

Exploring the Relationship between Body Image and Alcohol Consumption among Sorority Members and Non-Members

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Abstract

Around 60% of college students report consuming alcohol in a given month³. In addition, many college women experience poor body image and body dissatisfaction⁶. Negative body image has been associated with health-compromising behaviors such as increased alcohol consumption. Further, women who have a more positive body image tend to not drink as heavily as those with poor body image⁸. Whereas negative body image is an issue faced by college women in general, it is especially prevalent among women who participate in Greek life. One month after joining a sorority, women's incidence of body shaming increased compared to those who did not join Greek life¹¹. However, research has not yet examined the correlation between body image satisfaction and rate of alcohol consumption among women who participate in a social Greek organization compared to those who do not. To explore this relationship, an online survey was conducted at a medium-sized university in the Midwest. The survey included the Body Shape Questionnaire, a 34-item measure of body shape preoccupation, as well as questions about alcohol consumption. Of the 337 female participants, 128 (38.2%) were in a social sorority and 207 (57.6%) were unaffiliated. Results suggest alcohol consumption was a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction for both Greeks and non-Greek women. However, being in a sorority was not a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of encouraging positive body image as an intervention for poor health behaviors such as excess drinking.

Keywords: Body Image, Alcohol, Sorority

1. Introduction

Sixty percent of college-age students report consuming alcohol in a given month³. Additionally, high-risk drinking behaviors such as bingeing (4 drinks for women and 5 for men) are prevalent among college students¹⁴. Certain populations among college students report higher alcohol consumption than others. For example, numerous studies have evaluated the prevalence of alcohol consumption among college students who participate in Greek sororities and fraternities. Binge drinking, for example, is a behavior commonly associated with students who are members of Greek life and extreme drinking behaviors (at least ten drinks for men and at least eight for women) are more strongly associated with Greek members than non-members¹⁵. Further, a 2012 survey of 3406 Greek life members found that 97% consumed alcohol and 86% participated in binge drinking⁹. As a result, it is evident that drinking is a behavior central to Greek life involvement.

Prior research has investigated motivations for alcohol consumption among college students. Social and enhancement motives are the most common among college-age drinkers. Social motives relate to social facilitation while enhancement motives are associated with increasing fun and pleasure. Beyond social and enhancement motives, some college students may be motivated to drink to reduce the negative effects of personal issues¹⁵. One such personal issue that is associated with alcohol consumption is poor body image and body dissatisfaction. Specifically among

women, poor body image is associated with a greater risk for increased alcohol consumption⁸. This finding is significant considering the prevalence of body image dissatisfaction on college campuses⁷.

Poor body image is associated with groups that emphasize body shape and thinness, from athletic teams to social sororities. In particular, social sororities are perceived to be preoccupied with body image, exercise, and dieting. Indeed, past research has found that body dissatisfaction, idealization of thinness, and distorted perception of body size are more prevalent among sorority members than non-members¹². Additionally, college women who participate in sorority recruitment events report more negative feelings towards their bodies one month after joining Greek life, compared to women who do not participate in these recruitment events¹¹. Poor body image is evidently an issue affecting sorority women both during the recruitment process as well as during the regular membership period. Considering the high rates of drinking among college women prevalence of body dissatisfaction (specifically among sorority women), poor body image may be a predictive factor for alcohol consumption for college women and for sorority women in particular.

Past research has not investigated a link between negative body image and alcohol consumption among women who participate in sororities compared to those who do not. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between body dissatisfaction and alcohol consumption among sorority members and non-members.

Given that sorority affiliation is associated with both increased alcohol consumption and body dissatisfaction compared to non-sorority women, poor body image may serve as a motivator for drinking among sorority members. The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between poor body image and alcohol consumption among sorority members and non-members. Because sorority membership is associated with poor body image and high alcohol consumption (compared to non-members), it was hypothesized that body image dissatisfaction would predict greater alcohol consumption in sorority members compared to non-members.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled at a mid-size Midwestern university. Of the 454 participants, 337 (74.2%) were female. The female participants' mean age was 20.49 (SD 1.3) years. Female year-level distribution was 11.9% freshmen, 11.9% sophomores, 26.1% juniors, 42.4% seniors, 5% fifth-year undergraduates, and 1.8% graduate students. The racial background of female participants was 88.1% White, 2.4% Black or African American, 3.6% Asian or Asian American, 2.7% American Indian, and 3.2% mixed race. 193 female participants reported not being in a social sorority (57.6%). 128 (38.2%) reported sorority membership and 14 (4.2%) indicated they planned to join one in the future.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1 *body shape questionnaire*

The Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) is a 34-item measure used to assess body shape preoccupation and dissatisfaction. Participants answered questions about how they felt about their body over the previous four weeks, such as "Has feeling bored made you brood about your weight?" and "Have you worried about your thighs spreading out when you sit down?"⁵ Items were answered on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (always). The BSQ score is the total of all responses across the 34 questions. The lowest possible score is 34 (low body dissatisfaction) and the highest is 204 (high body dissatisfaction).

2.2.2 *alcohol*

Participants were also asked questions related to frequency of alcohol consumption, quantity of drinks in one drinking episode, and peak number of drinks. Frequency of alcohol consumption was measured by asking, "In a typical week, on how many days did you have at least one drink containing alcohol?" Quantity of drinks was measured with the question "How many drinks do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?" Peak drinking was assessed by asking, "During the last 30 days, what is the highest number of drinks that you consumed on any one occasion?" Answers were reported as continuous variables.

2.3 Procedures

Data were collected from students at mid-sized Midwestern university. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Students were emailed a link to an online survey in which they self-reported answers. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidential nature of the data. Participants were invited to enter a drawing for one of four fifty-dollar gift cards.

3. Results

Most female participants reported having consumed alcohol before (85.8%), while 33 participants (9.8%) had never consumed alcohol. Table 1 shows the mean values for frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption, peak number of drinks, and Body Shape Questionnaire scores for sorority members and non-members.

Table 1. Drinking characteristics and BSQ results among sorority members and non-members.

Variable	Sorority members (<i>N</i> =128; 38.2%)	Non-members (<i>N</i> =207; 61.8%)
Alcohol consumption		
Frequency (days per week)	2.19 (<i>SD</i> =1.14)	1.51 (<i>SD</i> =1.16)
Quantity (drinks per drinking episode)	4.48 (<i>SD</i> =2.43)	3.21 (<i>SD</i> =2.57)
Peak consumption (highest number of drinks in one drinking episode)	7.91 (<i>SD</i> =9.32)	5.38 (<i>SD</i> =4.18)
Body Shape Questionnaire	92.78 (<i>SD</i> =33.44)	89.41 (<i>SD</i> =37.60)

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to assess the relationship between sorority members' and non-members' alcohol consumption and BSQ scores. There was a significant difference in the number of days per week sorority members consumed alcohol compared to non-members ($t(305)=-5.04, p<0.01$) such that sorority members consumed alcohol more frequently than non-members. A significant difference was also found for number of drinks consumed on a typical drinking day ($t(305)=-4.34, p<0.01$) such that sorority women consumed more alcohol on a typical drinking day compared to non-members. Finally, sorority members consumed a significantly higher number of drinks in the past thirty days when compared to non-members ($t(304)=-3.23, p<0.01$). An independent sample *t*-test revealed no significant difference between the BSQ results among members and non-members ($t(211)=-0.65, p=0.52$).

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between body dissatisfaction and alcohol consumption and body dissatisfaction and sorority membership. There was a significant positive relationship between body dissatisfaction and frequency of alcohol consumption ($r=0.204, p<0.01$). A significant positive correlation was also found between sorority membership and frequency of alcohol consumption ($r=0.277, p<0.01$). No significant correlation was found between body dissatisfaction and sorority membership, however ($r=0.045, p=0.518$).

4. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between body dissatisfaction and alcohol consumption among sorority members and non-members. Consistent with previous findings, the results of the present study suggest body dissatisfaction was a significant predictor of alcohol consumption for both sorority members and non-members. Moreover, sorority membership was a significant predictor of alcohol consumption. Sorority membership, however, was not a significant predictor of body image dissatisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis that body dissatisfaction is a greater predictor of alcohol consumption among sorority members than among non-members could not be supported. Although sorority members do tend to drink more than non-members, this difference in alcohol consumption could not be associated with poor body image.

The finding that sorority members drink more than non-members is not surprising given that prior research has shown similar trends¹⁵. Similarly, the association between poor body image and alcohol consumption is consistent with previous findings⁸. What is most interesting about these results is that body dissatisfaction was not correlated with sorority membership and that there was no difference in body dissatisfaction among sorority members compared to non-members, despite prior studies' findings that sorority women tend to be more preoccupied with weight and body image than their peers who are not in sororities¹².

One explanation for this finding could be in the way sorority women share and receive messages about outward appearance. A previous study that assessed communication among sorority women found that the majority of messages related to appearance (e.g., "I like the color of your hair," "Have you lost weight?," and "You are so thin and pretty") were perceived as positive and favorably impacted the receiver of the message. Moreover, these messages boosted confidence and self-esteem¹⁰. Despite the messages' emphasis on outward appearance, they are generally positive, suggesting sorority membership may actually provide an environment that fosters positive body image and protects against body dissatisfaction. While sorority women have been found to experience higher levels of body preoccupation and body shame, especially during and after the member recruitment process, perhaps these positive messages help to mitigate those concerns. Non-sorority women may not belong to a large network of women from which to receive confirming messages about their outward appearance. On the other hand, they also are not exposed to the thin ideal promoted by sororities. These competing messages and cultural conditions might negate each other, explaining why there was no difference in body image dissatisfaction among sorority members and non-members.

Another reason why body image may not have been a significant predictor of alcohol consumption among sorority members is the normalcy of heavy drinking in sororities. Given the social aspect of sorority life, it may be that sororities are more likely to emphasize social and enhancement motives for drinking rather than body image-related motives⁴. Moreover, drinking is a practice modeled even by the leaders of sororities, who have been shown to engage in risky drinking as often as non-leaders². Thus, poor body image may have less of an influence on sorority members' alcohol consumption when compared to the strong social promotion of drinking in these groups.

Additionally, sorority membership may not have been a predictive factor for poor body image due to the nature of the sorority system at the university where this study took place. One study found that the longer a sorority member lived in her chapter's house, the greater the risk for increased body dissatisfaction and preoccupation¹. At the university where the present study was conducted, sorority women live with their pledge class (the group of women who all joined in the same year) for only one year. This living situation may result in less time spent with sorority sisters, thus decreasing the risk for body dissatisfaction.

Several study limitations should be accounted for when interpreting the results. The sample population was primarily white, lacking racial and ethnic diversity. Previous research assessing alcohol consumption among college students of various races found that drinking was most prevalent among white students¹³. As a result, further research should be conducted to determine how the results might apply to more racially and ethnically diverse populations. Moreover, the sample population was mostly junior and senior students. While prior research has shown how the sorority recruitment process can be detrimental to body image, perhaps this increase in self-body shaming and body dissatisfaction decreases by the later years of college and sorority involvement when members are removed from the recruitment process.

Future research should assess how body image preoccupation and body dissatisfaction changes throughout the college years or throughout sorority membership. Another possible limitation is the uneven distribution of sorority members and nonmembers. Finally, due to the online nature of the study, the data were self-reported and sampling was not random. As a result, the sample population may not have been representative of the greater student population.

5. Conclusion

Despite limitations of this study, this research contributes to the literature on alcohol consumption, body image, and sorority culture by further highlighting differences in drinking behaviors among sorority members and non-members and the association between alcohol consumption and body dissatisfaction. Although sorority members and non-members were not found to have any significant difference in body dissatisfaction, the demographics of the sample population (older, predominantly white students) suggests the need for further research with a more diverse sample. Given the high prevalence of alcohol consumption among sorority members, findings of this study emphasize the importance of reducing risky drinking in this population. More specifically, the association between poor body image and alcohol consumption demonstrate the importance of programming that fosters positive body image among college

women as a prevention method for excess alcohol consumption; future research and programming should involve the implementation of body positivity education as a means for reducing risky drinking among all college women.

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7. References

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