

# Here's Looking at You: Self-Objectification, Body Image Disturbance, and Sorority Rush

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**Abstract** This study investigated the impact of sorority rush on self-objectification and body image disturbance. First-year undergraduate women either participating ( $n=68$ ) or not participating ( $n=59$ ) in sorority rush at a U.S. Midwestern university completed online surveys at four time points. It was predicted that rush participation would lead to increases in self-objectification, which in turn would lead to increases in body shame and eating disordered behavior and attitudes. Results supported predictions based on objectification theory at a single time point, but not longitudinally. Rush participants evidenced higher levels of self-objectification and eating disordered behavior at all time points. Body mass index predicted dropping out of the rush process and was negatively correlated with satisfaction with the rush process.

**Keywords** Body shame · Objectification theory · Sexual objectification · Sororities · Eating disorders

## Introduction

It is the worst week many freshman girls experience...It was awkward, ego-crushing, and brought us to the depths of shallowness...The two minute convos [conversations] are just a chance for as many girls [as possible] to judge how pretty you are; that's the only thing they could determine in such a short amount of time.

– Sorority rush participant, from an open-ended survey question asking for general reflections on the rush process.

In the early months of 2007, a flurry of activity at the DePauw University chapter of Delta Zeta Sorority drew national attention to the commonly held stereotype that sororities are overly-focused on women's physical appearance. In response to dwindling membership and concerns over the chapter's reputation, officers from Delta Zeta's national headquarters arrived on campus, interviewed all current members of the DePauw chapter, and asked 23 of the 35 members to vacate the sorority and no longer be active members (Dillon 2007). The 23 women asked to leave included every overweight member of the sorority; those allowed to stay were described as the thinnest and most conventionally attractive. The New York Times quoted one former member as saying, "Virtually everyone who didn't fit a certain sorority member archetype was told to leave" (Dillon 2007, para. 4).

The present study was conceptualized as an applied test of Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, with the process of sorority rush acting as real-life objectifying context. Objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) suggests that frequent objectifying

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