women, the more inaccurate ones body image views are, the more likely they will be to participate in unhealthy behaviors. The survey showed a majority of the women have negative images of their body and feel like they need to lose weight. They are not exercising in a healthy manner and are obsessed with obtaining the “ideal body”. Other team members looked at the eating habits this issue creates and the mental impact. This assignment is to fulfill short paper 3.

Disclaimer: The purpose of the writing is to fulfill course requirements for BBH 411W and to stand as a personal writing sample, but the findings should not be treated as generalizable research.
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Introduction:
There is no doubt that the “ideal body” is everywhere girls look today. Turn on the TV or look at any social media and women are being praised for being skinny and shamed for having no thigh gap. A study at Arizona State University found that exposure to media portraying the “ideal body” as thin leads to promotion and maintenance of eating disorders and other body image behaviors. When a young woman enters college it is a major adjustment in one’s life. Finding oneself can be

1 Stice, Eric, and Heather Shaw. "Adverse Effects of the Media Portrayed Thin-Ideal on Women and
challenging with the amount of pressure that surrounds each woman. Part of trying to adjust could include joining a sorority, which can have its pros and cons. A article that was published in the New York Times stated that women who are in coming freshman, interested in joining a sorority spend the summer leading up to freshman year dieting and working out an unhealthy amounts in the hopes of meeting the “standards” for Greek life.” This demonstrates the pressure that girls feel even before they join a sorority.

Major concerns accompany physical health issues. Staying active is important to an individual’s mental, emotional, and physical well being but it is not healthy to exercise strictly in hopes of “looking better.” Running on an elliptical for an hour, five days a week is not healthy if it is not balanced with other healthy habits. Those who are working-out to stay healthy know about the importance of a healthy diet, hydration, balanced exercise and weight training, and they know not to over exert the body. Girls who are doing physical activity for body image tend to focus on a flat stomach and skinny thighs. They will over do cardio, do some squats and abdominal exercises and call it a day. These girls tend to look for results in a very short period of time versus slow and steady results that will last longer.

Recently there seems to be a new trending norm, girls have been looking for instant results instead of healthy life-style changes. These behaviors seem to be causing more harm than good to their bodies. Another concern with sorority girls and their “need” for exercise is the mental damage it does to them. These young women end up feeling like they are neither good enough nor pretty enough to be with their peers. Mental disease is a serious issue in today’s society. Friends, family, responsible adults, and health professionals need to closely monitor young women for signs of depression and/or anxiety.

Go to any gym on the Penn State campus and you will see flocks of girls in matching shirts with letters on them. Sororities give girls the opportunity to make life long friends, but along with these friendships come new peer pressures. Susan Paxton was intrigued by this idea and studied how friendship cliques affect body image issues and the extreme weight loss behaviors that usually follow. She found that girls were extremely affected by what their friends thought and as a result this usually led to image concerns and dangerous eating behaviors. (Paxton) Some sororities even hold their girls to unattainable standards; girls can only wear certain clothes or do their hair a certain way if they want to be seen in public representing their sorority. Research confirmed that sororities tend to create negative weight-related behaviors in members.

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A sorority brings hundreds of girls with all different personalities, and physical features together. The comparisons begin almost immediately. Fitzsimmons examined social comparisons and disordered eating thoughts, urges, and behaviors in college women. It was found people that compare their bodies tend to usually also have negative thoughts about eating and exercising. Arthur performed a study and found that many girls believe that the perfect “sorority girl” is thin, tan, well dressed and usually blonde. Girls who feel that they don’t meet these guidelines may take drastic measures to achieve them. This drive for thinness leads these women to participate in unhealthy weight control techniques in order to fulfill an impractical image.

Many think exercise is good and while this is true exercise is only healthy when it is being done correctly. Too little or too much can cause detrimental health issues. A study by Latimir focuses on college students who are not over-weight yet trying to lose weight as well as how Greek life plays an important role. The study looked at girls who were underweight or a normal weight for their height and were still attempting to lose weight. The subjects who participated in this study were significantly more likely to be in a sorority, be underweight, and partake in unhealthy behaviors like exercise and/or diet to lose weight. To back up Latimir’s findings Schulken and colleagues surveyed sorority women to examine body perceptions, attitudes and behaviors about weight, they found sorority women tend to have a fear of gaining weight, poorer body image and obsess more over weight and dieting than college women in other studies.

Being in a sorority means weekends are based around social activities with fraternities. Buscemi looked at the relationship between exercising and drinking among college students. Alcohol is extremely prevalent in Greek life and also a huge factor of weight gain. There was a positive correlation that has been found among the drinking habits of college students and their physical activity. Although all these studies were done differently and focused on different aspect of college women they all did provide great insight into different struggles.

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There is a large gap when it comes to exercise issues and sorority girls, many researchers focus mainly on eating disorders. This gap will allow us to dive into exercise issues where there is much more research to be found. The survey created will look into determining whether girls feel pressure to achieve a “perfect image” and their opinion of why girls in their sorority, including themselves, exercise. Could it be for health reasons, mental or emotional health, or strictly to achieve the goal of “fitting in” and being “perfect”?

References


