

The Barriers to Black Unity: An Examination of the Relationship Between The National  
Pan-Hellenic Council and the Black Community

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts

by

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Spring Semester 2024  
George Mason University  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the betterment of the Black community, for whom I hold so dear to my heart. Being a part of this community has brought me so much joy, and so much pain at the same time, and through my work, I wish to heal all the pain within my community.

I dedicate this work to my five beautiful, younger siblings and my wonderful parents who all hold a very special place in my heart. Everything I do, I do for them.

I dedicate this work to my love, Terence Hui, and my best friend, Jordan Lear, who helped heal all the pain I once felt and gave me all the courage I needed to write this thesis.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Craig for his continued patience and encouragement throughout my entire Master's program and this thesis. I give special thanks to Dr. Nicotera for never giving up on me and for continuously pushing me past my limits. I wish to thank Dr. Mhonde for being a gentle, kind soul and taking me under her wing. All three of your teachings have not only helped me become a better student but also become a better, more thoughtful person. You have all helped me hone in my passions and taught me how to put my thoughts to paper.

Finally, I thank God for giving me life and staying by my side no matter what. Without God, this thesis would not be complete.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Abbreviations and Symbols.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Background of the NPHC .....	1
Black Identity .....	2
Black Unity .....	3
Study Issue and Purpose .....	4
Chapter Two: Review of Literature .....	6
Prior Research.....	6
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Social Identity Theory.....	7
Intersectionality.....	9
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	11
Data Collection .....	11
Data Content .....	12
Analytic Approach .....	12
Chapter Four: Research Findings.....	13
Theme 1: Clashing Identities .....	13
Theme 2: Neither By Any Other Oath .....	15
Theme 3: Rejection .....	19
Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, Implications, Future Research .....	23
Discussion.....	23
Conclusions.....	27
Implications.....	28
Future Research .....	29
References.....	30

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

National Pan-Hellenic Council.....	NPHC
Black Greek Letter Organization.....	BGLO
Divine Nine.....	D9
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. ....	AΦA
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. ....	AKA
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.....	KAΨ
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. ....	ΩΨΦ
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.....	ΔΣΘ
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.....	ΦΒΣ
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.....	ZΦΒ
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.....	ΣΓΡ
Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. ....	ΙΦΘ
God Damned Individual.....	GDI

## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE BARRIERS TO BLACK UNITY: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATIONAL PAN-HELLENIC COUNCIL AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY**

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The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was created to uplift the Black community and create a space in which Black people could thrive and succeed, at the same time the NPHC has been the dividing factor in the Black community. This study aims to explore the possible tensions between the NPHC and the broader Black community. This study begins by delving into the rich history behind the NPHC, Black Unity, and Black identity. The findings from the research present three themes: Clashing Identities, Neither by Any Other Oath, and Rejection. Concluding the research, I delve into a discussion around these themes and what these tensions mean for the Black community. Future research can expand upon the LGBTQ+ community and sorority life, as well as bring in more perspectives from current NPHC members themselves.

Keywords: NPHC, Divine 9, Intersectionality, Social Identity, Black Unity, Black Community

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE NPHC**

The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) is composed of nine Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs); Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc (National PanHellenic Council). These nine organizations, also commonly referred to as the Divine Nine (D9), began in 1906 with Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. at Cornell University and ended with Iota Phi Theta in 1963 at Morgan State College (National PanHellenic Council).

The Jim Crow era sparked the beginning of the creation of the NPHC in the late 1800s when segregation was first put into place to create an even bigger divide between Black and White people (Ross, 2001). Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., first created their organization with a group of Black students who were experiencing the full effects of the Jim Crow laws, and together the last Black students started a “study and support group” (Ross, 2001). The NPHC created their organizations on college campuses to have a “safe space” where people with aligned goals and ideas could come together (National PanHellenic Council). Through these organizations, they have created social programs to



aid the needs of those in the Black community and other suffering communities (National PanHellenic Council). The NPHC groups work separately and collectively to create positive influence throughout not only Black communities but all communities.

### **BLACK IDENTITY**

What does it mean to identify as Black? During years of intense oppression and racism, identifying as Black was seen negatively in predominately White social settings. At times, being Black meant that you were composed of believed stereotypes and stigmas. In a literature review conducted by Keyiona Ritchey, she mentioned how:

They [PWIs] continue to operate under the melting pot theory, where everyone is expected to fit into the mainstream White middle-class value structure. This creates barriers and a climate that is not conducive for students whose identities fall outside of being White and middle class (2014).

With this in mind, it is understandable that Black students may flock together and create groups where they feel they identify best. Therein, a collective identity is created, and organizations like the NPHC are instrumental in the development of a collective identity. Fominaya stated that “collective identity formation is important because it plays a crucial role in sustaining movements over time,” (2010, p. 378). These organizations epitomize collective identity as having a collective identity was pertinent to Black movements across college campuses and the nation. However, when those movements began to change and become intersectional, that collective mindset was set in stone and hardly evolved. Abrams and Hogg reflected on collective identity formation saying, “crowd behavior is often a manifestation of collective protest or collective identity

expression, and is often closely tied to the pursuit of social change” (2001, p. 12).

However, there comes a point in time when crowd behavior can be toxic, especially with organizations that began super early and hold on to a lot of those collective ideals.

“Differences in culture (values and beliefs), power inequalities, resource distribution, a lack of communication and a sense of collective identity all contribute to the emergence of conflict,” (Coy & Woehrle, 2000, p. 2). With a collective identity comes and collective mindset, but conflict comes into play when people within a group begin to prioritize their values and beliefs over the group, and division happens when those power inequalities rise and the group values itself higher than other out-groups.

### **BLACK UNITY**

Black unity, or Black solidarity, has always been seen as one of the most necessary components of Black Liberation and the driving force for social change (Shelby, 2005). In a study conducted by William Hoston, he sought to explore Black solidarity and examine whether Black solidarity was influenced by racial contexts (2009).

In his study, he noted to define Black Solidarity:

The simplest expression of racial feeling that can be called a form of Black nationalism is racial solidarity. It generally has no ideological or programmatic implications beyond the desire that Black people organize themselves on the basis of their common color and oppressed condition to move in some ways to alleviate their condition. (Bracey, Meier, and Rudwich, 1970, p. xxvi)

The study found that in racial contexts in which people were predominantly White, Black solidarity was strongest (Houston, 2009). Houston’s findings can be applied

to Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), where Black organizations are held to a higher standard for their need to maintain culture and give space to those who need it than Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); hence the need and creation of the NPHC. Although Black unity is meant to be a good notion that drives Black people together for the greater good, intergroups within the Black community can be seen as a means of driving the Black community apart due to their differences and beliefs.

### **STUDY ISSUE AND PURPOSE**

Issues like colorism are one factor that has caused people to clash and have prevented people from wanting to join, especially if they feel that they don't fit the criteria of the organization (Bryant, 2013, p. 136). At the same time, there are also stigmas attached to each of the organizations that give hesitancy to those who intend to join (Bryant, 2013, p. 136). In addition, greek lettered organizations refer to those who aren't a part of the organizations as God Damn Independents (GDI) (Ray & Rosow, 2010, p. 544). This creates a hierarchy where those who are in organizations hold a higher social status and are afforded more opportunities than those outside of the organizations. I want to explore the relationship between the Divine Nine and the Black community to better understand how both sides perceive each other. Furthermore, this study explored the perceived barriers between the membership of the Divine Nine and non-Black greeks. Studying these issues and tension would help better understand the way these communities approach each other and help build the unity that is so desperately needed in the communities. This study examines the issues people have with belonging to, or

pursuing membership in, one of the NPHC organizations and helping them to bring to light and address those issues. The research question guiding this study is

*RQ1 How do individuals that have either pursued membership or belonged to an NPHC organization demonstrate tensions between the NPHC and the Black community?*

*RQ1a: How do the same individuals implicate the impact of tensions on Black Unity?*

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

When reviewing the literature, it became apparent there is an opportunity for a more in-depth exploration of the NPHC regarding the internal challenges or the social challenges that may arise from these groups. Work that has explored the NPHC thus far has resulted in topics like Hazing, the need for NPHC organizations on PWIs, or historical pieces that discussed the background of the NPHC and every group within it. This research seeks to better understand spaces that have been scarcely examined in academia in the relationship that NPHC organizations have in various aspects of Black identity and Black Unity.

### **PRIOR RESEARCH**

Tindal et al. (2011) explored the perceptions and stereotypes that occur within the NPHC sororities through their exploration of colorism, beauty, femininity, and stereotypes and the influences these aspects have had on their experiences being a part of the sorority in undergraduate chapters and graduate chapters. Tindall et al. conducted interviews with 18 women across all four of the NPHC sororities using a comparative method and coding strategy to analyze the data. Dividing the data into four sections for each sorority, the group found significant issues surrounding colorism, fatphobia, and other stereotypes. An interesting aspect of the researchers recognized the apprehension of greek members concerns of the nature of the work. The article alludes to a fraternity member who mentioned how this research was “perpetuat[ing] the ugliness within NPHC organizations” (Tindall et al. 2011). This is the reason why these stereotypes are never

truly addressed because everyone wants to push these issues away and keep them secretive. This study addresses important issues that happen within these organizations but also adds to my study because I believe these issues prevent Black unity within and outside these organizations.

Bryant, 2013, explored the impact of colorism within the NPHC groups by conducting interviews with members of the NPHC fraternities and sororities and found that although they knew colorism was a huge issue within the Black community, it was also considered a joke. He mentioned how the participant's friends and family would always joke about colorism, and how accepted it was amongst them (Bryant, 2013, p. 116). Colorism has been a constant dividing factor in the Black community through normalized beauty standards that imply having a lighter skin tone is more attractive than a darker skin tone (Bryant, 2013). This normalized standard creates a hierarchy and therein a separation between people with the same identity.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research seeks to use Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality to better understand and conceptualize the findings in this study.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Among the theories Bryant (2013) explored Social Identity Theory was most applicable to this study's objectives. Social Identity theory was first developed by Henri Tajfe in the 1970s, and he described it as “[an] individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Tajfel focused on intergroup relations when

examining this theory and focusing on self-identity, or self-concept, and comparing one's identity to that of another group. Social Identity Theory requires that one not look through the lens of a person within a social group, but rather at how that social identity impacts their lives, the lives around them, and the possible conflict with another identity they may hold. Another aspect of this theory is the distinction between the in-group (group individual identifies with) and the out-group (group individual does not identify with). People within the in-group tend to "make comparisons between their own group and an out-group they are concerned to ensure that their own group is positively distinctive—clearly differentiated from and more favorably evaluated than relevant out-groups" (McKeown et al., 2016, p. 7). Individuals within the NPHC must represent and withhold the organization's image or face being outed. Others seeking to join must be willing to change their mindset or else face never joining the in-group. So, everyone must have a collective mindset and understanding in order to maintain their group perception.

This is extremely important when examining the forthcoming research because it will produce a lens through which we can examine not only the person and the impact of their identity, but it allows for examination of communities and how they interact with each other, especially depending on their position, in-group or out-group. In this study, the NPHC will be looked at as the in-group while the rest of the Black community will be examined as the out-group. This theoretical framework will inform my research as I delve deeper into the dynamics of the relationship between the NPHC and the broader Black community.

## **Intersectionality**

Hancock (2013) best described intersectionality as “a justice oriented analytic framework for examining sociopolitical problems that emerge from race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other sociopolitical fissures as interlocking, process-driven categories of difference”. The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by “women of color scholar-activists working in liberation-focused social movements and was subsequently incorporated into the academy” (AlFaham et al., 2019, p. 248).

Dhamoon (2011, p.240), highlighted four categories in which intersectionality could be studied being “identities of marked individuals, categories of difference, processes of differentiation, and systems of domination”. Kimberle Crenshaw heavily examined intersectionality from multiple perspectives like Black women and feminism saying “because of their intersectional identity of as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized in both” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 4). Her study of intersectionality highlights issues Black women face due to their gender and race further showing that intersectionality can hold multiple identities that clash due to factors like gender and race that can’t be changed. Patricia Collins expanded on intersectionality bringing religion to the mix stating,

while there is a tendency in current research to either focus on religion and race, or religion, gender and sexuality, intersectionality might benefit the sociology of religion by giving attention to the various ways in which religion is linked to a wider set of dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality,



politics, and nation, and the ways in which these dimensions intersect (2021, p. 20).

Religion guides a person's life and their beliefs, so having an identity that clashes with their religion causes tension within one's self pushing them to choose one or the other. This study could examine the findings through the lens of these categories, especially the systems of domination and identities like religion.

Tying this in with Social Identity Theory and focusing on those systems of dominance, these theoretical frameworks play hand in hand to show how one can be associated with two or more identities, but with systems of domination in play, tension can form between those identities. This framework guides my research as the Black community is filled with a multitude of identities that play off each other and play against each other, but a deeper understanding of intersectionality will help to go in depth and conceptualize data from this perspective.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

When exploring the research question, *How do individuals that have either pursued membership or belonged to an NPHC organization demonstrate tensions between the Divine Nine and the Black community?*, it was determined that using a narrative approach would allow for a unique perspective bringing in personal experiences and finding commonalities between those experiences. Due to the vast database YouTube has, and its “inter-generational audiences”, I believe that using YouTube for a media content analysis provides extensive data ranging decades with a multitude of experience-based perspectives relating to the topic (Thelwall, 2018, p. 2).

### DATA COLLECTION

Using purposive sampling, after cutting through a lot of the general informational videos about the NPHC, a multitude of videos aligning with my topic were identified (Nematy et al., 2023). Beginning with just a general search of “NPHC” AND “D9”, there were a multitude of general educational videos, strolling videos and the “do’s and don’ts” of greek life. At the same time, there were a significant number of negative videos that discussed their personal experiences with hazing, going through the process to join, and denouncements. Using some of the terminology from the video titles, I developed a set of terms to collect data. The search terms used were “NPHC experience”, “D9 experience”, “Denouncing NPHC”, “D9 Hazing”, “Pledging D9”, “D9 culture”, “Joining a D9 sorority” and “Joining a D9 fraternity”. Through these search terms, I collected data from 10 YouTube videos.

## **DATA CONTENT**

The selected videos were chosen because they gave a full story of their experiences, and despite their negative experiences, they didn't deter people from joining in their videos. They ranged in years from 2017 to 2023 and were anywhere from six minutes to forty-six minutes and came from multiple experiences. While all of the videos revolved around negative experiences with the NPHC they were unique and categorized based on their respective sentiments towards the individual and collective bodies of the NPHC: a) two videos focused on their experiences going through the process to join the respective organization, b) two videos were centered on their denouncement from their sororities due to negative experiences, c) three videos revolved around denouncing the organization for religious reasons, and d) the last three videos discussed experiences around homophobia within the NPHC. Some of the videos were posted years after being a member of their respective organization or after going through the process to join.

## **ANALYTIC APPROACH**

Using the full coding approach from Braun and Clarke, I coded all data collected from the videos (2013). The first step of the process involved watching all of the videos and taking notes. In the next step of the process, I developed a set of codes from each video and developed a codebook. From there, I delved deeper into the codes to consolidate the list by merging codes into their perspective categories. Analyzing the categories through an intersectional lens and from a social identity perspective, I was able to create three central themes from the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three themes emerged through examination of the videos: a) Clashing Identities, b) Neither by Any Other Oath, and c) Rejection. All three themes reflected the common attitudes and common perspectives expressed in the videos based on individual experiences.

### **THEME 1: CLASHING IDENTITIES**

The first theme demonstrated a clashing of identities for the individuals posting the videos and was presented in a couple of different ways. The first demonstration of the theme was starkly present through the stories of those who had experiences around being gay and had either 1) gone through the process to join but ended up not joining or 2) had joined an NPHC organization.

Jay Theo, a man who identifies as gay, discussed his process of attempting to join an NPHC fraternity and expressed his desire to relate to men in a brotherly or friendly way without his sexual orientation coming between that.

Also, as a Black gay man, I feel it also could be a way where I could connect with other Black men...but I still always felt like this disconnect with being cool with Black men and I just wanted it to, I wanted to build a friendship and a brotherhood with Black men [that] didn't have to deal with me being gay or something romantic behind it. (2023)

Jay felt he could fulfill his desire for brotherhood and community within the Black fraternal groups of the NPHC. Throughout the beginning phases of the process to join the

fraternity on his campus, Jay was approached by one of his friends who also was seeking to join the same fraternity,

...he's like well Jay, they have had a line, you aren't on that line. They said that they dropped you and others on the line because you were an F word. Because I was gay, they dropped me and he said they made it very known that they're not having any F words on this line... (2023)

Joshua had a similar experience to joining an undisclosed NPHC fraternity, except he had precautions concerning him identifying as gay and being greek. He explained his hesitancy when deciding to attend an interest meeting: “The reason I was scared to go was because I felt like...they would like not like want me to join the fraternity because of my sexuality” (LifeofJoshua, 2018). Like Jay, Joshua was also refused acceptance into the fraternity because he identified as gay, and he expressed how this was an eye-opening experience to the reality of being gay and seeking to join an NPHC fraternity. Not being accepted into an organization simply due to a person’s sexual orientation created division, and over time that only grows,

...I never had something where I couldn't get it because I'm gay...That opened my eyes because I thought because I'm not flamboyant, like oh they might accept me...But it just goes to show like it doesn't matter like what you are like, people really are that ignorant... (LifeofJoshua, 2018)

The last person within this theme, George, pledged an NPHC fraternity, but did not openly identify himself as gay until sometime after pledging. He discussed the internal and external battles he persevered through and continues to create more inclusivity within

Black greek life, “I joined the org back in 2006. And since that time I’ve had my struggles being who I am and also being a member of the organization, and dealing with the images of projecting masculinity” (SLAYTV, 2017). Before joining this organization, George had not come out yet, so presenting as masculine was something he struggled with, but nonetheless tried to present, “I actually think that part of me joining the organization was to try and toughen myself up in some way. Or try and work on my image around masculinity” (SLAYTV, 2017). Although George’s brothers finally came to support his sexual orientation, that was not always the case and still is not for some gay identifying individuals in the NPHC organizations. At times, he felt as if he was being pulled between his two identities as a gay man and as a Black greek,

It was hard though as a 21, 22-year-old who hadn't come [out] yet, who hadn't fully identified as who I was. I was dealing with an identity crisis with myself, and also fighting to prove I belonged within my organization. (SOURCE)

George’s stories, as well as the others, showcase the struggle some people a part of the LGBTQ+ community may face when they NPHC organization if they make it through the process. While George may have decided to mask his identity to join, that was not the reality for Jay and many others.

## **THEME 2: NEITHER BY ANY OTHER OATH**

The clashing of identities between being greek and religious proved to cause tension within themselves and in those perspective communities. The theme, Neither by Any Other Oath, demonstrates the tensions between two influential Black groups: the

Divine Nine and the Black church. All data collected within this theme demonstrates the thoughts of those who denounced their affiliation with either their fraternity or sorority as a result of clashing with their religious or faith values. One commonality between these upcoming stories was the realization of the oaths they were speaking and the hymns they were singing.

Shaheed Johnson, a denounced NPHC member, discussed his disagreement with the fraternal rituals, oaths, and songs because of the power of it all.

One thing I say that I just...don't agree with is the rituals and the words that must be said and...some of the songs that we sing. It's just the words that are being said because we're bringing power to these things. And even in terms of the ritual, like taking the oath, the bible says we should not imitate oaths or swear by anybody's name... (Johnson, 2018)

Shaheed mentioned one of the lines from the songs commonly sung in the NPHC organizations and his opposition to who the songs are sung to and about, “Even as much as singing a song, all of my love, my peace and happiness, I wanna give it to this fraternity. Those things we supposed to give to Christ” (Johnson, 2018).

Similar to the realization Shaheed had, Candace Junée, a denounced NPHC member, spoke about her experience of taking the oath to join her former sorority and her realization of what that oath truly meant as someone of faith,

I thought that the oath that I spoke over myself was harmless, but anytime you're speaking an oath over yourself and establishing a covenant with something that is not of God...you're entering into a covenant and a spiritual agreement. And yes

you're agreeing to be a part of this organization but you're also agreeing to all of the things that are attached to it that come with it spiritually. (Junée, 2023)

Candace also mentioned the songs sung in her sorority, and how despite her uncomfortable experience with the songs, she felt that this was the cultural norm,

But the thing that started to be uncomfortable to me was the fact that in some of the hymns you're singing 'dear Alpha Kappa Alpha', 'sweet Alpha Kappa Alpha'. You're singing these things to these organizations like they're giddy. And the thing is it's such a cultural norm that we dismiss it. (Junée, 2023)

Adrian Templeton, a former member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., reflected on his reasoning for denouncing the fraternity and the ritual he attended stating:

I remember the Lord brought to my remembrance going through a ritual, almost 22 years ago, being blindfolded. Having to take these impressions and then removing the blindfold and there's an altar established there. And it's A PHI A is lit up and then we had to say something like 'Alpha, light of the world, pride of my heart'... (Templeton, 2023)

While discussing his experience, he also reflected on one of the prayers they spoke in his fraternity.

There was a prayer associated with it. The prayer says 'Oh Lord, may the true spirit of the fraternity rule our hearts, guide our thoughts, and control our lives so that we may become through thee servants of all'. (Templeton, 2023)

While these organizations are not religious-based, the Black church runs strongly through them to the point where these denounced members felt like their religious



identity was represented within these organizations. Similar to the NPHC, the Black church to has been a place of safety and comfort and “[provided] not only for religious needs, but for social service, mutual aid and solidarity among people of African descent” (Harris and Sewell 2012, p. 65). There are many NPHC members who attend church and hold positions within the church. However, some NPHC members who grew in their faith believed that they could not have one identity alongside another.

Adrian discussed his perception of the fraternity before joining and the importance of being a part of an organization built on faith,

Honestly, I truly believe these organizations aren't led by the spirit of God...Back then and for years, my thought was like hey these are built on Christian principles. These are organizations founded on...Christian ideas, ideologies...Me, someone who grew up in the church all my life, that was important to me. (Templeton, 2023)

Candace also spoke about the religious perspectives people have about these organizations and her biblical response to those perspectives,

So one of the things that people like to say is, you know, it's a Christian organization, it's founded on Christian principles. But the bible is very clear that...that the word, it stands alone on its own. You don't need to add anything to it, you don't need to take anything away from it. So what these organizations do within the rituals is...they have a bible there, and they read from the word, but they replace...things with things that are related to the organization. (Junée, 2023)

While these organizations are seen as being founded with Christian principles, that was not enough for the people who denounced them. Having both their religion and fraternity/sorority intertwined was not an option for them because they felt that one, their religion, came before the other, whereas others believe both can coexist in their lives.

### **THEME 3: REJECTION**

Rejection was the third most presented theme and presented itself in numerous ways. It was shown through people who had begun the process and not finished, as well as people who denounced their sororities. Nonetheless, all people within this theme experienced a form of rejection. Tytus Jones discussed her experience of being rejected from an NPHC sorority, which she had been seeking to join to gain a sense of community and lose that feeling of loneliness, "I was distraught, I just felt so rejected because all I wanted was friends and communities because I didn't have that..." (Jones, 2023). Before her rejection, she had mentioned how she had greek friends who answered her questions about hazing within these organizations. Within these organizations, people are labeled as either "paper" (not going through a hazing process) or people who are "made" (going through a hazing process). Her friend mentioned how people are not respected for not being hazed,

She gave me the rundown on hazing, paddling, "getting wood". This is how they make you, and if you don't get wood, even if you become a part of a particular sorority, they're still not going to respect you because you didn't take wood.  
(Jones, 2023)

Not only were people rejected for not being properly hazed, but they were rejected for not following NPHC cultural rules.

Angela told her story about wanting to join an NPHC sorority to gain status to win a competition at her college, Miss Lincoln. Her chapter got into trouble for hazing, and they were kicked off campus despite them never admitting to hazing. Angela sought out her overseeing graduate chapter members but felt no support throughout the process. She eventually denounced her organization after getting expelled but reflected back saying:

At the end of the day, they need you. They need your joining fees, they need your dues, that is how they maintain as business. And you are a walking advertisement for them, so as soon as you are not beneficial to them anymore, they act like you don't exist. (LifestylePeeper, 2020)

Angela felt that rejection came when organizations could no longer benefit from you, and her experience was similar to Terriann Belle, a denounced member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc., who experienced a different form of rejection through hazing,

When I joined my organization, from the jump, ever since we were on line...they would gang with each other and gang up on me. We had moments where we would call them sister circles but all they would do is just start projecting, gaslighting, and just putting me down...mind you our prophytes were present in...these meetings...they [prophytes] would just sit there and sit back and watch all of this happen. How are you teaching sisterhood when you're basically allowing all of these groups of girls to go against one sister. (Belle, 2022)

The rejection from mental hazing is what drove Terriann to denounce and protect herself. Much the same as Terriann's experience, Erika began the process of joining an NPHC sorority but ended up dropping off her line due to the effects of the hazing. She recalled her experience of telling one of the sorority members that she would not be continuing,

I called and was like I can't do this...I was stressed out about school. Y'all are stressing me like even more on top of that. I feel like I have nobody, nobody who can understand. I feel secluded...Basically, she was like delete my number and never speak to me again and hung up in my face. (TheRealErikaF, 2019)

In addition to this phone call, Erika started to feel the effects of rejection from her line sisters and rejection from something she had wanted for a long time,

...even if we had classes together (line sisters), didn't speak to me, didn't say anything to me, didn't look my way. Like just everybody started to treat me completely different, and I got extremely depressed because this was a decision that was the hardest decision I have ever had to make in my life. It was something that I wanted my whole entire life. (TheRealErikaF, 2019)

Here Erika is not only feeling rejection, but she was experiencing exclusion in its full force. Erika was in the process of joining the in-group but ended back in the out-group with added feelings of depression, rejection, and failure. These repeated stories of people in the out-group masking their identities or being rejected creates a divide between both groups, especially those with negative outcomes. Bringing this back to identity, these stories reveal that obtaining and maintaining a greek identity is hard especially when

those identities clash. That clashing of identities and exclusion after rejection is what drives the divide in the broader black community.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH

### DISCUSSION

This research presented the data in the form of three themes: *Clashing Identities*, *Neither by Any Other Oath*, and *Rejection*. The first theme, *Clashing Identities*, showcased the homophobia experienced by interested and current members seeking to join or be a part of the NPHC. While seeking to be a part of a community and further develop their individual identity - being Black within a fraternity, this study showed that identifying as gay often clashed with being a Black greek member in the NPHC, showing division between the communities. Masculinity and femininity were brought up several times in this theme and showed that NPHC fraternities associate being masculine with being heterosexual, and anyone presenting any form of what they consider to be feminine, would not be accepted. At the same time, masking their identity played a role in how they presented themselves to their potential fraternity, especially in George's case. Miller et al. stated that the act of masking one's identity was linked not only to identity management but the avoidance of stigmas (2021). There are a multitude of stigmas around people who identify themselves as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, so concealing their identity is the only way they felt they could join an NPHC member. This not only shows division within the Black community, but division within oneself between their identities.

In a literature review conducted by Shaheed et al., they found that previous studies had concluded that Black LGBTQ+ people felt that both their identities, race and

sexual orientation, were of extreme importance to them (2022). Looking at this from an intersectional lens, you cannot have one identity without feeling lost without the other identity, especially in George's case. These identities intersect with each other and require nurturing towards both, but the question surfaces how can an individual nurture her/his identity with a community she/he was excluded from?

Despite efforts to make the NPHC more LGBTQ+ friendly and inclusive, there is still discrimination people are facing in these organizations and outside of them. While there were already tensions between Black communities and Black LGBTQ+ communities, the discrimination and negativity perceived of the NPHC perpetuates the divide between the two. George mentions that Black people can't be the "oppressed who oppress" (2017). The NPHC was created to provide a safe space because of the oppression they were feeling, yet they continue to perpetuate this cycle of oppression with their communities and create a belief that intersectionality is not possible, that one must choose one identity over the other. Black unification requires that all Black people be unified as their whole selves, and not just as one of their identities. Accepting people as whole leads to a unified front rather than one that is divided.

The history between the Black church and the NPHC has been lengthy and intertwined. People identify these organizations as service- and faith-based organizations. Shaheed, Candace, and Adrian had all believed that they could maintain their identities with their faith and with their fraternity or sorority but later came to believe that it was not possible. The primary issue was not the community service or sisterhood/brotherhood, but the issue was with the initiation rituals, oaths, songs, and

prayers. There is indeed power in words, and they felt that the words they spoke or sang went against their beliefs and against what the Bible says. Songs like “All of my love, my peace and happiness, I give to...” strictly contradict the typical beliefs within Christianity. An example given by Shaheed referenced James 5:12 which states, “but above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation” (King James Version, 1769/2017). Referring back to the power of words, when these oaths are being made with the bible in front of them, it contradicts everything within this verse at that moment. The second they take that oath into their fraternity or sorority, they are putting their organization above their religion, and that is where the clashing of these two identities begins.

All three members who denounced their respective organizations for religious reasons expressed thoughts that they initially believed they could maintain both identities at the same time. However, this brought about tension and conflicts in their individual identity. The tension they felt they experienced with God and their fraternity/sorority, pushed them to choose one or the other. Despite their feelings, they felt called to push aside one identity to be able to focus solely on the other. In the videos, they mentioned several times that they either received negative comments or expected to receive negative comments around them denouncing. This shows the tension between the two communities and the possibility for those tensions to expand and people starting to separate faith from these organizations. Referring back to social identity theory, severing one’s identity because of an overpowering identity puts them fully in the in-group for one



of their identities and fully in the out-group for the other identity signaling to those around them that one cannot exist if the other is there. In doing so, they consider the severed identity to be in the out-group creating a divide between the two.

The rejection experienced by people of the Black community by Black Greeks has expanded tensions between these communities. Hazing in fraternities and sororities across the world is not new, but the hazing experienced within the NPHC has greatly affected the lives of those who have endured it. The hazing within the NPHC and other BGLOs is different from hazing that occurs in other fraternal groups. What is considered to be hazing is believed by some to have been passed down from African “rites of passage” (Williams, 1992, p. 4). Additionally, a claim was made by one of the participants that “during the Civil Rights Movement and before, Black people have just suffered a lot in this country, and so hazing is supposed to symbolize the struggle of Black Americans. (Miss Tytus Jones, 2023). Despite the beliefs of where NPHC hazing comes from, one common factor of these beliefs is that one must experience a struggle to come out new and better.

NPHC members not only have to heal from the trauma produced by hazing, but they also have to deal with the constant feelings of rejection and exclusion from dropping line or denouncing. As these stories are continuously spread, more people become hesitant and fearful of what to expect when joining. Furthermore, when people join there are expectations set for how they pledged, and when those expectations are not met, NPHC members are faced with rejection. How can the Black community be unified when people are being rejected for not wanting to be hazed or being rejected for not being

hazed? In blatant terms, it cannot be unified, but it can be divided. Community cannot be built when feelings of rejection are rampant within the community. At times, rejections push you to disassociate with what is causing the rejection. And in doing so, people divide themselves from that tension they feel, only further dividing the Black community. This study showcases that the NPHC wants people with a “one size fits all” identity or wants to alter people into that identity, but that is not possible. When people act outside of the “one size fits all” identity, they disrupt the system in the organization creating tensions and then further a divide.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The National Pan-Hellenic Council was created to uplift the Black community and create a space in which culture could be expressed and where Black people would be accepted and not discriminated against. At the same time, these very organizations that created safe spaces have also created distressing spaces. Whether that be through homophobia or rejection, these tensions only divide the Black community more when it should be unified. This study around intersecting identities has highlighted the fact that when these organizations began, they did not necessarily have to consider people with other identities like being a part of the LGBTQ+ community because back in the early 1900s that was not socially acceptable. However, just as the NPHC has evolved throughout its years, it must learn to be more accepting of people and their various identities or there will always be a divide within the Black community.

Concerning the religious aspect, both the Black church and the NPHC have long histories separately and history that ties them together. The choosing between one’s

identity is a tension within itself, but as more people continue to denounce and share their stories publicly, the more greeks despise them, especially those who believe the NPHC was built on religious foundations. The religious and greek identities both require sacrifices and loyalty, and participants showed that they felt they could only give that to one identity. Not only does this show a tension between the two communities and their beliefs of devotion, but it shows how the identities conflict within a person. Bridging the gap between the NPHC and the broader Black community will require first acknowledging the tensions and then working to implement change not only in their practices but also in the beliefs that guide these organizations.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

When I initially began this research, I sought to conduct interviews rather than doing a content analysis, but I was not able to get people to participate. When I was working to recruit NPHC participants through each organization's social media accounts across various universities in the DMV, I was either ignored or blocked through several of the accounts. The same went for the Black, non-greek organizations I had reached out to as well. While this was a subject that seemed like no one wanted to talk about, I felt it was still important to conduct the study, but in a different manner. As previously mentioned earlier, this study area is very under-researched and this study adds to the limited data there is out there. I believe that conducting this research, adds to the study area and opens the door for more research to be conducted about the NPHC.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Further research around the NPHC could be expanded by focusing on each specific theme to hone in on the issues and delve deeper into them. For example, the videos I collected data from that explored homophobia all came from men and their experiences with joining a fraternity. However, through my search terms, I found little to no information regarding the Black LGBTQ+ community and NPHC sororities. Building off of this, it would be beneficial to explore how transgender people are perceived by these organizations. At the same time, more research should be conducted on the role of the Black church and the NPHC in the Black community. An additional area of study that needs to be examined more is the intersection of being an NPHC member, religious, and a person who identifies themselves as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This study touched on the three of these separately, but more research needs to be done to examine the challenges people face with these identities. Lastly, this study had a whole theme centered around people who ended up choosing their religion over their fraternity or sorority, but there is much research needed to examine the NPHC responses to people denouncing their organizations.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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