

Relational conflicts experienced through digital platforms among generation z sorority women

by

William R. Frankenberger

B.S., Millikin University, 2010  
M.S., Ball State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Adult Learning and Leadership  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflict among female Generation Z sorority members inflicted through digital platforms and how those women attempted to resolve digital conflicts. The study included 9 sorority women participants between the ages of 18-22. Grounded in social constructivism, this phenomenological qualitative inquiry findings were gleaned from two participant interactions including a 60-minute, semi-structured interviews via Zoom, and a second interview elicitation process to review their lived example of a digital conflict. Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) process, the findings from interviews were coded first by experiential statements and exploratory notes followed by a cross analysis of each individual case, producing four group experiential themes (GETs). Findings related to the first research question were found within three of the four GETs which included: conflict initiation and escalation, digital dynamics, and relational influences coupled with societal effects. Findings related to the second research question were gleaned within the final GET and included women and conflict, various conflict styles and their use among participants, and finally, the resolution considerations and strategies attempted. The findings of the study supported use of digital communication and also suggested that an aim of digital conflict is to engage in a more destructive and hurtful discourse given that without the existence of a relationship, resolution is not actively sought or desired. Findings also suggest a reimagining of the conflict lexicon to reflect the digital landscape. Suggestions for future research included focusing further our comprehension of digital conflicts within broader contexts including cross-cultural perspectives and an exploration into policy development and enforcement regarding digital conflicts on college campuses. The significance of this study provides beginning research on a topic that is

rarely explored while also contributing to the research showing how relationships, especially among women, impact digital conflicts given the unique dynamics that are present in a digital medium compared to face-to-face mediums.

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
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## **Dedication**

To my Dad, the ultimate teacher. I hope to teach others with your passion, humor, and kindness so that my students feel able, comfortable, and empowered as you have demonstrated my entire life.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

My research aimed to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z sorority women who endure relational conflicts inflicted over digital platforms. Real examples of such conflicts are included in the figures below.

Figure 1.1. Chapter GroupMe Message

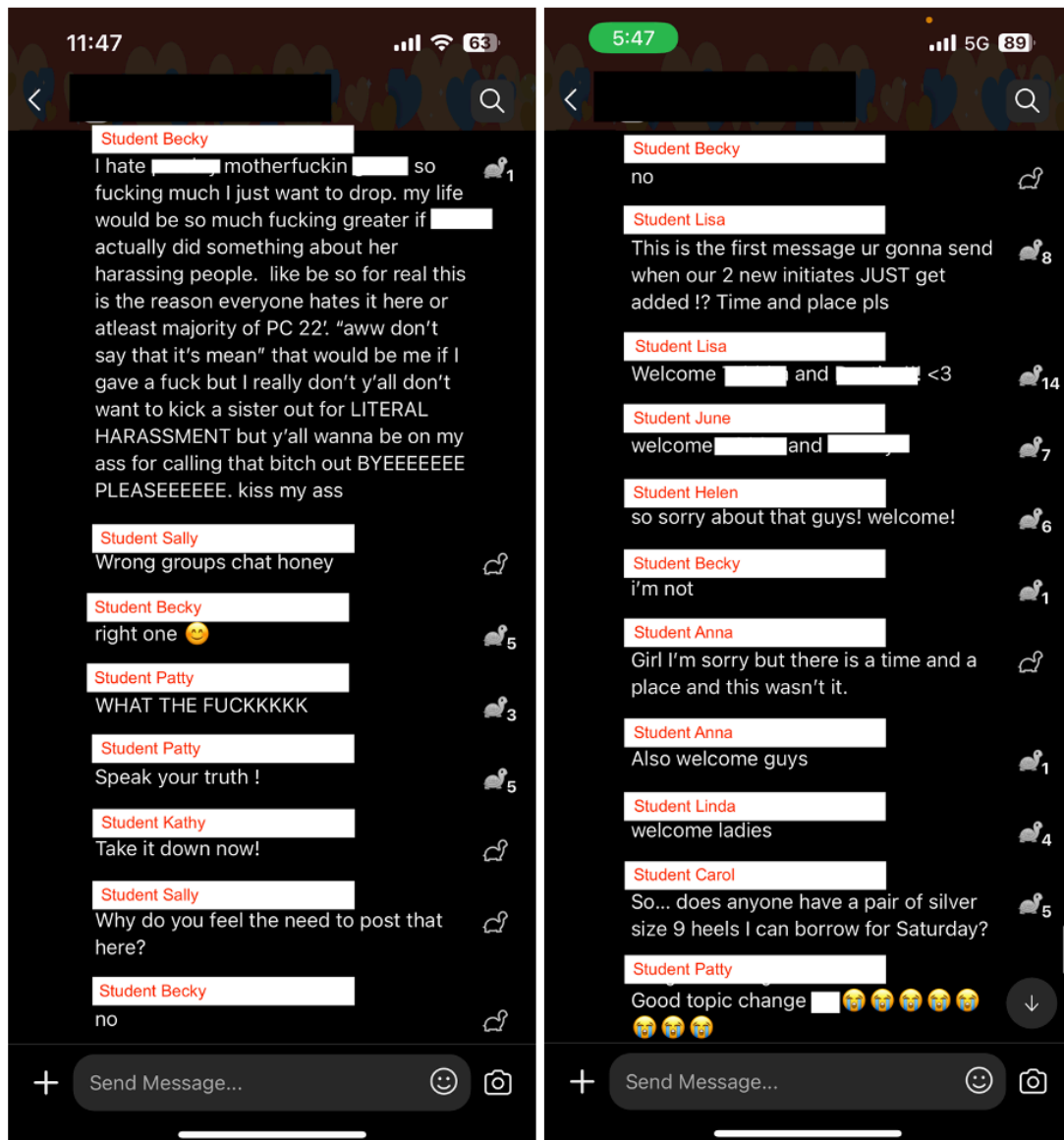


Figure 1.2. Chapter Group Text Message

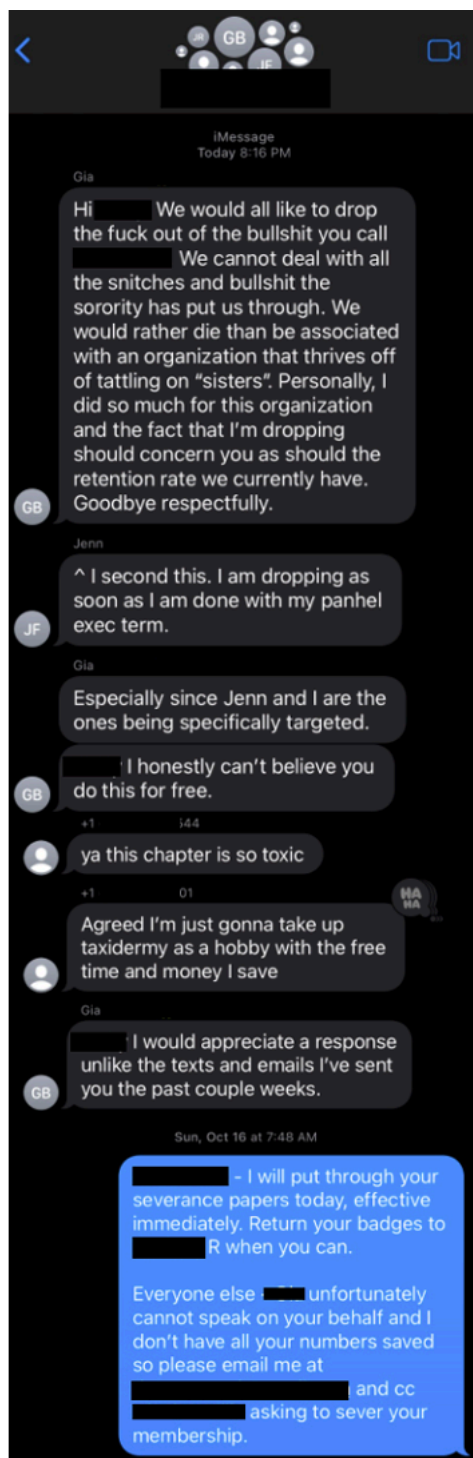


Figure 1.3. Sorority Women Snapchat Message talking about another women's organization

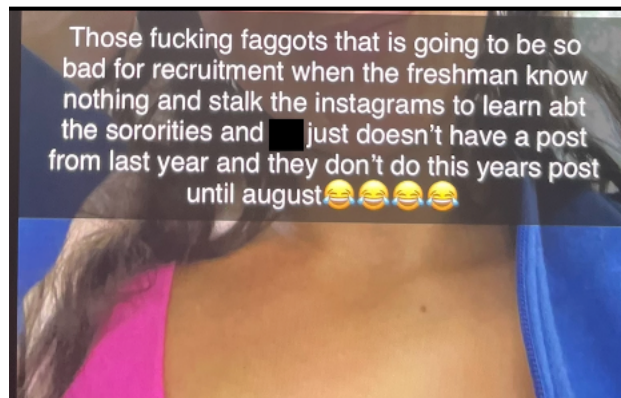


Figure 1.4. Individual Text Message to Another Member



Figure 1.5. Two-Way Text Message between Members

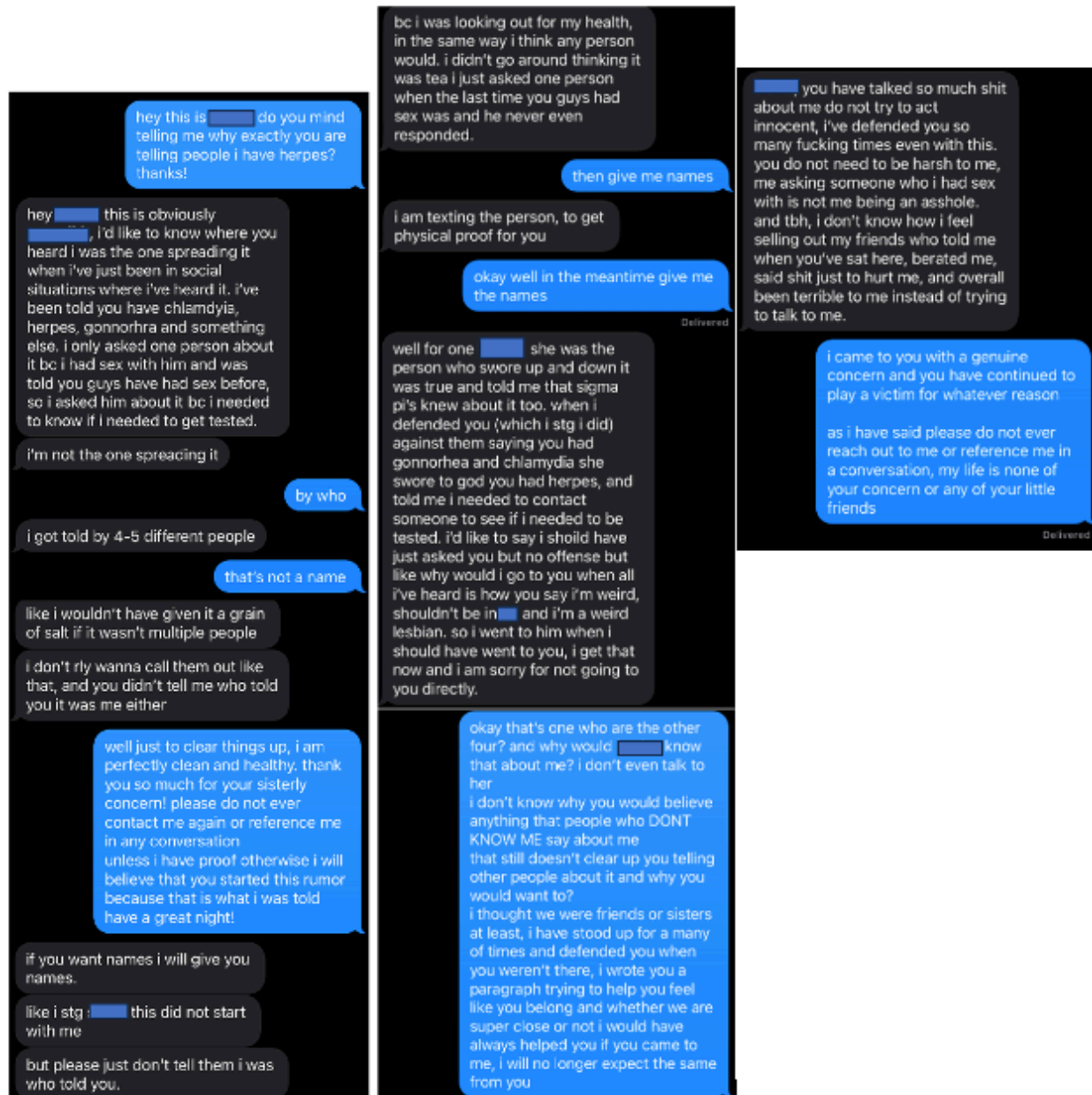
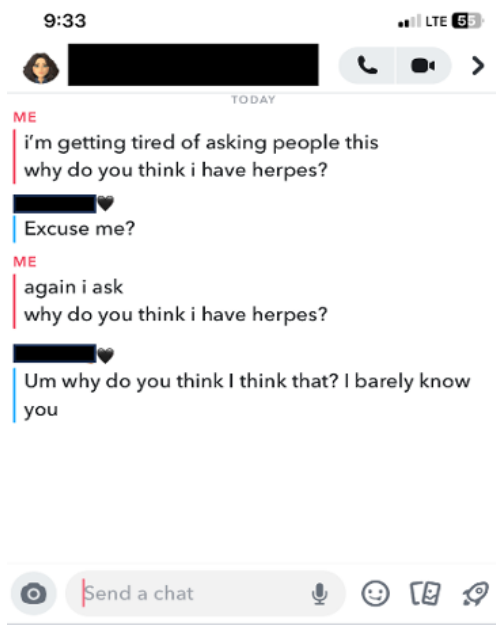


Figure 1.6. Snapchat Communication with the Member who Allegedly Started the Rumor from Figure 1.5



This study focused on the central phenomenon of real-life conflicts exemplified over various digital platforms. Understanding the global differences and similarities in social media use is crucial in understanding the common and more mundane practices of digital communication. 4.9 billion people around the world use social media, which is just under 60% of the world's population of nearly 8 billion; the most active users are millennials or Generation Z (Ruby, 2023). The Pew Research Center defines millennials as anyone born between 1981 and 1996, and Generation Z as individuals born 1997 to 2010 (Dimock, 2019). Many Generation Z ages currently fall into the stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Defined as individuals between the ages of 18-25, emerging adults prefer using digital media over face-to-face or phone-based conversations for communication because of ease and convenience (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Emerging adults contend the use of digital communication platforms lead to more consistent and transparent experiences (Leonardi & Vast, 2017; van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2023).

On average, cross-generational users of social media hold eight accounts across various digital platforms. United States users are the third largest consumer base of these digital platforms—behind China and India with 302.35 million users—meaning approximately 90% of the United States population are social media users (Ruby, 2023). Digital platforms can streamline individual and group communication by providing an efficient and transparent method of communication (Leonardi & Vast, 2017; van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2023). They also provide means to counter challenges caused by social anxiety or difficult conversation avoidance through the deployment of on digital communication and platforms over face-to-face communication strategies and media (Larin, 2022).

Shifting communication to primarily digital spaces, such as texting, emails, or direct messaging, can lead to challenges: for example, users might be unable to interpret someone's tone or intent in messaging. Such misinterpretations can escalate disagreements and arguments towards individuals and groups (Larin, 2022; Resyadi, 2022; Tang et al., 2021). In many cases individuals might say something more harsh or direct in digital spaces than they would if they were face-to-face (Marin, 2022; Resyadi, 2022; Tang et al., 2021). Communication in digital spaces can also be hard coded into existence, and sometimes archived or distributed amongst others, often to expose a conflict or illustrate the character of another person with the intent of having others judge the communicant (and, in some cases, bully or attack). Cyberbullying and the trolling of individuals can result from users projecting their experiences and thoughts through digital platforms, which can often have negative impacts on a person's safety or dignity (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2023; Cowie, 2013; Coyne et al., 2019; Vásquez, 2021). Cyberbullying is defined as:

[ . . . ] hurtful and offensive actions done through computers, cell phones (smartphones), and gaming devices connected to the Internet. There are many forms of what we call cyberbullying. It can be repeated nasty messages, comments, images, videos on your phone or computer, but it can also be comments on various Internet sites (such as Facebook) when you are online. There may also be people who, against your will or without asking you, reveal information on blogs or sites or post pictures or videos of you. In some cases, other people appear as or pretend to be online, stealing your login and password for sites you visit. Some may persuade you to promote or say mean things about others online (Johnansson & Englund, 2021, p. 326).

Behaviors like cyberbullying may be motivated towards aggressive personal targeting of certain individuals when communication occurs between individuals or groups who have an existing relationship, or matched ideals and objectives, which emerge from in-group dynamics of organizations or clubs, like an online parents' group, a church, a common interest group, or a social sorority. In one study's estimation, relational bullying had the highest connection with cyberbullying (Johnansson & Englund, 2021).

While subtle, there are difference between cyberbullying and relational bullying, or aggression which centers around the medium through which the behavior occurs. Relational aggression occurs when an act becomes more personal, often emerging from the existence or not of a relationship between conflicting parties. Relational aggression is defined as "a form of aggression that involves attempts to harm others through the manipulation and damage of relationships and feelings of social inclusion" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711). Because relationships are often at the core of relational aggression, it is often felt more harshly than discretely anonymous attacks on an individual. Relational aggression can occur both in face-to-

face settings, and across digital spaces and platforms. In recent years, studies have shown a rise in aggressive attacks between individuals in digital spaces as compared to face-to-face media given the comfort and security of being somewhat hidden behind devices (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2023; Coyne et al., 2019.). Johansson & Englund (2021) write:

The characteristics of anonymity are also special to cyberbullying in that it is mainly indirect rather than face-to-face...perceived anonymity may increase the number of potential perpetrators; many students who dare not bully in real life also involve cyberbullying due to its perceived anonymity (p. 321).

Relational aggression leads to conflicts, and require resolution. However, traditional conflict management methodologies customarily require parties to be face-to-face to resolve a matter. This disparity highlights the gap in the conflict literature addressing resolution methods for conflicts that originate in digital mediums (Bercovitch & Foulkes, 2012; Erickson & Johnson, 2012; McElearney, 2023; Rahim, 2017). Conflicts that occur via online platforms, such as text messages, social media exchanges, or direct messaging, commonly escalate to cyberbullying attacks, threats, and blocked communications (Zorlu, 2023). These results usually do not resolve issues and instead impact relationships between individuals, groups, companies, and more, if not addressed. As individuals and groups continue to engage and practice digital communication methodologies, research must provide a greater understanding of how conflict arises in these spaces. Traditional conflict resolution strategies continue to evolve with technology advancement, thus making online resolution strategies limited or absent. Therefore, future studies and research should investigate how online dispute resolution designs might lead to continued personal social development, as well as more effective communication strategies that lessen the impact or avoid intentionally harmful behaviors.

Generation Z comprises much of the emerging adult population, and more than half of current traditional college aged students—as 66.6% of college-aged students are 24 years of age or under (Hanson, 2022). College students engage in campus life activities as part of their collegiate experience. Fraternal organizations are common among college students seeking an extra or co-curricular experience. Involvement in women’s sororities is another co-curricular experience that was founded on principles of fostering support between women on college campuses. Prior to the introduction of these systems, the collegiate experience did not welcome nor foster lifelong friendships and relationships rooted in sisterhood and deep emotional bonds (Turk, 2004). According to the trade association charged with governing all its member organizations, the National Panhellenic Conference, over 5.5 million women joined or were initiated into one of their 26 member organizations. During the 2021-2022 year, 354,166 undergraduate women were members of NPC sororities. Additionally, 125,884 new members were initiated into the 26 member organizations (National Panhellenic Conference [NPC], n.d.), which brought the total collegiate membership to over 450,000 college women. Although all social groups can have the potential to foster negative experiences, there are also many positive benefits to sorority participation. These positive aspects include: (a) lifelong sisterhood bonds; (b) increased student retention within university settings; (c) greater academic success; and (d) stronger emotional support (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perkins et al., 2011).

Recent efforts to consider the impact and benefits of sorority membership have been studied by Patrick Biddix (2023) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. As part of his unpublished report examining belonging, diversity, wellbeing, and initiation, 1,288 participants—more than 50% of the participants—indicated they felt positively about their sorority experience (Biddix, 2023). In the same study, one participant stated: “It’s truly so unique

and beautiful, I can easily say I found my home and created relationships I will have for life” (Biddix, 2023, p. 7). Another participant stated the value of membership beyond the college setting:

My sorority experience has exceeded my expectations. I have been able to meet and form relationships with so many different people, built skills that will help me after graduation, and grown so much as a person. I will truly miss [my chapter] being a part of my life on a daily basis. I can’t wait to see what the future holds and how I can be involved in the chapter as an alumna (Biddix, 2023, p. 5).

Collegiate and alumnae members frequently cite the importance and meaningful friendships at the center of their experiences. This study explores the phenomena of digital conflicts and how those conflicts impact group belonging and resolution among members while framing sororities as socially constructed places where long-term friendships and other developmental skills are fostered for their members. Current literature focalizes long term resolution strategies in face-to-face spaces, but often neglects digital spaces. Given the increased use of digital platforms for daily communication among groups, this study provides new frameworks and strategies that aim to create resolution strategies for workplaces and groups who rely on digital platforms and media for communication.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding the phenomena of relational conflicts experienced over digital platforms requires a multi-theoretical framework design that imbricates the concepts of relational aggression; conflict styles and resolution outcomes; and women’s cognitive development.

This research fuses indirect aggression, covert aggression, and social manipulation into the term "relational aggression," defined as “the action of harming others by damaging peer

relationships or threatening to damage relationships by exclusion or withdrawal to demonstrate the control over another person” (Crick, 1995, p. 313). Relational aggression research posits that social development and maturity are directly linked to relational aggression, because the aggressor uses the relationship as the means through which to cause harm, often through advanced social maturity and manipulation tactics discussed below (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Little et al. (2003) define relational aggression as “acts intended to damage another’s friendships or feelings of inclusion in the peer group” (p.123). Having a relationship to use as a tool for harm, social manipulation, and the covert or anonymous nature of the harm emerge as key themes for relational aggression.

Relational aggression among variant ages examines how aggression changes with maturity and social development. Adults—female study participants in particular—are more likely to use covert aggression strategies to socially manipulate and cause harm in more extensive ways than adolescents, given their increased social maturity (Björkqvist et al., 1994). Similarly, Werner & Crick (1999) found that college students used relational aggression with more nuance and intention to cause social manipulation, compared to adolescent use. The researchers further found in the study that college students reported greater difficulty with anger management, problematic interpersonal relationships, and higher levels of self-destructive behaviors, which according to research account for the use of relational aggression in their lives. The research on emerging adulthood and relational aggression further connects external and familial contexts as factors affecting the likelihood of the use of relational aggression (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2017; Deason et al., 2019; Ostrov et al., 2011; White et al., 2015). Examining the links between psychological parental control and impairments in children’s interpersonal skill development, this research shows how such factors shape how adolescents

create and view relationships. Further literature posits that children not taught skills in empathy and perspective-taking in adolescence had higher rates of cold-heartedness and intentionally callous behavior (White et al., 2015). These characteristics manifest in peer relationships using relational aggression—primarily social manipulation and social group exclusion—and becomes conditioned behavior which bleeds into the contexts of emerging adulthood, making it harder for these individuals to maintain deeply bonded and trusting relationships with peers as adults.

Early literature on relational aggression indicates that women possess more advanced social and intellectual development, which may increase a woman's situational ability to assess relationship threats and respond with the use of relational aggression rather than physical aggression for retaliative and self-preserving purposes (Björkqvist et al., 1994). However, later literature suggests that sex is not a differentiator for the use of relational aggression (Bailey & Ostrov, 2008; Lento-Zwolinski, 2007; Verona et al., 2008). Prior to 2013, gender had not been used as the primary measure or main variable in studies of relational aggression (Dahlen et al., 2013). That research suggested there was little empirical basis for the hypothesis that women used relational aggression more than men. This study determined, in a participant sample of college students, that male students more than their female peers were more likely to use relational aggression. Overall, research into gender and relational aggression remains contradictory, and more research examining relational aggression and the in-depth and lived experiences and contexts of individuals and groups ought to be conducted.

Conflict is often regarded as difference, which can in turn cause disagreements or incompatibility with/in parties. As conflict is connected to the idea of dysfunction, resolution strategies are used to address and reconcile such apparent incompatibilities (Cronin &

Bezrukova, 2019; Rahim, 2017). Conflict, however, can provide motivation for parties to reform or reimagine the cause of the conflict (Jehn, 2014; Tirapani & Willmott, 2023).

The reformist approach to conflict and its resolution methods requires a deeper understanding of the parties' approach to the initial conflict, as well as a broader understanding of the various options of resolution that exist. Rahim's (2017) conflict styles serve as a basis for the conflict framework for this study. The five conflict styles include 1) avoidance; 2) dominance; 3) compromise; 4) obliging; and 5) integrating/collaborating. Avoidance is characterized by behaviors like denying the presence of conflict, topic-switching, non-committal patterns, and deflection through humor. Dominance, or a dominating approach, is defined as using power over others, frequently through aggressive or uncooperative communication techniques where the individual's goal is to "win" the argument or conflict. Compromise—or to "give a little and get a little"—is defined as any action which results in parties of conflict experiencing both gain and loss. Whereas compromise requires both parties to "give in," obliging or accommodating is the willingness to do something—such as a service or a kindness—in a manner helpful to or considerate of the other person's needs. Finally, integrating or collaborating is used when the parties use constructive engagement methods by considering the other party's and their own goals to find a successful solution to a problem or conflict, ultimately resulting in a strengthened or enhanced relationship with the other party.

This study also considers individual styles in conflict resolution. Though often used interchangeably, conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation have distinct differences that separate them from one another. The resolution of conflicts can involve various stages including: (a) pre-conflict; (b) conflict; and (c) post-conflict (Lederach, 2015). Pre-conflict involves preventing conflicts from arising, while conflict involves managing and

resolving conflicts. Post-conflict involves rebuilding relationships, trust, and cooperation among the parties involved. Despite methodological differences, some key concepts emerge as universally integral to the outcome process regarding conflict. According to Jehn (2014), conflict management is "the process of recognizing, diagnosing, and resolving conflicts between individuals or groups through communication and negotiation" (p. 9). Similarly, according to Rahim (2017), conflict management involves the process of minimizing the negative aspects of conflict while maximizing its positive aspects. Aula and Kiira (2010) indicate that conflict resolution is the response to incompatibilities or struggle which seeks to negotiate and provide a right-based process of resolution.

Similarly, Erickson and Johnson (2012) define conflict resolution as "the process of bringing a dispute or conflict to an end, through negotiation, mediation, or other means, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable solution" (p. 1). These definitions emphasize the importance of finding a mutually acceptable solution and achieving a sense of closure to the conflict specific to conflict resolution. Lastly, conflict transformation is defined as "the process of creatively addressing and transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict, to promote deeper understanding, healing, and reconciliation" (Lederach, 1995, p. 9). In later research, Lederach (2017) expands his definition to imply that conflict transformation is a process of addressing and transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict to create opportunities for positive change. It involves changing the nature of a conflict by addressing the underlying issues and power imbalances that fuel it, promoting understanding between parties, and creating space for dialogue and negotiation. This study conjoins the topics of conflict styles and resolution processes into the term "relational conflict."

Early framers of cognitive research were men who applied theories of cognitive exploration to all humans, regardless of gender. However, many women researchers felt these cognitive theories did not validate the experiences they were facing. Critics of the early research felt female-focused cognitive development was missing or undervalued, and the early theories did not consider if girls and women develop uniquely. Instead, most research used men as the central empirical figure around which centered most early cognitive grounding theory, an absence which provided a starting point for research into women's cognitive development. Nancy Chodorow (1974) introduced concepts of "family structure and feminine personality" into the discipline, examining how girls and women develop using the paradigm of mothering (p. 43), claiming: "Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own..." (p. 167). Her assertion that girls and women emphasize the needs of others more than boys and men provided an initial contradiction to theories posed by Erikson and Piaget. In 1976, Jean Baker Miller critiqued the research gap in the field of psychology. In *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, she writes: "the parameters of the female's development are not the same as the male's and ... the same terms do not apply" (p. 86). Baker Miller's vocal dissent against the universalizing of early cognitive developmentalists supplemented the previously challenged arguments advanced by Chodorow. Baker Miller (1976) asserts that women develop their sense of self via emphasizing their ability to maintain relationships and connections with other women; together, Chodorow and Baker Miller began to shape the research into women's cognitive development. In her seminal work, *In a Different Voice* (1982), Gilligan examines, through the same techniques as Kohlberg, how boys and girls differ in their moral development. Gilligan asserts that historical norms of cognitive development are skewed towards men, making women appear deficient. Based on the importance of relationships, women and all humans should

implement what Gilligan (1982) calls an “ethic of care” (p. 174). Overlapping research findings seem to suggest that women indeed value relationships in a way that is pertinent to their cognitive development.

Sororities are bound together through bonds of sisterhood and the development of women, both personally and professionally, which aligns to the experience of women’s cognition as shaped by female scholars in this area. Regardless of the community, women experience conflict with other individuals or in groups. Therefore, the idea that relationships are central becomes murky as part of the exploration into the cognitive process by which women interpret the conflict and its impact on them emotionally, mentally, or physically. By centering women’s cognitive development as another theoretical pillar of this study alongside relational conflict, this research aims to examine how women evaluate their relationships in conflict—whether before, during, or after, and in spaces where they might arise—and how they place meaning behind the “why” of the conflict, rather than the cause or effect of it.

### **Statement of Problem**

Generation Z students make up 66% of the current college population and will be the next generation to enter the workforce (Hanson, 2022). While at college, many students seek, in organizations and clubs like fraternal organizations, a sense of belonging, experienced through peer support and lifelong friendship formation (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As Generation Z members make up the current collegiate membership, these fraternal organizations often rely on the preferred communication choice of their audience, digital platforms and social media, in order to streamline communication among their members (Leonardi & Vast, 2017; van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2023). Inevitably, when conflict arises within these groups over online platforms, digital conflict resolution skills (*i.e.* conflict resolution delivered digitally) are under-

researched and commonly not present in available conflict resolution literature, unlike face-to-face conflict resolutions (Larin, 2022; Resyadi, 2022; Tang et al., 2021). Thus, the inability to resolve digital conflicts can impede interpersonal relationships, encourage estrangement, and negatively impact the member experience (Wang et al., 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflicts among female Generation Z sorority members inflicted through digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) and how those women attempted to resolve conflicts digitally.

### **Research Question**

1. What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms?
2. How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally?

### **Overview of the Research Design**

Creswell (2007) stated “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57); this study adopted a phenomenological approach to examine relational conflicts within digital platforms using the sub-population of current collegiate members of single-sex women’s sororities. A sorority touts the development of deep bonds between members, or “sisters,” both at micro-levels (between two individuals) and macro-levels (between the entire chapter or fraternal community). Given the vast social connections present within these sub-populations, the study uses a social constructivist approach as the epistemological anchor to frame and examine the lived experience

of the participants. Social constructivism aims to explore how individuals make sense of their encounters and create shared perspectives in specific situations or settings (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study engaged nine participants who are currently initiated members in collegiate sorority chapters from various institutions of higher education within the United States, and organizations represented within the National Panhellenic Conference (the trade association representing 26 inter/national women's fraternities/sororities within the United States and Canada). All participants who identified as women were between the ages of 18 to 25. All participants completed one semi-structured and open-ended 60-minute in-depth interview via Zoom. First round interviews were guided by prepared questions designed to encourage the participant dig deep into their experience. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription software. Transcriptions were provided to each research participant for review and revision. Five participants completed secondary interviews, which used an elicitation technique (Bhattacharya, 2017), which examines the conflict jointly between the researcher and participant. Three participants could not find examples of their digital conflicts and were unable to participate in the elicitation. Additionally, one participant declined to participate in the elicitation. The participants were asked to share a copy or real-time version of a digital conflict, and they explained in detail their conflict to enhance and contextualize research data for further analysis. In addition to the participant interviews, and given the researcher's close personal experience with the phenomenon being studied, the study used bracketing for active reflection and bias examination; additionally, the researcher frequently recorded observations and hypotheses within a reflection journal.

The research grounds its analysis process in the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which recommends bracketing as an empirical strategy for researchers who may have personal connections or potential “conflicting interests” throughout the research and analysis process (Smith et al., 2022). IPA connects the meaning-making practices of the participants with the researcher’s practices of meaning-making through inductive coding approaches. This involves a process wherein “codes” of communication are built from a ground-up approach, pulling from available data initially (Saldaña, 2021). This coding approach also aligns with phenomenological inquiry by centering the lived experiences of participants as the phenomenon of study, rather than as an abstract or conceptual framework, or as anticipated themes to motivate and potentially impede processes of communication and coding (Peoples, 2022; Van Manen, 2014). The analysis process followed a traditional qualitative coding approach, starting with a first round of inductive coding grounded in the practices of open and simultaneous coding. Open coding refers to the practice of breaking down data into excerpts, and attaching a label, or category, to them which connects it to the study’s central focus (Saldaña, 2021). Given the multi-theoretical framework of the study, the first-round inductive process also uses simultaneous coding, where excerpts generate multiple codes enabling passages of data to have more than one label (Saldaña, 2021), followed by the generation of categories and subcodes. Further rounds of selective coding iterated initial rounds of open coding into final re-codes, which generate final lists that avoid continued amendments (Saldaña, 2021). All participants gave explicit permission for the collection and examination of data gathered through interviews, which were conducted in full compliance with the Kansas State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Chapter 3 expands on this research design further; Chapter 4 analyzes the research findings these methods produced.

## **Importance of the Study**

Technology continues to evolve, and new communication mediums are developed at a rapid pace. While these systems can make communication between individuals and teams more efficient, they do not eliminate conflict (Larin, 2022; Resyadi, 2022). A common outcome of communication, conflict is a natural and inevitable part of groups and teams. As more and more environments rely on digital platforms to share information, digital conflict resolution skills are missing in current literature. Being able to solve conflicts with people with whom they have a relationship becomes harder as more emphasis is placed on digital communication media, often due to a lack of guidance on how resolution can or should occur over those media. While studies in the past have looked at why relationship conflicts arise and what methods of conflict resolution best support the de-escalation of relational conflict, these studies lack information that supports the changing dynamic and impact that technology plays in our everyday communication including social media. This study successfully began to understand how relational conflicts emerged in digital platforms and how conflict resolution may or may not have occurred. The results of this study helps researchers further examine and understand the growing trend of digital communications between individuals and teams. As workforces continue to use digital platforms, digital conflict resolution skills must be understood and taught for performance improvement and positive culture experiences. Participant experiences provided a launchpad for further work on digital conflict resolution that could be mirrored in various other settings and a part of professional development education around conflict resolution.

## **Assumptions**

A primary assumption for this study is interlaced into the topic around the opportunity that comes from asking participants to open up and share examples of times they were in conflict or the antagonist of conflicts. While the goal is for openness and honesty from the participants, it was understood that self-disclosure might be a factor in honest and holistic answers. This was apparent when stories were shared by participants in which they were the cause of the relational conflict. The researcher worked to ensure trust and established a nonjudgmental environment for participants to disclose not only their own experiences with these relational conflicts, but also to anonymize their identities in the case they were the individual inciting or exacerbating the conflict. It was assumed that participants would only want to share stories of victimization of online relational conflicts, and therefore would not provide a balanced account of these episodes; however, the researcher found these accounts were balanced between participants role as victim or aggressor; the undefined role of observer also emerged.

Another assumption of this study was that the participants and the focus of the study included women who are members in single-sex women's sororities. Recognition of trans women existing in these sorority spaces was known by the researcher and for the purpose of this study women was not defined. The researcher sought out participants who identified as women; further, the experiences of transwomen could serve as a focus for future research into these concepts and topics.

## **Limitations**

The most notable limitation of this study was the primary researcher's self-identification as male; all participants were women and the site of research was a women's membership organization. Understanding the lived experiences of women, thus, required special

consideration on the researcher's part. The inability to experience first-hand the dynamics of being a woman, or of being a part of a women's organization, could have led to an inaccurate perception during analysis, or a failure to dig deeper during interviews to fully understand the participant's perspective. As a male researcher who works professionally for a women's sororal organization interviewing female participants, an unintended or perceived power dynamic could have developed which the researcher was cognizant and considerate of at all times.

Measures to counteract this limitation were designed through two processes, including self-reflection and the advising of a dissertation committee. First, the researcher engaged in active reflection work, such as bracketing to reflect on biases and experiences close to the study, as part of the inquiry process alongside the participants entrusting this study with their stories (Van Manen, 2014). Self-reflection following interviews, transcribing, and coding also allowed the researcher to identify potential knowledge gaps and foreground the responses from participants over possible gaps in experiential knowledge. In addition to reflection, the dissertation committee assisted in focalizing the perspective on female voices and stories to support efforts to acknowledge and identify where possible gender-based biases may have emerged. The committee also held space for actual sorority members to advise on research through examinations of the data. The researcher also grounded analysis not in personal assumptions based on professional work and experiences but in the participants' experiences and feedback as the study's guide.

Another limitation of this study was around the applicable and generalized nature of the participant environment. While college single-sex sororities are environments that can be mimicked in other clubs or groups, the fundamental purpose of these groups for many college students are the social dynamics. Women's bible studies, women's service groups, and women's

sports teams have social aspects, but there are other primary drivers for gathering. While there are other reasons that women's sororities exist for, the central purpose remains to bond women in sisterhood through social experiences while also fostering academic growth, service to communities and leadership development. The limitation of this study might have impacted the applicability of findings to another context. Another limitation of the current participant pool was the age of participants. Neuroscientific research asserts that prefrontal cortex development, which regulates the decision-making parts of the brain, are not fully developed until the average age of 25 for many. As such, decisions are sometimes made incorrectly or through a system of trial and error in younger years in life that inform personal experience or other future experiences. Considering the average age of the participants, science may be limited in ascertaining specific rationales that easily explain the patterns and behaviors this study seeks to examine and understand.

Given the researcher's professional background as mediator and conflict coach, questions during the elicitation process were meant to guide participants more in the areas of coaching and developing when processing their conflict in real time, rather than foregrounding the larger research questions and theoretical framework in communicating with the participants during the study. A rigorous protocol for consistency across those who participated in the elicitation session was crafted by the researcher, who also engaged in post reflection work after manually transcribing interviews to address where coaching might have been more frequent than questions of inquiry. This method and design did not call for participant action research therefore an adherence to centering the lived experience of the participant over the coaching desire of the researcher was greatly monitored.

Additionally, the methodology of phenomenology is not without its limitations and critiques; as such, the researcher used bracketing as part of the reflection practice to offset those limitations. Even with bracketing the positionality of the researcher was considered when integrating the lived experiences of the participants in the analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Van Manen, 2014).

### **Operationalization of Terms**

Cyberbullying – hurtful and offensive actions done through computers, cell phones (smartphones), and gaming devices connected to the Internet through repeated nasty messages, comments, images, videos on a phone or computer. Cyberbullying may also include comments on various digital platforms. People may also, without consent, reveal information on blogs or sites or post pictures or videos of a person (Johnansson & Englund, 2021).

Digital platforms – digital spaces that are intended for communication and connection. Examples of these include social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, GroupMe, Snapchat and include communication tools such as text messages, emails, and direct messages. These can also include networking sites that are specific to a college campus with a tool digital platform like YikYak.

Generation Z – individuals born 1997 to 2010 (Dimock, 2019).

Relational Conflict – this term connects the concepts of relational aggression which uses a friendship or relationship to spread gossip or exclude to cause hurt, and conflict as the disagreement between parties that cause dysfunction or hurt feelings (Bezrukova, 2019; Crick, 1995; Cronin & Rahim, 2017).

Social Media Platforms – web and app-based sites that allow individual to connect in order to meaning-make (Baym, 2015) and also maintain relationships (Jensen, 2015) through chats, picture sharing, video sharing and other methods.

Sororities – membership-based clubs for women that provide co-curricular experiences outside of the classroom including peer support, friendship, philanthropic work, academic partnership, and community service (Turk, 2004).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who have experienced relational conflicts inflicted through social media, aiming to deepen the understanding of digital conflicts and the resolution process on interpersonal relationships. The current lack of literature examining digital conflict resolution provided the need for this study. This study viewed this phenomenon through the lens of interpersonal relationships which are experienced in all aspects of life. Given the narrow nature of this investigation this study will used a multi-theoretical framework centered upon relational aggression, conflict styles and resolution approaches, and women's cognitive development as the theories which drove the analysis of this phenomenon.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z sorority women having experienced relational conflicts inflicted over digital platforms. The study used a multi-theoretical framework, shaped by three main theories: (a) relational aggression; (b) conflict styles and resolution approaches; and (c) women's cognitive development.

### **Relational Aggression**

#### **Defining Relational Aggression**

In the earliest research on aggression, researchers focused their inquiries on examining the behaviors of "direct aggression" versus "indirect aggression." Indirect aggression includes behaviors more verbal in nature, like the spreading of gossip, as compared to direct aggression behaviors, which are physical and can include assaulting an individual (Buss, 1961; Feshbach, 1969). Over time, the research on indirect versus direct aggression expanded to explore variants and nuances linked to indirectly aggressive actions that were harder to measure. For example, in 1988, the research team of Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen connected the use of indirect aggression to perform an act or behavior of social manipulation. The researchers found that social manipulation allowed for the isolation of victims by their peers and being removed from social groups or social standings. Further, the aggressor remained unidentified, eliminating the fear of getting caught for their actions.

The next phase of indirect aggression research examined the concept of anonymity in further detail, bringing forward another concept and definition under indirect aggression called "covert aggression," which occurs when the aggressor possesses a more developed social maturity and is thereby able to engage strategies of aggression towards a victim without being identified (Björkqvist et al., 1994). Covert aggression allows the aggressor to plan for and remain

anonymous in his or her tactics yet still “attack” the aggressed through indirect means (*e.g.* gossip spreading or bad-mouthing).

Contemporary research on indirect aggression has begun to place more importance on social manipulation (Crick, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Linder et al., 2002; Little et al., 2003; Ostrov et al., 2011; Sullivan et al., 2006; Werner & Crick, 1999). Research fuses indirect aggression, covert aggression, and social manipulation into the term "relational aggression." Relational aggression is defined as “the action of harming others by damaging peer relationships or threatening to damage relationships by exclusion or withdrawal to demonstrate the control over another person” (Crick, 1995, p. 313). Relational aggression research posits that social development and maturity are directly linked to relational aggression because the aggressor uses the relationship as the means to cause harm (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression research was first applied to young children; it was not applied to emerging adults until later trials (Hottle et al., 2011; Ostrov et al., 2011; Werner & Crick, 1999). Like earlier definitions, later definitions of relational aggression explicitly foreground how friendships may be used as the tool or object for manipulation. Little et al (2003) define relational aggression as “acts intended to damage another’s friendships or feelings of inclusion in the peer group (p.123).”

In addition to focalizing on friendship, other later definitions include the impact on feelings of belonging as damaging to mental well-being resulting from relational aggression (Linder et al., 2002). Given the consideration of how social manipulation of relationships is used for relational aggression, research studies must consider how group function and bonding play a role in the occurrence and experience of relational aggression within a group. The literature does not define relational aggression as a group function; however, disputes between one or more individuals within a group may impact the group as a whole. Currently, research does not

connect social manipulation to relational aggression as a tool used for such disruption, which is why further research is required.

When defining relational aggression, key themes are found such as: (a) having a relationship to use as a tool for harm; (b) social manipulation; and (c) the covert or anonymous nature of the harm; Although the research showcases these themes consistently, much of this research does not address the gap that practitioners create when using the term “bullying” as a part of the lexicon associated with relational aggression. Key indicators of bullying in present literature does not include the presence of relationship bonding nor persistence over time; and bullying requires a power differential (Cartwright & Cooper, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Comparatively, in relational aggression, there is no requirement of a power differential, and the actions are rooted in a desire to harm the relationship. This means the individuals involved must be bound together by a friendship, relationship, etc., so that the isolation of the individual and exclusion toward the group impacts the victim intentionally. Additionally, bullying commonly involves comments that evoke feelings of hatred, whereas relational aggression requires the intimate knowledge of a person and their settings to cause harm or damage. While both bullying and relational aggression are toxic, relationally aggressive behaviors may be more damaging to victims than bullying due to the exclusionary nature and deep manipulation that occurs when using relational aggression (Crick, 1996; Sullivan et al., 2006). Qualitative data to further investigate the impact of relational aggression compared to bullying is required to not only see where the overlap falls but also to differentiate behaviors to support preventative education for both toxic behaviors. This examination would include what individuals say and how the victim interprets those comments as attacks on the friendship, person, or both.

To measure the concept of relational aggression, researchers developed a tool called the Self-Report of Aggression and Social Behavior Measure (Morales & Crick, 1998). This tool requires research participants to name those who demonstrate aggressive behaviors and the impact of those behaviors on social groups and environments. Several studies use this measure to validate relational aggression among peer groups and to posit that relational aggression is different than indirect aggression. This is likely due to the nature of using social manipulation as the vehicle and the relationship as the gas to cause harm to individuals.

### **Relational Aggression in Emerging Adulthood**

Early research examining relational and other forms of aggression primarily studied adolescent participants when exploring this phenomenon (Buss, 1961; Crick, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Feshbach, 1969; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Non-adolescent research contains a noticeable gap in the literature of relational aggression. During post-adolescence, a time referred to as "emerging adulthood," individuals begin to place more importance on relationships outside of family to further support the fostering of their independent stability (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2000). For example, when a young adult goes off to college, the student must make new friends and relationships to receive the emotional, mental, or physical support and stability that were once provided by the individual's family while in their home in earlier years. The increased focus on creating and maintaining relationships outside of the family provides a strong argument for why the exploration of relational aggression among emerging adults is critical when compared to the current literature, which is based predominantly on adolescent-centered literature.

In 1994, a team of researchers who studied relational aggression among adolescents explored the same phenomenon with adult populations. This team used earlier findings to

examine how aggression changes with maturity and social development. Their findings demonstrated that adults—female study participants in particular—were more likely to use covert aggression strategies to socially manipulate and cause harm in more extensive ways than adolescents, given their increased social maturity (Björkqvist et al., 1994). Similarly, another study used a college-aged sample group to examine the use and presence of relational aggression among adults, compared to its use by children and adolescents (Werner & Crick, 1999). This study found that college students used relational aggression in a manner similar to how children and adolescents used it, but they did so with more nuance and intention (usually to cause social manipulation). Werner and Crick further claim that college students reported greater difficulty with anger management, problematic interpersonal relationships, and higher levels of self-destructive behaviors, which account for the use of relational aggression in their lives.

Studies on relational aggression continue to emerge that explore the outcomes of both perpetrating relational aggression and being victim to relational aggression during emerging adulthood. Previous research found that, in early adolescence, relational aggression adversely affects relationship factors such as social status within a group; reputation management; and belonging, or the sense of group loyalty and acceptance; and emotional well-being and mental health (Linder et al., 2002).

However, research conducted during emerging adulthood examining whether the impacts of relational aggression on relationship factors are similar to the impacts in other phases of life is limited. In emerging adulthood, a person is more developed socially, cognitively, and emotionally. The focus of literature has been on whether a person's development allows him/her to recognize the impact of relational aggression on their emotional well-being and mental health. For example, a recent study found that college students possessing higher anxiety, express traits

or behaviors that tend toward anger, and tendencies to misuse alcohol are more likely to engage in relational aggression with peers which by their nature negatively impacting their relationships (Dahlen et al., 2013). Increased levels of anxiety, trait anger, and alcohol misuse are linked to developmental challenges for a person's maturity and, therefore, those issues stunt one's ability to maintain and feel bonded in relationships with others. This finding also indicates that victims of relational aggression are at an increased risk of social, emotional, and behavioral problems, including loneliness, stress, burnout, social isolation, and reputational damage.

The research on emerging adulthood and relational aggression also connects external and family factors with increases in relational aggression (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2017; Deason et al., 2019; Ostrov et al., 2011; White et al., 2015). This research examines the links between psychological parental control and impairments in children's interpersonal skill development, which shapes how adolescents create and view relationships. Findings show that increased psychological parental control negatively impacts how children view and make relationships from adolescence into adulthood. This is due to the child's inability to process and make sense of relationships on his or her own without the perspectives and approval of parental figures (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2017). Further literature on the impact of parental development of children found that children who were not taught skills in empathy and perspective-taking had a higher rate of cold-heartedness and intentionally callous behavior (White et al., 2015). The increased speech patterns and behavior often manifests in peer relationships using relational aggression—primarily social manipulation and social group exclusion—and becomes such strongly conditioned behavior it continues into emerging adulthood, making it harder for these individuals to maintain deeply bonded and trusting relationships with peers as adults. New research on Generation Z suggests they tend to view their

parents as their best friends and use patterns from child/parent friendships as a measure against all other relationships (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

The comparison Generation Z uses can both positively and negatively impact how they make and maintain friendships. Using the relationship bond a person has with their parent may blur how they view loyalty and trust (given that loyalty and trust in relationships between friends is often, but not always, different than between parents and children). This research further demonstrates generational dependency on how friendships with parents drive perceptions of the fostering and maintaining of friendships with peers—as well as parental support of those developed relationships. This literature points to external factors that show emerging adults' use of relational aggression is impacted by childhood development and external factors that are beyond internal motivation only.

### **Prevalence of Relational Aggression in Women**

Early research findings and more current literature around the motivations for and frequency of using relational aggression among women paint two different pictures. The earliest findings of relational aggression use showed, in general, higher frequency among women compared to men; and increased frequency based on situational context, compared to male use of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Feshbach, 1969; Frodi et al., 1977; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Werner & Crick, 1999).

Gender-based research also suggests that women possess more advanced social and intellectual development, which increases a woman's situational ability to assess relationship threats and consequently use relational aggression (rather than physical aggression) as the weapon of choice for retaliation and preservation (Björkqvist et al., 1994), pointing to the impact of socialization on young girls compared to boys raised to be more focused on maintaining

relationships in the sociocultural context of the United States. To connect socialization and relational aggression use among women, earlier research found that women often place greater importance on relationships and groups; additionally, when someone hurts that relationship or group, this importance is linked to an increased use of relational aggression tactics to harm the wrongdoer, including: (a) isolation a member from the group; (b) gossiping; (c) rumor spreading; and/or (d) social manipulation (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). The same research team also found that female subjects tend to foster anger towards the person who has wronged them for longer durations—a term sometimes referred to as "grudge holding"—compared to male subjects. This finding suggests that women use social manipulation and grudge holding more than physical aggression to harm others within peer groups. Longer anger engagement was addressed in later literature by examining the challenges young women face regarding social adjustment within groups in their teenage years, compared to boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Due to the increased social adjustment challenges girls face—such as lower confidence and increased self-doubt—higher use of relational aggression is present and acts to maintain an individual's friend group and increase her social capital or status within those groups. Therefore, when someone wrongs a member of the group, social manipulation and isolation are the punishment used by the group towards the wrongdoer. Using social manipulation and isolation as a punishment is more commonly seen in intergroup conflicts among women than in men.

Unlike these early findings, later literature suggests that sex is not a differentiator for the use of relational aggression (Bailey & Ostrov, 2008; Lento-Zwolinski, 2007; Verona et al., 2008). In 2013, research came forward that tested the use of relational aggression by gender as the main variable, which had not been used as the primary measure for research up to this point (Dahlen et al., 2013). The findings suggest that there was little basis for the common depiction of

women using relational aggression more than men. This study found that, in a participant sample of college students, male students were more likely to use relational aggression, compared to female college students. The research team attributed this change in findings from earlier research to more work on addressing toxic masculinity at younger ages, and more education for women on emotional control. The research team did not endorse those messaging efforts, nor attribute those educational efforts as a distinct reason for the change in findings. However, they did note these efforts were part of their evaluation of the shift. Like these later studies' findings, another research study that used only women in their research pool justified a rationale for why women's prevalence towards using relational aggression might be more frequent than men's (Ostrov et al., 2011). Unlike the 2013 study, the 2011 team suggested that, since women are more likely to engage in intimate relationships with friends and demonstrate increased levels of bonding compared to men, the use of exclusivity to protect those friendships and possible secrets shared is much higher for women. This practice of keeping a friend group or close circle of friends intact is an act of exclusion to outsiders, so when a new possible group member is introduced, increased levels of relational aggression might be present due to the intimate nature and secrecy of the group prior to the newcomer joining. Overall, when exploring the prevalence of women's use of relational aggression, the findings are contradictory. More research must be conducted that examines the in-depth and personal experiences of the individuals outside of broad generalizations gleaned from these quantitative studies. Additionally, relational aggression conflict has a rich research background with adolescent girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Bowie, 2007) but lacks research specific to adult women. To address this gap in the literature, this study will focus on relational aggression among emerging adult women. Emerging adulthood is defined as a time of in life where a person would not self-identify as either adolescence or young

adulthood and is usually classified by the ages of 18-25 (Arnett, 2000). Exploring a more personal approach to this topic would allow for better support of the broad, generalized findings and would impact the process by which we come to know how sorority women experience relational aggression and its impact on their mental well-being.

## **Conflict Styles and Outcomes**

The way in which conflict is framed plays a role not only in how it is viewed by the conflicting parties but also in the process of resolution. Conflict can be regarded as difference, which can cause disagreements or incompatibility with parties, and is occasionally connected to the idea of dysfunction; thus, it must be addressed and reconciled successfully to overcome the conflict (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Rahim, 2017). Further researchers posit that conflicts provide a rationale for a call to reform or reimagine the cause of the conflict in a broader and more systemic way (Jehn, 2014; Tirapani & Willmott, 2023). This reformed approach to conflict and its resolution method requires a deeper understanding of the parties' approach to the initial conflict and a broader understanding of the various options of resolution that exist. This section will use the five conflict styles (Rahim, 2017) as a basis for the framework; it will largely focus on conflict transformation (Lederach, 2017), and the conflict spheres.

### **Conflict Styles**

How one handles conflict can be directly connected to the following: (a) personality traits; (b) view of personal safety; (c) cultural nuance; and (d) the upbringing one experiences as a child into adulthood (Hamilton & Tafoya, 2012; Roloff, 2009; Siffert & Schwartz, 2011). For example, individuals who were raised as quieter and more reserved might more naturally engage in an avoidance or obliging conflict styles. Comparatively, if a person comes from a large, more bombastic family, a style of dominating might become more natural to use (as that is what the

individual has grown up experiencing and learning from others). Conflict styles develop over time, as individuals mature and become more aware of themselves, which is why understanding the styles can help resolve the conflict. When conflicts arise, there are usually two main actors—the self, and the other—both of whom can be the victim and perpetrator. While not all conflicts operate in a binary format, the research on conflict styles can be applied to two or more parties. The dual concern model (Rahim, 2017) addresses five different conflict styles and are linked to both the self and the other when conflict arises. In this section, we will review the five conflict styles, which include: (a) avoiding; (b) dominating; (c) compromising; (d) obliging; and, (e) integrating.

### *Avoidance*

Avoidance is characterized by behaviors like denying a conflict, changing a topic, being non-committal, and using humor to deflect from the conflict (Rahim, 2017). One might consider that using the avoidance style is non-effective; however, avoidance can be used to de-escalate a conflict. Consider a conflict arising in the middle of a work meeting, with several colleagues around; the avoider might choose to deflect by changing the topic so that the individuals avoid further discomfort or spectacle in front of the rest of those uninvolved in the conflict.

Avoidance entails a low concern for self, as well as a low concern for others. As research in conflict styles has emerged, some would position avoidance as a neutral style, rather than low in concern for self and others, due to the nature of this position: not argumentative but rather deflective, which can read as neutral, so as not to pick or start a fight. Furthermore, it does not enhance the argument or conflict (Guerrero & Gross, 2014). Avoidance is a useful style when relationships are not important to maintain, and the issue is trivial in nature. Avoidance is a less useful style for other relationships, as it can let the situation continue to fester without addressing

it, leading to an eventual explosion of emotions and pent-up hostility. Avoidance can also signal to the other individual that one does not care enough about the person or the relationship to address the conflict and move on jointly.

Another outcome that occurs when using the avoidance style is called the "avoid/criticize loop" (Sillars et al., 2004). Simply articulated, this is the action of avoiding the topic of conflict while also criticizing the person or another, directly or indirectly. This can be common in organizations or groups where one individual talks to others about another individual but does not want to meet face-to-face or directly with the person to solve the problem. This method is still a technique using the core functions of avoidance—deflection, avoidance, and disengagement or postponement of conflict resolution.

### ***Dominance***

The next conflict style is dominance, or a dominating approach, which is defined as using power over others, through aggressive or uncooperative communication techniques where the individual's goal is to win the argument (Rahim, 2017). This style can also be called a "competitive" conflict style. Connected with an assertive communication style, dominance is usually seen as "aggressive," rather than assertive. Assertive communication requires the individual to engage in conflict without using techniques like belittling, ridiculing, or damaging another party; alternatively, the aggressive communication style aims to hurt feelings and harm verbally.

Thompson et al. (2011) examine the advantages of the dominating style when used to generate quick, decisive action, and when outcomes are linked to high reward; in other words, when the goal of achievement is more important than the relationships of the group. When a group is in lock step with a goal, dominating is seen as a harmonious way to build consensus (*ex.*

when a team is trying to win a match or game). Conversely, a dominating style comes with disadvantages. For example, the dominant party not reaching consensus with others can lead to harm in or to relationships. The dominant party may use harmful methods to ensure all parties meet the goal, regardless of comfort or goal disagreement. The most common way we see a harmful dominating technique used is with threats, which research has shown can be an effective tool for conflict resolution (Thompson et al., 2011).

Besides the use of threats, the dominance style of conflict can engender other destructive forms of communication, including verbal aggression and abuse, harassment, and micro-aggressions. Verbal aggression and abuse are categorized as forms of communication abuse and are more direct than threats, as they attack the other person's character by using insults, humiliation, and profanity (Infante et al., 2011). Harassment is defined as “the repetitive verbal attack towards a person who is of lower rank or classification than the other person, thus requiring a power dynamic to be the core difference in this dominance technique, compared to aggression or abuse” (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994, p. 30). Lastly, micro-aggressions are overt or explicit behaviors, brief, and include verbal, behavioral, or environmental conditions that create derogatory insults towards oppressed groups, which are typically present alongside dominance styles of conflict (Nadal, 2013; Sue, 2010).

### ***Compromise***

Commonly summed up as “give a little and get a little,” compromise is defined as the action resulting in each party experiencing some gain and some loss and is based upon the idea of trade-off rather than flexibility and solution-seeking, as is connected to this style (Rahim, 2017). This conflict style is used when there is an opportunity to have shared power, as both parties must have something to give and gain, or else there would be no use for this style. When

considering compromise as a conflict style, advantages do emerge, including using less time to achieve a goal or shared outcome, sharing of power among people, and parties to feel whole with the outcome.

Additionally, there are disadvantages to this conflict style. For compromise, many foreground or emphasize the loss before or over the win, thus making more of the reality of losing something rather than seeking common ground to resolve the issue. Others would say that compromise is a style of avoidance in that it is best to just agree to disagree and accept both parties' desires: leave it alone and move on to something else to de-escalate the conflict. The heart of compromise is the requirement of each side to give up something and that giving in to a demand can become a myopic lens to the party through which they will not see a mutually beneficial resolution, but only the loss or the item given up, thus centering feelings of resentment and hostility towards the other party.

### ***Obliging***

Whereas compromise requires both parties to give in, obliging or accommodating is the willingness to do something, such as a service or a kindness, in a helpful manner to the other person's needs. When this style is used, the obliging individual prefers a cooperative and harmonious approach (Neff & Harter, 2002). At the core of this style is the emotional reward one receives once they use this accommodation—it is sometimes seen as pleasurable to oblige another party to reach a resolution. However, this outcome can also manifest as a passive-aggressive feeling, which results in feelings of martyrdom, complaint, or resentment towards the other side.

When using the obliging or accommodating conflict style, the largest advantage comes when there is a goal of preserving relationships or maintaining harmony without conflict.

Additionally, this style is useful in conflict if one side becomes aware of an error in their part, such as an assumption being made that is proven untrue; or if new information is learned that dismantles the credibility of the initial position causing the conflict. This is an occurrence in marital relationships when one party is found to be unfaithful to the other. The party caught in infidelity will commonly make several accommodations towards the injured party to maintain a relationship—in this case, a marriage or partnership—and to avoid losing the relationship. Just like all styles, there are disadvantages to using the obliging style. First, obliging prevents more creative solutions from being found, as one party will assume almost complete control over the other with demands or requests. This creates more challenges in the long run; if one party is constantly giving in to the other, they can create a strong power imbalance that can later be used in more harmful ways. Secondly, this style can result in items being calculated in a “tit-for-tat” process where each party counts and recalls the times they accommodated the other party, implying they expect an accommodation in return. Lastly, this conflict style can result in downplaying the root cause of feelings and positions between parties that will go unaddressed and can fester for one or both parties. This long-term feeling of accommodating the other party can lead to explosive arguments and a power imbalance that, if not addressed, can lead towards the more passive forms of aggression discussed above.

### ***Integrating***

The last conflict style in Rahim’s 2017 conflict style model is integrating or collaborating. In this conflict style, parties use constructive engagement methods by considering everyone’s goals to find a successful solution to a problem or conflict. This typically results in a strengthened or enhanced relationship with the other party. Unlike compromise, an integrating conflict style allows for all parties to continue to seek ideas for solutions until all parties are

satisfied and support the determined resolution. As discussed, in compromise, both sides look for an easy, intermediate position that at least partially satisfies each side, whereas in a collaborating style, all parties work creatively to find new solutions that maximize outcomes for all. This style requires a person's best communication skills and all parties to refrain from making dramatic responses and reacting hastily. Integrating does not mean having a reaction or being emotionless, but it requires the parties to keep those areas in check to listen and hear the other parties' needs in consideration with their own. Integrating does not require any party to falsely accept complete responsibility for a conflict—instead, it is the responsibility of all parties to find mutually agreeable solutions: new ways of moving forward. Research does show that, when used, this style results in higher satisfaction among partners and stronger organizations (Gayle-Hackett, 1989; Lederach, 2017; Wall & Galanes, 1986).

Based on the research, there are many advantages that come from using a collaborative conflict style: mainly, that it satisfies all parties more than other styles (Roloff, 2009). Satisfaction comes from the practice of respecting all parties, entertaining creative solutions for resolution, and requiring the commitment to resolution for all parties, as well as a longer-term commitment to resolution. This style is most supportive compared to other styles when there are long-term relationships that parties wish to maintain. An integrating style is most effective as it prevents destructive and long-lasting conflict via preserving or conceptualizing the action or process of conflict as productive. While there are many advantages to this conflict style, there are also disadvantages, such as when an individual skilled in verbal communication uses this style for manipulative means. This imbalance can also lead to a power dynamic issue, or further deepen such an inequality if already existent. A final challenge to this style is that it ordinarily takes the most time and practice to refine and achieve. However, when practiced and achieved

successfully, it can be very impactful and advantageous to the largest number of conflict participants.

When using an integrative technique, there are three common tactics that are used: supportive remarks, concessions, and acceptance of responsibility (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). When using supportive remarks, a party might respond with a demonstration of empathy and the centering of feelings. An example might look like, “I can see why that is difficult—we have all been ganging up on you.” Regarding the use of concessions, this tactic is used to build agreement on compromises; but unlike compromise, it does not actually lead to any concessions—just the acknowledgement of needing to make them. It might sound like, “Ok, I agree I need to find a new way to deal with this problem.” The last tactic that is used is an acceptance of responsibility in the integrated conflict style, which is used when one or both of the parties accept ownership in the disagreement, allowing them to start building a bridge towards resolution. This process could be a phrase like, “Yes, I have been acting uncooperative lately.”

### **Conflict Outcome Styles**

As part of examining an individual’s style to approaching conflict, the literature on outcomes of conflict must also be considered. While conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation share some common characteristics, there are also key differences that distinguish them from one another. The resolution of conflicts can involve various stages, including pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict (Lederach, 2015). Pre-conflict involves preventing conflicts from arising, while conflict involves managing and resolving conflicts. Post-conflict involves rebuilding relationships, trust, and cooperation among the parties involved. While there are differences in these approaches, there are key concepts in conflict that are universal as part of the literature and must be considered as part of the outcome process.

## **Conflict: Key Components**

According to Alper et al., (2000) there are five key components to conflict. First, it is essential to distinguish between functional and dysfunctional conflicts. Functional conflicts are those that promote positive outcomes, such as increased creativity, innovation, and growth. Alternatively, dysfunctional conflicts lead to negative outcomes, such as decreased productivity, low morale, and high turnover. Second, it is important to recognize that conflicts can be either distributive or integrative. Distributive conflicts arise when individuals or groups have conflicting interests, and the available resources cannot be divided in a way that satisfies everyone. Integrative conflicts involve identifying shared interests and finding a solution that benefits all parties involved. Third, it is essential to distinguish between task and relationship conflicts. Task conflicts arise from differences in opinions, ideas, or perspectives related to the task at hand, while relationship conflicts arise from interpersonal differences and negative emotions. Fourth, it is important to recognize that conflicts can be either constructive or destructive. Constructive conflicts can lead to positive outcomes, such as increased creativity, innovation, and growth, while destructive conflicts are angry and use tactics such as threats, personal insults with a goal to harm versus repair. Fifth, the management of conflicts can have different orientations: problem-solving, communicative, or structural. Problem-solving orientation emphasizes finding a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict, while communicative orientation emphasizes restoring relationships and improving communication. Structural orientation focuses on changing the environment, context, or rules in which the conflict occurs to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

It is also crucial to distinguish between personal and substantive conflicts (Rahim, 2017). Personal conflicts arise from differences in personalities, values, or attitudes, while substantive

conflicts are about issues, objectives, or goals. Personal conflicts tend to be more difficult to resolve than substantive conflicts since they are related to personal identity and emotions. Also, emotions play a significant role in conflict management (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Emotions can escalate conflicts, impair decision-making, and lead to negative outcomes. However, emotions can also be harnessed to enhance creativity, facilitate communication, and build trust. Further, it is important to recognize that conflicts can have positive or negative consequences, depending on how they are handled (Pruitt & Carnevale, 2015). Negative consequences can include emotional distress, damaged relationships, and decreased productivity, while positive consequences can include increased creativity, innovation, and improved relationships. Finally, culture and identity can play a significant role in how conflicts are perceived and resolved (Avruch & Mitchell, 2016). Understanding cultural and identity-related differences is essential for effectively resolving conflicts in diverse settings. One must focus on understanding the complex interplay of factors that contribute to conflicts, such as historical legacies, cultural differences, and economic disparities. This involves looking beyond the immediate issues and exploring the deeper underlying causes of conflicts. In consideration of culture, conflict resolution processes require the importance of recognizing the multiple identities and perspectives of those involved in a conflict (Edmund, 2021). This involves recognizing that individuals have multiple identities and that conflicts are generally fueled by differences in identity, such as race, religion, and ethnicity. The next section is an examination of the definitions of conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation; and highlights the key aspects of each of these outcomes.

### ***Conflict Management***

According to Jehn (2014), conflict management is "the process of recognizing, diagnosing, and resolving conflicts between individuals or groups through communication and negotiation." Similarly, according to Rahim (2017), conflict management involves the process of minimizing the negative aspects of conflict while maximizing its positive aspects. It involves recognizing the existence of a conflict, understanding its underlying causes, and working towards a resolution that benefits all parties involved (McCoy et al., 2009). All definitions suggest that conflict management involves active intervention to address conflicts by effectively communicating, negotiating, and finding common ground. Characteristics of conflict management include:

1. A focus on managing conflicts in a way that minimizes negative aspects while maximizing positive aspects (McElarney, 2023).
2. The recognition, diagnosis, and resolution of conflicts between individuals or groups through communication and negotiation (McElearney, 2023; Rahim, 2017).
3. An emphasis on finding practical solutions to conflicts that can benefit all parties involved (Rahim, 2017).
4. A focus on finding a resolution that satisfies everyone, but not necessarily addressing the underlying causes of the conflict (McElearney, 2023; Rahim, 2017).

### ***Conflict Resolution***

Several scholars have defined conflict resolution as a process of ending a conflict or disagreement in a peaceful, and amicable, manner. For instance, Aula and Kiira (2010) indicate conflict resolution is the response to incompatibilities or struggle that seeks to negotiate and provide a rights-based process of resolution. Similarly, Erickson and Johnson (2012) define

conflict resolution as "the process of bringing a dispute or conflict to an end, through negotiation, mediation, or other means, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable solution" (p. 1).

Conflict resolution can also be defined as the process of addressing and resolving disagreements or disputes among individuals or groups in a peaceful and mutually acceptable manner (Bercovitch & Foulkes, 2012). It involves finding a solution that meets the needs and interests of all parties involved while minimizing the negative impact of the conflict. These definitions emphasize the importance of finding a mutually acceptable solution and achieving a sense of closure to the conflict. Characteristics of conflict resolution include:

1. A focus on resolving disputes or conflicts between individuals or groups in a peaceful and amicable manner (Lederach, 2017).
2. The process of bringing a conflict to an end through negotiation, mediation, or other means (Lederach, 2017).
3. An emphasis on finding a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict, rather than simply managing, or containing it (Lederach, 2017).
4. That both parties are willing to work together to find a solution that satisfies both sides (Lederach, 2017).

### ***Conflict Transformation***

According to Lederach (1995), conflict transformation is "the process of creatively addressing and transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict, to promote deeper understanding, healing, and reconciliation" (p. 9). In 2017, Lederach expands his definition to imply that conflict transformation is a process of addressing and transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict to create opportunities for positive change. It involves changing the nature of a conflict by addressing the underlying issues and power imbalances that fuel it, promoting

understanding between parties, and creating space for dialogue and negotiation. The more recent definition points to the requirement of root-cause analysis as conflict transformation, emphasizing the importance of addressing underlying issues and causes of conflicts, rather than just their symptoms. This can involve addressing issues such as poverty, discrimination, and other structural inequalities. Conflict transformation recognizes the importance of a long-term and systemic approach to conflict resolution (Kriesberg, 2012). Similarly, Schirch (2004) indicates conflict transformation aims to examine systems that support violence and injustice into processes that support peace, justice, and healing. These definitions suggest that conflict transformation involves a fundamental shift in the way individuals and groups relate to one another and a focus on addressing underlying causes of the conflict, rather than simply resolving the immediate issue at hand. Characteristics of conflict transformation include:

1. A focus on transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict in a way that promotes deeper understanding, healing, and reconciliation (Lederach, 1995).
2. The process of creatively addressing and transforming the underlying causes of a conflict, rather than just the surface-level issues (Lederach, 1995; Schirch, 2004).
3. An emphasis on a fundamental shift in the way individuals and groups relate to one another, and in the systems and structures that support the conflict (Schirch, 2004).
4. A required commitment to long-term, sustainable change, and a willingness to address the deeper issues that contribute to the conflict (Lederach, 1995; Schirch, 2004).

In addition to these characteristics of conflict transformation, considerations for key concepts should also be examined to understand the complex process of conflict transformation. While the key concepts addressed are relevant to conflict transformation as an outcome, the

importance of relationships and how they are impacted by conflicts ought to be further underscored and studied (Brahm, 2019). Conflict transformation emphasizes the need to build relationships between parties to promote understanding and cooperation. It is important to recognize the role of power in conflicts and how it can perpetuate them. Addressing power imbalances and promoting equality is a critical aspect of conflict transformation.

In summary, conflict management is focused on managing conflicts in a way that minimizes negative aspects while maximizing positive aspects; conflict resolution is focused on finding a mutually acceptable solution to a conflict; and conflict transformation is focused on fundamentally transforming the root causes and dynamics of a conflict. Conflict transformation requires a deeper commitment to long-term change and addressing the underlying issues that contribute to the conflict (Lederach, 1995; Schirch, 2004).

### **Contact Theory**

Contact theory, a cornerstone in conflict studies, posits that increased contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice, foster mutual understanding, and promote positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954). Originating from social psychology, contact theory has been extensively applied across various contexts, including intergroup conflicts, racial tensions, and international relations. The foundational work of Allport (1954) highlighted the importance of equal status contact, cooperation towards common goals, and institutional support in facilitating positive intergroup interactions.

Research has consistently supported the efficacy of contact theory in reducing intergroup prejudice and promoting social cohesion. For instance, studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) and Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) demonstrated that intergroup contact significantly reduced prejudice and improved intergroup attitudes among diverse groups. Moreover, meta-analyses by

Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) reaffirmed the robustness of contact theory across a range of intergroup contexts, emphasizing the role of positive contact experiences in fostering intergroup harmony.

While contact theory has garnered empirical support, scholars have also identified key moderators and boundary conditions that influence its effectiveness. Intergroup contact under optimal conditions, such as equal status, common goals, and intergroup cooperation, tends to yield more positive outcomes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Additionally, the quality of contact, including the depth of interaction and frequency of contact, significantly influences its impact on prejudice reduction and intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011).

Furthermore, recent advancements in contact theory have expanded its applicability to digital contexts and virtual interactions. With the proliferation of online platforms and social media, scholars have explored the potential of digital contact in mitigating intergroup biases and fostering cross-group understanding (Vezzali et al., 2015). Studies by Tynes et al. (2018) and Frison and Eggermont (2016) have highlighted the role of digital contact in promoting positive intergroup interactions and reducing prejudice, underscoring the importance of virtual spaces in facilitating intergroup dialogue and social integration.

Contact theory remains a foundational framework in conflict studies, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of intergroup relations and prejudice reduction. While traditional applications have focused on face-to-face interactions, recent research has expanded the scope of contact theory to encompass digital contexts, reflecting the evolving nature of intergroup dynamics in the digital age. By understanding the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of contact, scholars and practitioners can harness its potential to promote social cohesion and mitigate intergroup conflicts in diverse settings.

## **Criticisms of Contact Theory**

Contact theory, while widely regarded as a significant framework for understanding intergroup relations and conflict resolution, is not without its criticisms. One of the primary critiques revolves around the conditions under which contact leads to positive outcomes. While initial formulations of contact theory emphasized the importance of equal status, common goals, and cooperation between groups (Allport, 1954), subsequent research has highlighted that these conditions are not always sufficient to promote positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors. For example, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) argued that simply bringing groups into contact may not be effective in reducing prejudice if certain mediating factors, such as empathy or perspective-taking, are absent. This suggests that the quality of contact, rather than only the presence of contact, is crucial for achieving positive outcomes.

Moreover, critics have pointed out that contact theory may overlook power imbalances and structural inequalities that underlie intergroup conflicts. Tynes et al. (2018) found that experiences of race-related traumatic events online were associated with negative mental health outcomes among adolescents of color, highlighting the potential harm of contact in contexts where power differentials are salient. Similarly, Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) noted that intergroup contact may be less effective in reducing prejudice when groups are characterized by large disparities in status or resources. This raises questions about the applicability of contact theory in contexts shaped by entrenched social hierarchies or systemic discrimination.

Furthermore, some scholars have critiqued contact theory for its focus on individual-level processes, which may neglect broader social and structural factors influencing intergroup relations. Vezzali et al. (2015) demonstrated that reading books from the *Harry Potter* series, which feature themes of tolerance and acceptance, was associated with reduced prejudice among

Italian children. While this finding supports the potential of contact to promote positive attitudes, it also highlights the role of cultural narratives and media representations in shaping intergroup perceptions. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of intergroup conflict requires a consideration of both micro-level interpersonal interactions and macro-level societal dynamics.

In summary, while contact theory has provided valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying intergroup relations, criticisms suggest that its applicability may be contingent on various contextual factors and that it may not fully capture the complexities of intergroup conflicts. Future research should address these limitations by examining the conditions under which contact fosters positive outcomes and by integrating multilevel perspectives to account for both individual and structural determinants of intergroup dynamics.

### **Contact Theory and Digital Communication**

Research exploring the application of contact theory within digital mediums, particularly in the context of intergroup relations and conflict resolution, is relatively limited but gradually expanding. One notable study by Tynes et al. (2018) examined the impact of race-related traumatic events experienced online on the mental health of adolescents of color. While not explicitly framed within contact theory, this research examines how digital interactions can perpetuate intergroup tensions and exacerbate conflicts, highlighting the need to understand the role of online communication in shaping intergroup dynamics and harmony. Similarly, studies investigating online interventions aimed at reducing prejudice and promoting positive intergroup contact provide insights into the potential application of contact theory in digital contexts.

Additionally, studies examining the role of social media platforms in facilitating intergroup contact offer valuable insights into the dynamics of digital intergroup relations. For instance, research by Kwon et al. (2018) investigated how online social networks can foster

cross-cultural interactions and reduce prejudice. By analyzing communication patterns and content shared on social media platforms, this study aims to help readers and future researchers understand how digital media can serve as contexts for intergroup contact and conflict resolution.

Contact theory remains a foundational framework in conflict studies, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of intergroup relations and prejudice reduction. While traditional applications have focused on face-to-face interactions, recent research has expanded the scope of contact theory to encompass digital contexts, reflecting the evolving nature of intergroup dynamics in the digital age. By understanding the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of contact, scholars and practitioners can harness its potential to promote social cohesion and mitigate intergroup conflicts in diverse settings.

### **Women's Cognitive Development**

Human development has been a field of study for thousands of years, pioneered by scholars such as Aristotle and Descartes. Erik Erikson (1958) initiated cognitive development research within the educational system by introducing his interpretation of the stages of psychosocial development, which examined humans in stages from infancy through death. Shortly following the work of Erikson came Jean Piaget's (1965) conceptualizing of the stages of cognitive development, whose work examined children's developmental psychology from infancy through about the age of 12. Using Piaget's stages of development, Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) focuses on development through the lens of morality. These early framers of cognitive development research provided the educational field with vital information about how humans learn and grow.

While these men helped shape the field of cognitive learning research, female researchers also furthered research into female development. Critics of earlier research felt female

development was missing as a variable, and the early theories did not map on to the experiences of development felt by girls and women. Nancy Chodorow (1974) contributed the concepts of "family structure and feminine personality," and her article examines how girls and women develop using the paradigm of mothering: "Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own" (p. 167). Her assertion of girls and women emphasizing the needs of others more often than boys and men was the first notable contradiction to the theories posed by Erikson and Piaget. In 1976, Jean Baker Miller entered the research space with a more vocal critique of the gap in psychological research, writing in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976): "the parameters of the female's development are not the same as the male's and ... the same terms do not apply" (p. 86). Baker Miller's vocal dissent against the universalizing oversights of early cognitive developmentalists was interlaced with the previously challenged arguments of Chodorow. Baker Miller (1976) asserts that women develop their sense of self and place importance on their ability to maintain relationships and connections with other women.

Though I prominently cite the work of authors like Gilligan and Belenky et al, some might argue I am taking an essentialist perspective about women's development and support the narratives presumed about women and historical discourses reducing plural cognitive, experiential, and psychosocial developments; however, as a researcher, I aim to use these authors to illuminate gaps in prominently cited research and data to expand the literature with a focus on gender differences. I refrain from using prominent concepts within mainstream social or political theories to frame questions of moral reasoning because, as a qualitative researcher, I am not looking at cause and effect related to gender and moral reasoning. As a personal note, I appreciate the framing of "why we do what we do," and understand the value of political theory

paradigms and what they offer studies related to power. However, I am choosing the perspective of cognitive development for its advantages of situating conflict in how an individual might perceive the world and conflict through a specific stage of development.

### **In a Different Voice: Placing Women's Cognition Front and Center**

In 1982, Carol Gilligan challenged the published research of her teacher and friend Lawrence Kohlberg. *In a Different Voice* (1982), Gilligan's seminal work, examines how boys and girls differ in their moral development using the same techniques as Kohlberg. Gilligan argued historical norms of cognitive development skewed towards men and framed women as deficient or non-normative. Based on the importance of relationships, women and all humans should implement what Gilligan names an "ethic of care" (1982, p. 174).

In Kohlberg's study, boys and girls were asked to respond to a moral dilemma presented through a narrative: a character, Heinz, who cannot afford a drug that his wife needs must decide if he will steal it to save her life (1981). The Kohlberg study found that most boys responded affirmatively, evoking the concept of "blind justice." This meant boys made their decisions based on how laws and judicial processes would adjudicate conflicts that would arise from Heinz stealing the drug. Alternatively, the girls did not evoke such a principle, but instead focused on fostering relationships, positing he ought to determine with the pharmacist if there were space for negotiation: acquiring the life-saving drug not through theft but through compromise or asking for assistance (Kohlberg, 1981). The concept of creative consensus, where all parties' needs can be met, is the primary focus within cognitive development theory concerning the development of girls, placing importance on mutual understanding and valuing relationships. Gilligan argues that, through Kohlberg's stages of moral development, the boys would be seen as within the correct stages of development, and the girls would be seen as morally deficient, as his study did

not apply to the lens of female development (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan's second dominant point established a new position of moral development: the ethic of care. In her research, she acknowledges the ethic of justice, but believes humans should be treated equally through an additional ethic of care as an alternative and nonviolent option: "While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt" (1982, p. 174). The ethic of care exposes gender-based oversights in Kohlberg's stages of moral development that do not consider the value of relationships, which are noted as the primary driver for most girls and women. However, Gilligan's style of composition led to multiple misinterpretations of her work: "The hardest times for me were not when people challenged what I said, but when I felt my voice was not heard" (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 20). Linda Kerber critiqued Gilligan's work, writing:

I agree with Gilligan that our culture has long undervalued nurturance and that when we measure ethical development by norms more attainable by boys than by girls our definition of norms is probably biased. But by emphasizing the biological basis of distinctive behavior . . . Gilligan permits her readers to conclude that women's alleged affinity for 'relationships of care' is both biologically natural and a good thing. (Kerber, 1986, p. 309)

Kerber argues that Gilligan's position reinforces the biologically determinist notion of women's nature. Indeed, uncritical reproduction of Gilligan's models and thus her use of general categories continues to reduce cultural, economic, and racial differences into a flattened category of female. Fraser and Nicholson, for instance, take issue with Gilligan's use of overly generic categories:

By constructing a female count model, [Gilligan] invited the same charge of false generalization she had herself raised against Kohlberg, although now from other perspectives such as class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity (Fraser & Nicholson, 1989, p. 33).

Regardless of criticism, Gilligan's work became a springboard for further research into and conceptual investment in female cognitive development theories. Following Gilligan, a collective group of female researchers and educators set out to examine how women learn. Belenky et al. (1986) focused on women's epistemology, or how women make meaning and learn information. Similar to Gilligan, they knew work had been completed in this area by a mutual teacher: William Perry. They felt Perry's 1970 epistemological development position sequence did not consider or contend with the female experience of how learning occurs and how meaning is made (although it is likely Perry would disagree with that summation). Perry argued women were assimilable into then-used scientific paradigms about learning epistemology established by male participants. However, to counter Perry, themes specific to women were much harder to uncover in a critique from Belenky et al.

### **Women's Ways of Knowing: How Women Learn and Make Meaning**

Using the same phenomenological interview approach, Belenky et al. carried out a novel study through conducting 135 interviews of women which focused on how they structured their own learning. Out of their research, Belenky et al. established their own epistemological perspectives, including silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge, resulting in 1986's *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

The first epistemological perspective is silence, which suggested a strategy women may use as a response to the pronouncement of authority figures that may seem passive or

unquestioning. In Belenky et al.'s estimation, women use silence as a survival tactic masked as obedience to a powerful and punitive authority, or as "deaf and dumb" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 24). This manifests in a woman's inner voice, with little awareness of the power of language for sharing her own thoughts, feelings, or insights (Belenky et al., 1986).

After silence comes received knowledge. In received knowledge, women learn and make meaning from authorities. Unable to make meaning for themselves yet, they rely on an expert to transmit knowledge. In this perspective, women do see themselves as a capable and efficient learners, acting as a sponge ready to soak up information. She does this using excellent listening and information recall to reproduce knowledge. Additionally, in this stage, she can come up with creative ways to store and retain knowledge for recall. The voice of the learner here is still more silent than not, as it is still intent on listening to take in the new information (Belenky et al., 1986).

Next, the authors introduce subjective knowing. In this perspective, the woman begins to formulate her opinion based on the information she has learned, but she relies on her gut feeling or inner voice. This way of knowing demonstrates that the learner can learn independently and analyze, which can be problematic to knowledge acquisition. Within her mind, a woman's opinions are unique, and she values her thoughts. Additionally, in this stage, she is fascinated with learning new points of view and not concerned about the truth versus reality. Relying upon her gut, the inner voice listens for what is right for her based on her inner truth. This is put into action through her voice—by speaking from her feelings and experiences—but she also listens to the needs of others without judgement (Belenky et al., 1986). In this stage, a woman begins to make meaning of the importance of others, without the awareness that valuing the other's perspective creates a meaningful connection.

The fourth perspective is where readers see a divide among the sexes, known as procedural knowledge. In procedural knowledge, the learner starts to recognize different frameworks or realms of knowledge, and she enjoys the evaluation and creation of her own knowledge. This is when the investigator mind acts and starts to see the world as it is; she becomes suspicious of unexamined knowledge. The modality of this knowledge is differentiated by separate knowing and connected knowing. In separate knowing, the learner uses logic, analysis, and debate to learn his or her argument. For example, men likely listen within a debate to prepare their rebuttal the act of separate knowing versus women who would listen and while they might disagree, would connect the perspective of the other into their thought, which is connected learning. Conversely, in connected knowing, the learner uses empathy, collaboration, and careful listening to inform their epistemology. This is more common in women, who listen to understand rather than to contest.

The final meaning-making perspective is constructed knowing. In this stage, a woman can formulate knowledge though strengthening previous positions but still examines, shapes, and shares her system of thought. The mind is connected to the heart and seeks the truth through questioning and dialogue. This is achieved through a blend of both connected and separate knowing, and the voice is empowered to critique arguments while also practicing empathetic listening. The balance of a woman's voice is evident when she speaks and listens, both done with confidence and care.

### **Modern Applications That Support Women's Cognitive Development**

More recently, research in women's cognitive development was again revisited by Belenky et al. through a series of essays in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power* (1996). These essays put "women's ways of knowing" into practical terms in various disciplines. Ann Stanton

discusses how she retooled her course design to facilitate learning by emphasizing how women are “thinkers and knowers” in the college classroom (Menkel-Meadow, 1996, p. 27). To Stanton, being aware of the knowledge perspectives put forward by Belenky et al. frames how she facilitates discussions, specifically identifying how separate and connected knowing exists. She challenges students in her courses to construct meaning in opposition to what they feel is more “natural” to expand their own personal meaning-making perspectives. Stanton points to Maxine Greene, an educational philosopher who describes Belenky et al.’s work as a vital tool in liberating women’s voices in academia. Greene argues that *Women’s Ways of Knowing* allows faculty to “break through the ‘frames and systems’ provided by old authorities, and ... create [their] own” (Greene, 2006, p. 68). Both Greene and Stanton attribute their reconstructed teaching approaches to the knowledge perspectives outlined by Belenky et al.

In another essay, attorney Carrie Menkel-Meadow describes how, when applied, the learning perspectives put forward by Belenky et al. have led to the creation of feminist jurisprudence and legal theory, which elucidate the negative silences in law classrooms and the absence of women’s voices in law writing (1996). For example, Menkel-Meadow draws attention and criticism to the formalized “Socratic method” of law pedagogy, where students are challenged by the professor and argue on the basis of separate knowing, re-enforcing that there is one “right way to know” (1996, p. 64). However, advancing Belenky et al.’s framework, Menkel-Meadow proposes that shifting approaches from a professor-lecturer model to a peer-education approach aligns more with the spirit of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Additionally, she writes that such an approach would eliminate the male bias repeatedly found in legal school pedagogy that silences minority voices, such as those of women, people of color, and “other” categories (1996). Both legal pedagogy and legal practice need to develop a more woman-centered approach.

For those who have focused on nonadversarial methods of resolving disputes and drawing clients and parties into participation in solving their own legal problems in a more democratic mode .... such as mediation and more creative resolutions. (Menkel-Meadow, 1996, p. 73)

This alternative resolution process—and nonadversarial approach—highlights the importance in women’s cognitive development of connection and relationships that Gilligan (1982) examines, a concept reinforced by Belenky et al. Using the paradigm of legal pedagogy and practice, the epistemological approaches presented in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* are put into modern-day action. Ultimately, women’s cognitive development research is young but has proven vital as an interdisciplinary approach to learning and constructing meaning in a more inclusive and empathetic way. The concepts put forward by Gilligan (1982), Belenky et al. (1986 & 1996) and the Stone Center at Wellesley College focus on how women grow in connected environments; I will explore how college sorority women, in group educational settings, make meaning and foster connections through harm-reduction discussions. These female pioneers have paved the way for development of purposeful action and learning in women’s cognitive development, and I can only hope to contribute to the growing body of research.

### **Women’s Sororities**

Women were unable to access the higher education learning institutions reserved for white men during the developing stages of American higher education. Though not intended consumers of the sorority experience, various men shaped the system and impacted the future of women’s fraternal experiences. The first Greek-Letter name fraternity was Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 at the College of William and Mary (Baird et al., 1991). Around 1840, higher education expanded to allow women to study with restrictions on academic areas, stricter curfews,

academic limitations, and more rigid dress codes (Peril, 2006). In 1870, the first women's Greek-Letter fraternity was founded at DePauw University and intentionally used the word "fraternity" prior to the coinage of the term "sorority." (Turk, 2004). Women's fraternities and the later-named sororities provided women with a cocurricular experience outside of the classroom, which included philanthropic work, academic partnership, community service, and an intimate network of other women for support and friendship (Turk, 2004). These small groups of women gathered to show how collective support and action, rather than isolated individualism, would help them achieve their goals and earn degrees (Turk, 2004).

The first official founding of women's fraternity and sororities is a bit of a contested topic, as Becque (2020) and Turk (2004) mention that Kappa Alpha Theta was the first women's fraternity founded. Conversely, Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu argue for this title as well. The confusion of this is due to the titles of the early groups being founded as societies rather than fraternities or sororities. Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu were initially founded as societies called Adelphean at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia, in 1851, later assuming the names Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu (as they are called today). As the number of women attending college grew exponentially, leaders of Kappa Alpha Theta recognized that the sorority could expand its benefit to more women and added three chapters in 1870. Kappa Alpha Theta, along with I.C. Sororis (Pi Beta Phi), Kappa Kappa Gamma, and Delta Gamma, expanded throughout the Midwest in the 1870s and early 1880s, framing the Panhellenic system we know today (Becque, 2020).

While early framers of each sorority created unity through ritual and established values and ideals to live by, the expansion of these groups led to the diverse membership of women from different hometowns, backgrounds, and cultures; women arrived at these groups with

different and varied perspectives on common issues and perspectives on urgent priorities (Turk, 2004). Following the success of growing chapters and organizations, the leaders of sororities had to maintain a sense of identity and purpose. Not only was there an increase in women attending colleges and universities, but also students of color who were prohibited from entering the same colleges or segregated into specific colleges and universities began to enroll in colleges at higher rates (Gillon et al., 2019). Many black students found their educational path at private and public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Systemically racist policies prevented black students from joining in the opportunities afforded to white students; therefore, a pathway was forged to create social organizations for black students. The first historically black sorority was Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated on January 15, 1908, at Howard University in Washington D.C. (Alpha Kappa 30 Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, n.d.). The black women who founded this chapter contended with an inherently racist society as well as the material effects of patriarchy (Gillon et al., 2019). Two more organizations followed Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. at Howard University, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated on January 13, 1913, and Zeta Phi Beta on January 16, 1920.

Due to the growth of the fraternal movement, the large size of the volunteer-run organizations created a push to have consistent staff support in centralized locations, such as central offices. By the 1950s, nearly every organization had a central office or headquarters (Baird et al., 1991). As organizations continued to define their focus and value, they began addressing social issues and behavior, which were not well received by student leaders. In the 1960s and 1970s, a change appeared in the attitude of the students on college campuses who protested against their institutions (Baird et al., 1991). One common protest demand was an end to the tradition of *in loco parentis* (*i.e.* a Latin phrase meaning in place of parents, which was

also a legal term that established the relationship between college students and school administrators) (Forrest, 2013). Students felt that they were subject to school rules that denied them fundamental constitutional rights like the freedom of speech, the freedom to live and congregate with others, and the right to vote (Forrest). Lower enrollment and interest in pledging plagued Greek organizations during this time of political activism and upheaval. These groups came with alternative expectations than other generations of student groups; many felt this system maintained an unfair or unequal sense of wardenship. Fraternities and sororities fought to survive on college campuses to provide the same experience the founders fought for, grounded in social connection and student enrichment.

The 1980s provided a resurgence of growth in members and numbers of chapters, largely thanks to the mainstream commercial success of the movie *Animal House*. This movie increased interest in Greek organizations and engendered imitations of its cinematically represented problematic behaviors. According to Baird et al. (1991), some colleges and universities brought charges against fraternities and sororities, and a few schools abolished the fraternal system from their campuses due to problematic and dangerous behaviors. Chapters struggled to recover without consistent organizational accountability for conduct standards and poorly managed structured recruitment processes (Baird et al., 1991). Sorority chapters found responsible for perpetuating significant hazing environments were closed, and ceased to operate (Baird, 1991). As a historical result, some campuses ceased investing into their fraternity and sorority communities; in many instances, they closed the organizations on campus.

The 1990s and 2000s, with the invention of the internet and more computer technologies such as cell phones and laptops, brought tremendous change to the way fraternities and sororities

were managed. Fraternity and sorority members and leaders not only dealt with ongoing and systemic hazing issues, but also began to examine the role of bullying behaviors and its impacts on mental health. As the internet and social media websites continued to develop, members of fraternities and sororities were scrutinized for problematic behaviors in social media posts, both individually and as chapters. Additionally, these reviews focused on behaviors that did not foster student safety and inclusion with today's college students. As a result, members from within Greek-Letter organizations and outside of the organizations are actively trying to "abolish Greek life" (Marcus, 2020). The organizers of the Abolish Greek Life Movement indicate that the fraternity and sorority communities perpetuated "incidences of racism, misogyny, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and sexual assault due to the systemic oppression within historically White fraternities and sororities" (Stewart, 2020). Leaders of the Abolish Greek Life Movement posit that, "The system is broken. We cannot adequately reform Greek life. We must abolish it" (Stewart, 2020).

### **Benefits of Sorority Participation**

Despite criticism, participation in sororities can be valuable to young adults during their college life, and during the life transitions that commonly occur during this time. Studies have supported the positive benefits of joining a sorority during college (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Further, the concept of socialization and peer support positively impacts a young student's development and social skill building (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perkins et al., 2011). In addition, the value of a shared experience with ideals and values can create a stronger sense of belonging for students and is more likely to increase their desire to stay in school, support their peers, and enjoy their membership after graduation (Strayhorn, 2011). Sororities can base their membership experience within bonded friendships and meaningful

connections and provide a system for student support and success in ways that other students would not experience without the closeness of a social sisterhood organization (Antonio, 2004; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

### **Negative Impacts of Sorority Participation**

There are sound and important reasons for why women join sororities; however, there is a strong argument made for why some women do not join or stay within their sororities. While many seek the social support system for growth and development, the impact of the social aspect creates environments that are centered around alcohol, sexual exploration and partying that can negatively impact a student's desire to remain a part of the sorority experience (Armstrong et al., 2006). Further, the perpetuation of gender norms within the role of the sorority and in conjunction with male fraternity interactions require a continued social norm of gender roles ascribed to women that they must assume. These include social and gender roles that could include sexual interactions, big brother/little sister programs, and remaining friends with men's groups who have a higher social capital to ensure your chapter retains their own high social capital, despite the other groups behavior or reputation around gender norms and women's safety (Forbert, 2000; Forbert et al., 2006; Locke & Mahalik, 2005). Lastly, women's sororities have seen an increase in the negative behavior of cyberbullying over social media and the role it plays in student safety, mental health, and commitment to the organization. Studies have examined the impact of social media communication between friends or coworkers and its impact on mental health and development (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2022; Coyne et al., 2019; Vásquez, 2021) but have not applied the same ideas to the sorority medium. I will use these to interrogate the experiences of sorority women who experience relational aggression among their sorority sisters to determine better understand the experience of that aggression, the impact the medium had (i.e. social

media, in-person, group chat) and how that impacts their development to address a gap in the current research.

### **Summary**

Heretofore explored independently and not yet connected or considered linked, the interrelated theoretical frameworks of this study (which include relational aggression, conflict styles and resolution spheres, and women's cognitive development) together help this research examine a present phenomenon based on real world experiences.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflicts among female Generation Z sorority members inflicted through digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) and how those women attempted to resolve conflicts digitally. A phenomenological study is well equipped to investigate real life situations and to maintain the integrity and wholeness of the experience (Creswell, 2007). The researcher's philosophical assumptions were focused on the idea that humans experience the world in a different view and that those views cannot be limited to short, quick answers, instead they need to be explored thoroughly to fully understand and learn about a person and a phenomenon. By interviewing members of college chapters, this study aimed to describe the phenomena through the lived, real-life experiences of the participants while remaining focused on the phenomenon at the center of the study. This study was guided by two questions:

1. What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms?
2. How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally?

This study was grounded within a social constructivist epistemology and interpretivist ontology. Social constructivism aims to explore how individuals make sense of their encounters and create shared perspectives in specific situations or settings (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Sororities are largely socially focused on their objective and create strong social connections among members usually through interactions with one another or groups (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perkins et al., 2011). This study's grounding explored how participants made meaning of these social interactions, in this case digital conflicts. Further, it examined not only

how meaning was made individually but also how participants constructed meaning about the conflict within a group's larger context.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As part of my subjective acknowledgements as primary researcher, I now note the research methodology selected—hermeneutic phenomenology—recognizes the researcher is unable to remove oneself from a state of the being present within the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1962; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Heidegger (1962) argued for the ever presence of the researcher and the phenomenon, rejecting the idea that researchers could suspend judgment, bias, or pre-conceived conceptions (Friesen et al., 2012). In hermeneutics, pre-conceived conceptions and biases are recognized and distinguished by the researcher as part of their inoperative process (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). My subjectivity is linked to my extensive knowledge of this work and my own anecdotal experiences, witnessed first-hand. However, as part of that reflection and bias acknowledgement, I was able to lean into the stories shared from participants to make a more formalized sense of relational conflict in digital spaces and learned new information as part of this iterative inquiry.

As a researcher who studies sorority women, I acknowledge the direct and indirect power dynamic that existed between myself, a male researcher, and the female participants. My limitations in understanding the participant's lived experiences was acknowledged and considered without comparison against my assumptions. To help eliminate possible biases, participants reviewed interview questions along with the female-dominated dissertation committee. Additionally, data and their interpretation was shared with participants as well as the committee to identify any unrecognized biases. Further, it is important to note that as women are not dependent upon men to advocate for themselves and be storytellers, these women did not

depend on me to share their stories for discovery. In my case, the participants entrusted me with their stories and allowed me to share their lived experiences and interpretations of life events as contribution towards research and enriching our understanding. As the researcher, I was responsible for confidentiality and developing an atmosphere that celebrated and engendered their vulnerability and sharing.

A challenge I experienced, but overcame, related directly back to the inability I had to understand the decisions and thought process of women. Studying women's relational aggression, I was be prepared to ask questions that helped me learn and support how meaning is made from the role of these participants, as I lacked the same cognition process as my participants. For over a decade, I have identified areas of reform and research that were needed to fulfill the ideal fraternity and sorority experience. As a professional that works in the industry, I remain committed and influential as a change agent to reform our systems for the goal of student-leader development, life-long friendships, and learning how to maintain and foster relationships with others who are similar and different. As a professional sorority man (a term I have dubbed jokingly and caringly), I am finally in a place where I am deemed an insider who is a protector of the women's experience based on my actions and words and with my openness of being both a feminist and a social justice advocate. Reform must be driven by data and based on the recommendations of someone who in the know and trusted within our professional spaces. Therefore, as someone with the ability to obtain a terminal degree I have contributed to the research of the sorority experience which provided further data needed to craft a safe and enjoyable member experience for life.

## **Research Methodology – Phenomenology**

This study design utilized a phenomenological approach and interrogated the lived experiences of Generation Z sorority women who experienced and attempted to resolve relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms. Creswell (2007) stated “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). Similarly, Vanderstoep and Johnson (2009) discussed how phenomenology seeks to explore both how individuals construct meaning of experiences and how an individual’s understanding of experiences contributes to shared meaning among groups. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the key to understanding qualitative research is the notion that meaning is socially constructed through individual interactions in the world. Social constructivism aims to explore how individuals make sense of their encounters and create shared perspectives in specific situations or settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Social constructivism centers upon the premise examining how human beings interpret experiences that are unique to their environments (Berger & Thomas, 1966). The bonds between sorority are deep and built between many members uniquely unto itself, with terms like “big sister,” “little sister,” “families,” and “twins.” Therefore, this study utilized a social constructivist approach to support the participants’ meaning making processes within the unique social environments. Using this epistemology, the research supported the exploration of relational conflict on both an individual level and at one which considered relationships within greater groups or chapters.

In this study, hermeneutical phenomenology was used to identify essential themes and the meaning of lived experiences (Friesen et al., 2012; Van Manen, 2014). According to Van Manen (2014), hermeneutic phenomenology pursued insight into the nature of a phenomenon through the reflection of lived experiences. Moreover, Friesen et al. (2012) posit that

hermeneutic phenomenology is more than description and to focus specifically on interpretation and meaning of lived experiences.

### **Standards of Rigor**

In qualitative studies, the researcher must address trustworthiness of the study. A distinguishing difference between quantitative and qualitative research approaches are the ways data are validated and established as reliable (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2015). Lincoln & Guba (1985) approached the need to address trustworthiness of qualitative data through confidence in findings, showing that findings were applicable in other settings, presenting findings that were consistent and repeatable, and how findings represented the experiences of research participants and not the researcher. The standards outlined by Daniel and Harland (2017), centered around higher education research, supported the efforts to ensure validity of the study. This paradigm was selected for its alignment with qualitative inquiry and higher education populations, both of which are at the center of this study. To support the rigor of qualitative study, the researcher demonstrated the systematic processes used to organize and analyze data (Daniel & Harland, 2017). In this study, the four criteria used to judge the trustworthiness included: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Creditability is vital in qualitative research. Credibility is built from the careful description of data collection and verification of data sources (Daniel & Harland, 2017). In this study credibility was established using thick descriptions, member-checking, and epoché or bracketing. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that thick descriptions of data provide an in-depth understanding of the background and the environment of participant experiences. By utilizing the phenomenological approach to interviewing participants, the researcher held semi-

structured interviews and focused questions on the lived experience of relational conflict, conflict styles and cognitive development with Generation Z members in collegiate sorority chapters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure credibility alignment, the researcher used an alignment chart to guide the credibility both in questions being asked during interviews and guided reflections of conflicts. Establishing interview protocols and credibility alignment provided a funnel for focusing on the phenomenon as central to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Next, member checking is a component of developing credibility and occurs when the researcher asks for each participant to give input regarding the study (Creswell, 2007). Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of the findings with participants. The researcher provided participants transcripts of interviews to ensure statements were accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and allowed for any adjustments and deletions to any or all parts of their interview transcript. Finally, through peer-reviewing the researcher relied on trained professionals, both in the doctoral committee, and outside the committee to comment on the research design, data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Peer-reviewing safeguards that the data collection and analysis process was in line with best practices in the field of qualitative research.

### **Transferability**

Unlike quantitative research (where transferability generally translates into how data is generalizable across multiple cases), qualitative research defines transferability as suggestive of findings that likely offer valuable lessons to other, similar settings (Daniel & Harland, 2017) through creating a “rich, thick description allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability” (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). To create transferable findings, the researcher provided

detailed descriptions of the research design, site setting, interview protocols and analysis procedures of the study. This allowed future researchers to study the findings and determine if outcomes are transferable to their site and duplicate the study if needed.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to whether research findings are consistent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By utilizing peer review and debriefing process after data analysis was completed, the researcher supported the validity of interpretation of data collected. The peer review process allowed for an external researcher to ask questions and further interpret the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to above efforts, the process of bracketing (or epochè) required meaningful and reflective work to ensure bias was not present, thus making dependability center around participant experience rather than the research's experience driving analysis.

### **Confirmability**

The purpose of confirmability in a qualitative research study is to show that the data and the conclusions drawn from the study were logical. Creswell states that “dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process” (2007, p. 207). Through the lived experiences of participants, the researcher interacted with women in sororities who have both experienced and inflicted relational conflict in digital platforms. The researcher's “outsider” perspective, being a cisgender male who was never a sorority member, contributed to understanding and interpreting the participants' statements. The researcher's positionality and self-awareness of this difference assisted in the confirmability of the study. Audit trails were also kept by the researcher to lead to the confirmability of this research. An audit trail, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), creates a clear description of the research design, data collection

procedures, and rationale for the decisions made and argues that confirmability finally occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability were achieved.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

The foundations of a research study are grounded by the theoretical frameworks implored by the researcher to inform both knowledge construction and conceptual and methodological alignment delivering impactful research outcomes. The multi-theoretical framework approach linked the alignment of this study from purpose to findings and was given great consideration when crafting the methodology.

Epistemology is defined as the theory of knowledge embedded into the overarching design of the study (Crotty, 1998), and the process of establishing a theoretical epistemology answers the questions of “how we know what we know.” In other words, it attempts to answer how knowledge is constructed by research participants. Crotty (1998) outlines two large epistemologies including objectivism where meaning is direct and without interpretation and constructionism which allows the individual to make sense or construct what the meaning of the experience or object. As researchers, the epistemology frames the entire direction and journey of research.

In this study, the researcher used a social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivism forces the researcher to allow the participant to make their own meaning based on interactions and experience of others within social settings (Bhattarcharya, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The connection of participants’ experiences of relational conflict and the meaning made from those experiences directly linked vital data to inform the research. Given that these relational conflicts and efforts to resolve them were interpreted differently among the

parties justified why a social constructionist approach to this qualitative inquiry aligned with the researcher purpose and questions.

As a qualitative study grounded in social constructivism, phenomenology was the selected methodology focusing the inquiry. This methodology connected strongly to the purpose and questions of the inquiry by focusing on the lived experience of the phenomenon and supported the research purpose and questions. With the trust given to the research team by the participants, the research team protected and honored the participants who shared stories and experiences central to the phenomena relevant to greater theories bolstering this study. Peoples writes “...phenomenological research is strictly aimed at understanding experience as lived” (2021, p. 3). Phenomenology allowed for the lived experience of the phenomenon, in this case relational conflicts which occurred digitally between Generation Z sorority women, to be constructed which provided alignment between the larger theoretical framework and the methodological framework.

Phenomenology can serve many functions, including theory, methodology, or analytical tool. For this study, the researcher used phenomenology as the methodology, but acknowledged that phenomenology had a connection in its own right as a theoretical framework, and supported the academic idea that phenomenology could be the only theoretical framework—if taking a purist stance was required (Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach required the investigator to acknowledge they are present in the world and making meaning every day and in many cases have connection or personal experiences within the phenomenon being studied. This concept is known as *dasein*, translated to “being there” (Heidegger, 1962).

Bracketing, or *epoché*, helps researchers close to the investigated topic by providing a process for identifying their own experiences and biases during inquiry. By avoiding the

suspension of the phenomenon in question, the researcher maintained a dance between the meaning making of the participant and the researcher's subsequent meaning making of the participants' responses. This dance is defined as the hermeneutic circle. Similarly, the hermeneutic circle was also used when the researcher began to analyze the data. To align this analysis process with the methodology the researcher used a process known as interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022), discussed in the data analysis section. By breaking down data into smaller sections or subthemes and connecting those sections into broader themes known as group experiential themes (GETs), the researcher was in a constant state of reaction and reflection. This process of evaluating the smaller pieces to the greater whole is circular in fashion and provided the researcher with a net and process of reflection and analysis, hence the name hermeneutic circle.

The next step in the process of theoretical alignment explored the connection of content level theories to the larger theory and methodology. While the constructivist approach supports phenomenology as a theoretical framework and methodology, this study relied on phenomenology as a methodology more than a framework. The design was braced by three theoretical frameworks that aligned the research purpose and question making this a multi-theoretical framework study. These theoretical frameworks included relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Little et al., 2003); conflict styles and resolution spheres (Aula & Kiira, 2010; Erickson & Johnson, 2012; Lederach 1995/2017; McElarney, 2023; Rahim, 2017), and women's cognitive development (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al., 1986).

A core tenet of the sorority experience is sisterhood. Sisterhood frames the deep connections between women within a chapter. Those deep bonds can lead to long-lasting friendships and support through major life events such as marriage, divorce, birth of children and

passing of loved ones. The value of those connections also supports student success and strong student development mentally and emotionally. Conversely, when drama and tension permeate into the bonds of sisterhood, cliques, passive aggression, cyberbullying, and direct anger occur causing strain on the bonding experience of the women and may lead to emotional or mental trauma. This negative behavior is formally defined as relational aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) define relational aggression as using a relationship or threat of the removal of a relationship as a means of harm (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Little et al., 2003). Actions such as developing cliques, using passive aggressive communication, or cyberbullying are examples of this relational aggression, but are later referred to as relational conflict in this study. A better understanding of the experiences and motivations behind relational conflict will assist others in understanding the phenomenon. The researchers professional experience observationally demonstrated strong evidence that relational conflicts hindered the interpersonal relationships among members and negatively impacted into a sorority chapter culture.

The second theoretical framework that shaped the research design is Rahim's (2017) conflict styles which include avoidance, dominating, compromising, obliging, and integrating. These conflict styles are widely used in conflict and leadership research and for the purpose of this study were useful given the lack of literature on digital conflict resolution. While widely accepted among conflict scholars, when applied in the digital space, this study asked participants to determine their style and coded to the styles to connect these styles to the relational conflicts. These conflict styles were not yet to be applied to a digital medium and this theoretical framework examined if the continued use of the lexicon in the digital space or the creation of a new lexicon is required. In addition to examining conflict styles, this study also asked participants about resolution attempts in the digital space. Conflict and dispute literature has

centered around three spheres of solutions including, conflict management (McElarney, 2023), conflict resolution (Aula & Kiira, 2010; Erickson & Johnson, 2012; Jehn, 2014), and conflict transformation (Lederach, 1995/2017). These are outlined in detail in the literature review of this resolution efforts, a more holistically painted picture will emerge drawing deep meaning to the phenomenon.

The last theoretical framework that grounded this inquiry involves women's cognitive development. This framework has lacked research for some time and is not expanded within different context or modern-day applications. The last examination of women's cognitive development was done in 1996 and did not consider digital communication as a process by which meaning is made among women. The founding research indicated that women have a strong and meaningful desire to preserve relationships with one another more than men due to their ability to care for others more and higher empathy skills (Gilligan, 1982). When applied to how woman make meaning in community with one another, Belenky et al. (1986) provided years of therapeutic counseling to women and crated five ways meaning is made including silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowing. Given the nature of the study which examined relational conflicts among women, continuing the exploration of women's cognitive development or meaning making has been applied to a new generation of women and in a completely different medium.

## **Research Design**

This section outlines the research design components of the study including research participants, site, membership role, data collection, data management and analysis, data representation, and ethical considerations.

## **Research Participants**

The individuals involved in this research were women who were current collegiate sorority members and have experienced relational conflict via a digital platform. Given the membership requirements of nearly all collegiate sororities, participants' enrollment status as college students was assumed. The participants considered for this study were collegiate women ranging in age from 18-24 years old, thus falling into the emerging adulthood range (Arnett, 2000). The researcher interviewed nine participants for this study, using a referral approach for participant solicitation by emailing colleagues in the field seeking recommendations for outreach; the researcher additionally posted promotional materials for the study in two Facebook groups for fraternity and sorority professional staff members. Both the email and promo materials are included in the Appendix. In addition, after the first interview, the researcher solicited other possible names from participants using a process called "snowballing." The participants under their own free will participated in semi-structured interviews, which are detailed later in this chapter. Participants were also under no obligation to participate in the study and were also able to withdraw from the study at any time if they so desired without any consequence from the researcher.

## **Research Site**

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted that qualitative design should include descriptive and holistic analysis of programs, institutions, or persons. Thereby, the research participants were selected from universities across the United States and interviews were done virtually via Zoom. The participants came from higher education institutions where they are members of collegiate sororities' chapters. Participants were recruited from a variety of chapter sizes and campus dynamics including unofficial popularity rankings or social tiers. This study did not rely on a

single site therefore a detailed analysis of the site could not be provided given the many variables of the institution types participants came from, however a synopsis of each participant can be found in Chapter 4.

### **Background and Role of the Researcher**

Many aspects of this research were considered and reflected upon to ensure that readers are aware of the many roles involved in the process, including the primary researcher's dual role as interviewer and researcher. The dual role of interviewer and researcher is an important consideration in the collection and use of these data. The researcher was aware of his influence and impact within the industry, as well as his role as a cisgender male working with female participants. However, the researcher's only intention was to gain an awareness and understanding of each participant's lived experience of specific relational conflicts experienced over digital platforms. It is also important to note earlier comments regarding the researcher's personal interest and the researcher's reflection about personal experience and is mindful and aware of personal bias.

### **Data Collection**

Creswell (2007) stated that "often data collection in phenomenological studies consists of in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with participants" (p. 61). All data was gathered through interviews with explicit permission from the participants and in full compliance with the Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. The use of observation and interviews are routine in qualitative research and provided a way of obtaining an inside view and understanding the lived experiences of research participants (Smith et al., 2022). Observations are helpful in crafting an understanding from a theoretical and professional perspective the behaviors of individuals involved in the research. Additionally, the researcher

kept a detailed journal from the beginning of the research project, throughout the group session until completion of analyzing data.

## **Interview Process**

Qualitative interviewing was used to obtain rich, descriptive data about the phenomenon being studied. Participants joined one semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interview. Individual interviews aimed to allow the participant to dig deep into their experience guided by prepared questions in advance (Bhattacharya, 2017). The purpose of these interviews was to encourage the participant to describe their lived experiences of enduring relational conflict inflicted over a digital platform. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that qualitative interviewing include: (a) deciding whom to interview; (b) preparing for the interview; (c) planning initial moves; (d) pacing the interview and keeping it productive; and, (e) terminating the interview and gaining closure (p. 270). They also reported the importance of being able to flow with wherever the interview goes: “Maintenance of flexibility so the interviewer can follow up promising leads or return to earlier points that seem to require fuller development is essential” (p. 270). The individuals in this research project were asked to participate in at least one interview that utilized the same interview question protocol and an optional elicitation guided by a separate interview protocol. This structure gave the researcher the opportunity to return to previous thoughts and emotions related to the experience and more fully gather an understanding of interviewee’s perspective within a real-life example jointly.

## **First Round Interview Purpose and Questions**

Interview questions were constructed with an attention to the current literature on the topics and frameworks which can be found in the appendix section. The goal of the first interview was listening to the lived experiences of participants as they discussed relational

conflict with respect to their narrative, with a focus on narrowing down the phenomenon of relational conflict inflicted digitally and the effort to resolve the conflict which are central to the study. Given the nature of this topic and the assumption that participants were honest, setting an environment between the investigator and the participant was key for allowing them to reveal aspects of their experience that were both difficult to replay but also did not shed participants in a positive or uplifting light. Building rapport with the participants was key for establishing trust and a non-judgmental environment to achieve the full narratives of participants lived experiences which lead to rich data and meticulous analysis. Interviews were audio and video recorded using Zoom and initial transcripts were provided via Zoom and reviewed for accuracy via Microsoft Word by the researcher. Once transcribed, each participant was provided the transcription for their review and editing, a process known as member checking. Member checking is considered an important aspect in qualitative interviews for supporting validity and trustworthiness. Member checking allows the participant to validate the information that was transcribed and information that was observed and offering amendments when requested by the participants (Merriam, 1998). This element in qualitative inquires helps to solidify triangulation and allowed the participants to partner in the process. In the second round of interview, the researcher and participants reviewed the first-round transcripts for accuracy and provided the opportunity to amend for any corrections or changes needed. This was done to notate this validation being recorded as part of the second interview process for deeper validity and rigor.

An important item to note in the first round interview protocol was how the participants were introduced to the Rahim (2017) conflict styles. This study did not utilize any mixed methodologies therefore a survey or pre-assessment tool measuring individuals' conflict styles was not utilized. Given the possibility that participants would not be familiar with these styles,

the researcher during the interview shared a PowerPoint slide with each of them outlining the styles. Participants were asked to review the slide and the styles and then were prompted with a series of questions regarding their styles in various environments and supporting rationale for why they selected their responses.

### **Second Round Interview Purpose and Questions**

This study used a two-round interview process for deeper meaning making of the topic central to the study and allowed the participants to share their way of making meaning in two settings using different approaches. While the second-round interview used a semi-structured interview process, the second interview was guided by a real example of a digital conflict that the participant brought to directly share their relational conflict that occurred over the digital platform. The prompt before the elicitation and the questions for the second round interviews can be found in the Appendix. This joint process was done so that the researcher and participant could jointly examine the interaction. Opposed to a traditional discourse analysis approach where the investigator is interpreting the statements or writings, this approach allowed both a practical examination of a real-life example but also the meaning made with the participant alongside the researcher further validating the researcher's interpretation. Further, this approach allowed the participant and the researcher to call back to the conflict styles discussed in the first interview and find areas of congruency and dissonance. This process also allowed for a second data collection process which created more richness to the data and rigor of the study. Additionally, with the participants' permission the lived examples were used to deepen the findings of the study in the analysis section. Not all participants engaged in the second-round elicitation interview. Of the nine participants, five participated. Three of the remaining four did not participate as they did not have or could not find the real example to walk through an elicitation

and one participant declined to participate in the second interview. The second interview was also transcribed like the first interview and provided to the participant for member checking and validity.

An important note about this second round elicitation was the role the researcher played in the process during questioning. With a deep understanding of conflict and mediation, it was possible the researcher could have assumed a role of a conflict coach rather than a subjective analyzer of the conflict and focusing the inquiry further into a coaching conversation rather than centering the participants lived experience. To combat this possibility, the researcher followed a guided interview protocol process relying on questions and worked hard to only seek clarity on points made by the participants and asking further questions. Additionally, the researcher journal was an imperative tool to process reactions and emotions from the elicitations which redirected much of the considerations and thoughts around coaching the participants for healthier conflict experiences.

### **Researcher's Journal**

The data analysis process is discussed at length in the next section, but the act of reflection was a required step in the analysis process that guided this study, which used the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Within the constructivist approach, the researcher utilized a broad skill set of approaches to successfully listen to the participants experiences and not interpret anything but the direct experience germane to the phenomenon being studied. To engage in meaningful work as a qualitative researcher, the researcher utilized self-reflexive exercises as outlined by Denzin & Lincoln (1994) and the concept of researcher-as-bricoleur. The researcher-as-bricoleur principle required the researchers to reflect so they

could address bias or hunches, while also noting opportunities for improvements prior to the starting of something new, within the study.

Remaining true to the IPA process, the researcher engaged in epoché or bracketing which required the investigator to share his own thoughts and ideas about the phenomenon before beginning the research through self-interviews or peer interviews (Smith et al., 2022). Epoché is a required step in the reflexive process when the researcher has similar personal experiences or deep professional experiences that might influence the analysis. As outlined in the researcher background section, the researcher is a professional in the fraternal field and has worked directly as a mediator and solution-seeker for relational conflicts and without question has a deep professional experience which has resulted in personal beliefs about relational conflicts that were suspended during analysis to the best possible effort. Engaging in self-interviews or peer interviews about the phenomenon and along with video blog entries after interviews so that reactions could occur prior to analysis, the researcher remained consistent with the IPA process and committed to the hermeneutic circle reflection within the phenomenology method. Peoples (2022) challenges the visual of a circle and illustrates the process as more of a spiral because a circle implies no change just circular through whereas a spiral changes direction in a circle motion; therefore, Epoché allowed the researcher to have a different or changed consideration of the topic and allowed for new themes, patterns or ideas to emerge that were not present prior, thus demonstrating the power of the hermeneutic spiral allowing for changes in direction and thought as the research continues.

Table 3.1. Data Inventory Table

| Source of Data                      | Number of pages           | Number of pages |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Nine first-round interviews         | 12 per participant (avg.) | 108             |
| Five elicitations interviews        | 8 per participant         | 40              |
| Researcher Journal & Self-Interview | 24                        | 24              |

## Data Analysis

Through qualitative analysis, the focus of the researcher is to explore and find the meaning making behind the researchers' questions and purpose. "Quantitative analysis calculates the mean. Qualitative analysis calculates meaning" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 13). This statement accurately defines the deeper connection to the research that is possible when doing qualitative research compared to quantitative research. Using the necessary skills for coding as outlined by Saldaña (2021) the researcher must be organized, have perseverance, deal with ambiguity, possess flexibility, be creative, maintain rigorously ethical standards, and possess an extensive vocabulary. Overall, qualitative researchers must use skills to ensure strong data analysis in an iterative process to obtain deep meaning making and analysis of the why behind the research question. Data from interviews, researcher epoché, and examples provided by participants, common themes were found in the dissection of the lived experiences of participants to foster interpretive meanings (Saldaña, 2021).

Data analysis was grounded using the IPA approach as outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Grounded in hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation, IPA required to researcher to make sense of the participants experience while also making sense of the participants and their self – the interrogation examined the experience for the participant but also the sense the participant was making of that experience (Smith et al., 2022). While major themes were coded out of the

analysis, each participants' experience was realized before processing the similarities or differences among the participants as a group. IPA is helpful in the analysis of a phenomenological study when the researcher has a personal experience with the topic being investigated (Smith et al., 2022). As stated previously, the researcher has a long-standing professional experience in working with sorority women in conflict and has seen matters similar to this study personally but was required to suspend bias and preconceived ideas to avoid impacting the study or failing to provide the lived experiences directly from the participants as called upon by the IPA method. To follow the analysis process outlined by Smith et al., (2022), this study followed the five phases of IPA including: (a) working towards experiential statements or personal summaries, (b) working towards case-level or participant-level summary, (c) working towards cross-case themes, and finally (d) working towards a linear account of the thematic structure.

Phase one included working towards experiential statements by getting to know the data and the researcher's interests and preconceptions about the data followed by conducting detailed exploratory analysis and finally articulating the main claims about the meaning of a person's experience based on their lived experience. Phase one included reflexive readings of the data as the researcher first, and reacting to eliminate wrong assumptions or preconceptions, a process known as bracketing or epoché. Once complete, the researcher then conducted detailed exploratory analysis of the data doing a line-by-line analysis using descriptive coding methods (Larkin et al., 2006). This descriptive coding process examined things that mattered to the participant such as objects of concern like events, relationships, concepts, or processes. It explored the meaning of those concerns for a participant which are called experiential claims. Finally, the researcher characterized the participant's stance or reaction to those concerns and

claims. When all compiled together the researcher ended the first phase of IPA and articulated the main claims through experiential statements which showcase their meaning making and bridge phase one into phase two.

In phase two of the IPA process, the researcher began working towards a case-level or participant-level summary. This process was completed by organizing the work completed in phase one around main claims and supplementing it with annotations or in vivo coding examples. This clustering of statements was put into candidacy consideration for larger themes for phase three but hold relevancy as a theme from the summary of the participant's analysis. This process was guided by what struck the researcher as important and relevant, as well as, looking at preconceptions and questions that were still outstanding from the participant's interviews. The next step of the phase merged the analysis into a consolidated case analysis that mapped the participants' themes into personal experiential themes (PETs). These PETs ultimately helped formalize participant analysis; and each participant had their own detailed summary analysis usable for the next phase which examines all participants together.

Table 3.2. Example of a portion of the IPA Analysis Table for Experiential Statements and Explanatory Notes for Margaret

| MARGARET                                                      | PG; LN      | QUOTE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>PET 1. RELATIONAL FACTORS FOR CONFLICTS AND RESOLUTION</b> |             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Subtheme 1a. <i>Meaningful Friendship and Deep Connection</i> |             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| EX ST: Dominating personalities.                              | 10; 331-333 | ...it is very hard for me to coexist with dominating personalities in conflict and to watch them do conflict in that way. As a woman it is harder when another woman has this style because dominating women are ruthless in messages. I know this because I become that person when I am matched with a dominating personality, I become ruthless right back.” |
| EX ST: Professional versus friendship interactions.           | 4; 140-143  | “I maintain being a professional and being in a group with her but that is what I do for my organization. As far as her and I as one on one friends, I am not interested so I don’t operate as a friend, only professional associate.”                                                                                                                          |
| Subtheme 1b. <i>Resolution Considerations</i>                 |             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| EX ST: Didn’t want to consider resolution.                    | 4; 125-127  | “...we had no relationship to go off of at this point it was like complete cold messaging and I was like I don’t know you and I don’t want to have a conversation anymore.”                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| EX ST: Inauthentic resolution or game playing.                | 8; 253-255  | “Instead of resolving this emotional conflict that we have between us, it is less about resolution and more about game play devote of emotional repairing considered. It is completely fabricated and inauthentic.”                                                                                                                                             |
| EX ST: Can be nicer and meaningful in person.                 | 8; 258-263  | “I’ve seen a lot of examples of like people in a group chat being rancid but then in person they are so kind. It is evident that people are much nicer in person because there’s an actual connection which makes it more meaningful.”                                                                                                                          |

Phase three of the IPA process required the researcher to work towards cross-case study themes. By using the detailed summary analysis of each of the participants and their corresponding PETs, the researcher began to examine descriptive themes and underlying themes that are not as obvious but deduced from the analysis. This secondary round of coding clustered the individual themes or PETs into group experiential themes (GET). The GETs were the concepts and findings that were applicable to all participants and informed the larger patterns or findings of the study which would be included in the final write up. The GET Table from this study can be found in Appendix G.

Table 3.3. Example of a portion of the IPA GET Analysis Table

| GET 1. <b>CONFLICT INITIATION &amp; ESCALATION</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Subtheme 1a. <i>Just text me</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                |
| <b>Quote</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>N.#; L#</b> |
| "I know when I have an argument over text, I am very nervous to see the person again because it's like a pause, but I know the fight will start up again but only back over text."                                                                                                                                                                        | Z, 8; 256-258  |
| "I've seen a lot of examples of like people in a group chat being rancid but then in person they are so kind. It is evident that people are much nicer in person because there's an actual connection which makes it more meaningful."                                                                                                                    | M, 8; 258-263  |
| "I would see her at <u>school</u> and it was like nothing happened because she and I didn't actually argue face-to-face."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Z, 2; 56-57    |
| "Yes, we talk about it in chapter...but it is often since we are talking broadly about it, it is not effective. The President will say something like, 'You know this isn't the first time and won't be the last time but please stop – what is said here, stays here.' It happens <u>over and over again</u> ."                                          | P, 3; 88-92    |
| "I kept asking to take this conversation offline and no one ever takes anyone up on that offer, or at least they didn't with me and this situation."                                                                                                                                                                                                      | S, 3; 81-82    |
| "Digitally, it pretends to be personal like a real conversation but then when girls are in person there's no communication - nobody's fighting, like it never existed because they save <u>it</u> so it all stays digital. So then when we come together in person nobody wants to say it out loud cause it makes it more real versus just texting them." | L, 2-3; 65-70  |
| "The girls who use the GroupMe really want to be heard but only will say their feelings behind a screen never in <u>person</u> but they want to be heard."                                                                                                                                                                                                | N, 11; 352-353 |
| Subtheme 1b. <i>Fear of face-to-face confrontation</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                |
| "I think it's a fear of like direct confrontation. It's comfortable for a lot of people, so a lot of times it's like people want to get their feelings out and like want it to be known they're angry but they don't want to directly confront the <u>person</u> but they want everyone else to know who they are beefing with, without saying who."      | B, 2; 62-66    |
| "I'm way more comfortable with navigating conflict in person because digital conflict is a no man's land. It is the unknown where I get worried and there is a lot of unknown digitally."                                                                                                                                                                 | M, 11; 359-361 |

The final phase was writing the findings through a linear analysis of the thematic structure. This process required a recall of the researchers own preconceptions, participant PETs and then the entire participant pool GETs. Using triangulation which obtained cross-validation between PETs and GETs the validity of the theme and study as a whole became clearer and met the standards of rigor outlined. Once completed, granulated themes drove outcomes and implications which supported the significance and practical application of this study.

### Software and Data Management Processes

For this study, the researcher did not utilize software such as NVivo for data analysis as recommended by Smith et al., (2022), in order to allow the researcher to fully live with the data. The analysis was rich within the IPA process and therefore systems like Zoom was used to

record and support the transcription of the interviews and elicitations. The researcher transcribed each interview after it was conducted to ensure accuracy of the transcription process.

Additionally, the researcher used Microsoft Word to complete all organization of PETs and GETs. Finally, using index cards and a bulletin board, the researcher laid out all PETs for analysis and coupling of shared experiences together.

### **Ethical considerations**

Many ethical considerations were contemplated with this study. Considerations included the population, the setting, confidentiality, and the individuals' experiences and possible challenges with discussing the conflicts endured. I was aware of the need for a strong level of confidentiality and privacy of the participants. To ensure this privacy, documents were password protected and placed on secure hard drives and protected. Participants remained confidential with pseudonyms. While anonymity was not guaranteed given I, as the researcher, knew the identity of each participant, disclosure of those names, schools or organizations was only kept with myself therefore making confidentiality achievable. Finally, member checking allowed the participants to determine the level of shared data and interpretation prior to releasing the study's consequential findings.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflict among female Generation Z sorority members inflicted through digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) and how those women attempted to resolve digital conflicts. Nine sorority women participants shared meaningful insights and experiences during their interviews and follow up elicitations. Using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) qualitative methodology, I aimed to understand the meaning made from these lived conflicts to understand the phenomenon of digital conflicts and beginning interview strategies.

Two research questions guided this study. Firstly: *What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms?* And secondly: *How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally?* The broad nature of these questions allowed for the openness of responses to an area of conflict research that is limited so that researchers may begin to understand the phenomenon of digital conflict and resolution. The first part of this section provided a detailed overview of the participants, an overview of the group experiential themes (GETs), an outline of the GETs in relation to both research questions and a conclusion of the findings. This study contributed to a new modality of conflict and resolution while also providing personal accounts of lived experiences by Generation Z sorority women who experienced these digital conflicts.

### Study Participant's Profiles

Nine current collegiate sorority women participated in the study which included one 60-minute interview with the researcher and five participated in a follow-up interview elicitation where the participant shared a lived experience in real-time with the researcher of the conflict

discussed in the initial interview. Participant details appear in Table 4.1, followed by a descriptive profile of each participant. To protect identities, all students when referencing their higher education institution were amended to College State University. Further, if a participant referenced their organization or chapter designation it will reflect Iota Iota Iota given the non-existence of the fictitious sorority. Finally, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym. All participants met the participant eligibility requirements including: (a) they were between the ages of 18-24, (b) current collegiate members in a sorority, and (c) experienced a digital conflict with someone they deemed as a friend where there was the establishment of a relationship.

Table 4.1. Participant Description Table

| <i><b>Name/Pseudonym</b></i> | <i><b>Age/Grade</b></i> | <i><b>Initiated Year</b></i> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Margaret                     | 20/Junior               | Fall 2021                    |
| Phoebe                       | 20/Junior               | Spring 2022                  |
| Dominque                     | 22/Senior               | Fall 2021                    |
| Leslie                       | 20/Sophomore            | Spring 2022                  |
| Bella                        | 21/Junior               | Fall 2021                    |
| Jenny                        | 19/Sophomore            | Fall 2022                    |
| Nadine                       | 20/Junior               | Spring 2022                  |
| Shaye                        | 18/Freshman             | Fall 2023                    |
| Zoey                         | 18/Freshman             | Fall 2023                    |

## **Margaret**

A junior at College State University and studying a field within the sciences. She started college during the beginning of the pandemic and joined her sorority in the fall of 2021 through the formal recruitment process so she could make friends and find a social outlet. Her university has a more relaxed sorority community, and she has served in many leadership roles within the chapter which has required her to be a part of and resolve several conflicts.

## **Phoebe**

A current junior at College State University studying design, she joined a sorority to make new friends and connect herself back to the campus which does have a large commuter population. She loves her sorority experience and has held many chairman roles and currently is holding an executive board leadership position. Her conflict detailed the issues of confidential information being leaked to others outside of the organization which created a large rift in the chapter GroupMe and fostered massive issues of mistrust and blame among her chapter sisters.

## **Leslie**

More of an observer of a massive digital conflict occurring over the chapter GroupMe, Leslie is a current sophomore member of her sorority which is the underdog group of her campus. She joined the group because she felt the most support in her identity compared to others on campus. Hailing from a small town and an avid drama avoider, the conflict she experienced tainted her sorority experience as she saw the harsh and mean ways sisters would speak to each other which has caused her to back away from her chapter.

## **Bella**

Another student who started college during the COVID era, as a natural introvert sought out a sorority to further develop her friend group and extrovert side. Finding the sorority community at College State a bit smaller than others, she felt less intimidated by the joining process and had a positive experience. As a member of her chapter, she is in the GroupMe and finds the conflicts there are often pointed and intentional often resulting in little to no change or resolution but just hurt feelings and drama. She details an experience where she was the target of these types of attacks during her interview.

## **Dominique**

A very extroverted woman, she came to College State University in the middle of the pandemic and after being on campus was forced to return home not once but twice because of Covid outbreaks which made the process of making friends very difficult. A unique aspect of her first semester was that only freshmen were on the campus. Not going through recruitment until her sophomore year, Dominique has loved being in a sorority and insists she has found lifelong friends. Her conflict was regarding a group communication for an apparel item and how her tone was heard digitally by her conflict partner and the continued fallout from her questioning.

## **Jenny**

Coming to college as a legacy, meaning her mother was also in the same sorority, Jenny knew she wanted to be a part of a sorority when arriving at College State. Hailing from a small town away from College State and attending a large college, she desired the ability to connect with others and open her mind and experiences to things she had not yet seen. Becoming actively involved in her sorority's philanthropic efforts, she took on leadership and planning roles to make her chapter's philanthropic impact bigger and better. Her conflict experience details the challenges she faced while planning for a major event and the experiences encountered by others who made execution and planning very difficult.

## **Nadine**

As a health sciences major, Nadine was drawn to College State for its strong academic programs. While in her courses she met three women who were in the sorority Nadine would later join as she found them to be friendly and academically minded. Going against her parents' wishes to join a sorority, Nadine has found great joy in her experience but does not care for the stereotypes that are placed upon sorority women. Nadine has experienced conflict with her close

friend in the chapter that has occurred both in text and in person which has required her to find new friends and let go of past friendships.

### **Shaye**

A recent joiner to her sorority, Shaye was immediately drawn to joining a sorority for academic support and mentorship. Coming from a small town she was reserved about the idea of College State given its size and demographics but found the joining process very fun. Since she is new to the sorority, Shaye's conflict experience was not connected to her sorority experience but rather an experience she had during her final year of high school regarding a social media post she made commenting on another individual's post which caused large backlash and followed her to college during the joining process.

### **Zoey**

Starting college recently, Zoey joined a sorority within the first few weeks of school after talking to other friends at different schools about their experiences. She joined to secure better housing and establish meaningful friendships and find older female mentors. While new in her sorority experience, Zoey outlines her conflict experience that occurred in the summer between a friend who as time drew closer to leaving for college their friendship became more and more strained thus resulting in a large fight and loss of friendship.

## **Group Experiential Themes**

Aligning with the process outlined within IPA, each participant's interviews were transcribed and analyzed for their personal experiential themes (PETs). After the establishment of PETs for each participant, the next process required a cross-analysis of each PET to form group experiential themes (GETs) reflecting the broader groups' lived experiences which is shown below in Table 4.2. The GETs served as the broad category or theme that was presented

across the larger participant pool. Under each GET, subthemes were discovered and broken down to narrow down the findings and their connection to one another. After the establishment of the four GETs including conflict initiation and escalation, digital dynamics, relational considerations, and conflict styles and resolution strategies, subthemes were nested under each to provide the context to the bigger theme.

Table 4.2. Group Experiential Themes (GET) Table Overview

| <b>GET</b>                                       | <b>Connected Subthemes</b>                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| GET 1: Conflict Initiation and Escalation        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just text me</li> <li>• Fear of face-to-face confrontation</li> <li>• Digital destruction</li> <li>• Intentional word choice</li> <li>• Group conflict escalation</li> </ul> |
| GET 2: Digital Dynamics                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screenshots and receipts</li> <li>• It is a screen not a person</li> <li>• Single-sided interpretation and deeper meaning</li> <li>• Little inhibition</li> </ul>            |
| GET 3: Relational and Societal Influences        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of friendship drives resolution outcome</li> <li>• Female friendships and perceptions</li> <li>• Societal expectations and realities</li> </ul>                    |
| GET 4: Conflict Styles and Resolution Strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women and conflict</li> <li>• Conflict styles</li> <li>• Resolution</li> </ul>                                                                                               |

The first section of findings answered the first research question: What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms? This section highlighted three of the four GETs and provided accounts from

the participants within each of the subthemes. The second section guided the answer to the second research question: How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally? The second question is answered by the final GET and will demonstrate the responses of the participant's lived experiences both from the interviews and elicitation process.

### **Findings: First Research Question**

Findings related to the first research questions combined the results from participant interviews and second interview elicitations in which examples and narratives of lived experiences of conflicts were explored and reviewed. Each of the participants outlined several components of the digital conflict and the various ways social media or the digital nature changes the conflict. Three of the four GETs were classified under this first question as it answered the broad question given the early nature of this type of research into digital conflict occurring between individuals or groups with relationships. The three GETs answering the first research question included: (a) conflict initiation and escalation, (b) digital dynamics, and (c) relational influences coupled with societal effects.

### **Group Experiential Theme 1: Conflict Initiation and Escalation**

As a group experiential theme, this first GET examined the participants' experiences around how the conflicts often started and the modality of that conflict initiation. Along with conflict initiation, this section also explored how the conflicts escalated between parties or within the group. All participants talked about both the conflict initiation process as well as the escalation process. As a major GET, there were five subthemes gleaned from analyzing the interview and elicitation data. These subthemes provided nuanced details within this GET and included the idea of texting over a face-to-face interaction, producing digital destruction with

words and processes, being intentional about words and phrases used, and how it impacted the group dynamics as others became a part of or witnessed the conflict.

### **Subtheme 1a: Just text me**

Throughout the interviews, the participants shared their preferred process of communication is mostly digital. Many talked about the fears of engaging with one another in person but were also worried about digital fights. A unique dynamic discussed was how the fight would pause during in-person interactions. Zoey shared this experience by saying, “I know when I have an argument over text, I am very nervous to see the person again because it’s like a pause, but I know the fight will start up again but only back over text.” This concept of seeing the person after a fight for it to only be paused but still have remaining tension was a common theme also discussed by Margaret in her interview, “I’ve seen a lot of examples of like people in a group chat being rancid but then in person they are so kind. It is evident that people are much nicer in person because there’s an actual connection which makes it more meaningful.” Unlike Zoey, Margaret felt that people use harsher language when texting in a fight, and if they were in person, it would be a more meaningful resolution. They both noted the difference in interactions when fighting digitally but then seeing each other in person as being less hostile or argumentative. This was also shared by Zoey later when she shared, “I would see her at school, and it was like nothing happened because she and I didn’t actually argue face-to-face.”

Along with the idea of preference being communicating digitally, participants indicated base resolution efforts began over texts while others were more face-to-face. In the case of Phoebe, she shared about her chapter leadership asking the members to stop it but broadly which usually did not result in any changes to the behavior. Phoebe shared:

Yes, we talk about it in chapter...but it is often since we are talking broadly about it, it is not effective. The President will say something like, 'You know this isn't the first time and won't be the last time but please stop – what is said here, stays here.' It happens over and over again.

A frustrating experience for Phoebe who often experienced the conflict in the chapter's GroupMe, she wanted more action to stop the behavior. Engaging in a conversation with individuals in person about digital conflict was part of the experiences shared but Shaye felt like that offering was never considered with her conflict experiences, "I kept asking to take this conversation offline and no one ever takes anyone up on that offer, or at least they didn't with me and this situation." The request to move the conversation to an in-person forum was something many did not consider due to the worry of the face-to-face conflict, which will be discussed in the next subtheme with more detail but these requests according to Shaye never were accepted. Leslie provided a consideration for why those offers were not taken up for moving the conversation in person. She shared:

Digitally, it pretends to be personal like a real conversation but then when girls are in person there's no communication - nobody's fighting, like it never existed because they save it so it all stays digital. So then when we come together in person nobody wants to say it out loud cause it makes it more real versus just texting them.

Participants' reflections indicated that digital communication is not only a preferential choice to address conflicts and noted the several differences for the preference compared to face-to-face conflict interactions. Regardless of the modality of the conflict, Nadine shares the goal of her experiences with the chapter's GroupMe and why she and her sisters prefer to just

text their conflict partner, “The girls who use GroupMe really want to be heard but only will say their feelings behind a screen, never in person but they value being heard.”

### **Subtheme 1b: Fear of face-to-face confrontations**

Connected to the first subtheme, the next theme gleaned from the interviews was the participants’ fear of face-to-face conflicts. The prevailing ideas within this subtheme relate to personal avoidance of conflict and the need to match the speed of a conflict playing out face-to-face versus a digital conflict where the pacing is established by both parties. The final section of this subtheme addressed how participants shared an increased self-confidence during digital conflicts and their ability to confront their conflict partners compared to face-to-face.

Just like the point Nadine made in the last subtheme, Bella shares why her sisters use the GroupMe for conflict rather than just going to the person face-to-face:

I think it’s a fear of like direct confrontation. It’s comfortable for a lot of people, so a lot of times it’s like people want to get their feelings out and like want it to be known they’re angry but they don’t want to directly confront the person, but they want everyone else to know who they are beefing with, without saying who.

As shared by Bella, she witnessed the dissonance between wanting to be heard and addressing the conflict while also not wanting to name the person or confront them face-to-face citing her fear of confrontation. Another participant took the opposite view of Bella by talking about the fear of digital conflict given the uncertainty of the resolution compared to a more understood process when talking face-to-face. Margaret stated, “I’m way more comfortable with navigating conflict in person because digital conflict is a no man’s land. It is the unknown where I get worried and there is a lot of unknown digitally.” In her experience, she feels more in control

of the process and subsequent outcome when having conflict face-to-face compared to digital conflict which was a very different perspective than her peers.

When discussing face-to-face conflicts, a theme that continued to resonate among several participants was the preparation of the conflict and the pacing of a face-to-face interaction which sparked anxiety and fear in many as they described their experiences. Zoey shares, “I think that is the biggest thing about being able to text somebody in an argument, you don’t have to come up with everything on the spot. I shut down in conflict so it’s easier when it’s over text.” Within her statement, Zoey shared a common reason why face-to-face conflict produces anxiety within the population, the back and forth being meaningful and profound. Participants found that a face-to-face conflict required deeply thought-out points and quickly crafted retorts compared to a more authentic and vulnerable discussion where pace and point are not as important as listening and resolution. Nadine shared in a reflection that digital conflicts embolden her more to speak her mind, but she prefers the digital method because of the pacing. Nadine shares, “Even though I was standing up for myself, I wasn’t quite ready for the back and forth of the conflict.”

The first two subthemes within the GET illustrate how the participants view the conflicts often starting and continuing through relegating the conversation to texting due to a fear of face-to-face confrontation with their conflict partners. The remaining subthemes speak to how the conflicts escalate after they have been initiated both individually between conflict partners and also when occurring within group messaging threads.

### **Subtheme 1c: Digital destruction**

An image often painted after war or natural disasters, participants used the term destruction and referenced related imagery during their interviews and elicitation to encapsulate their own lived experiences of digital conflicts. Participants often spoke about digital conflicts

being much more dramatic and over-the-top and many of them used the same common phrase of dropping a bomb on the other person or within the group. In particular, during the elicitation process, one participant shared a conflict experience that she observed as a member of the GroupMe:

A big long message got posted from a member right before graduation which just like ripped the group and a bunch of leaders to shreds about being transphobic and racist. So she posts this and then just dips. Like blows up the group and then left so no one could respond or even defend themselves that she like named in her post. She literally dropped a drama bomb and ran off so then of course the group backlash just started blowing up but then member who started the entire thing just left. I still think it was super shitty to poke the bear and then run away.

As one of the most descriptive examples of the havoc of digital destruction, Leslie painted the picture of the conflict from her sister's post being a large disruption within the GroupMe and how it caused issues with members which led to mistrust and anger. In her interview, Leslie acknowledged the need for the member who made the post to be heard as their experience was hurtful but also felt that the process by which they went about it was not providing any closure to any party involved and made the chapter overall healthier.

Digital destruction as a concept was a common idea that other participants shared in their interviews. In Phoebe's case, the lack of order and social cues make conflicts in the GroupMe difficult. She reflected, "...in our GroupMe it is just a free-for-all and people just jump down each other's throats trying to prove who is the most enraged and hurt." The process of anger comparing is a common occurrence within sorority chapters GroupMe's and from the experiences of our members rarely leads to resolution only more hurt feelings. Phoebe goes on

further to talk about this exact experience by sharing, “In the GroupMe pretty much all of the comments are just pointed and rude. It is mean girls who love being mean girls.” A position was shared similar to this by Nadine who stated, “People just start popping off about their opinions, again needing to be heard because they feel silenced, but they don’t want to talk or resolve just like revolt almost.” These two women shared commonalities, with the escalation being quick and aggressive but deviating between the purpose of whether to be heard or to simply be mean.

To best understand the rationale for why the need for such destruction occurs within digital spaces, it can be attributed to personal conflict styles and preferences, and later analysis will show a direct connection with conflict style and resolution. Dominique shares why for her personally in a conflict she gets destructive, “I get hotheaded, and I’ll just start going in and I won’t stop, it is a slippery slope.” For Dominique, it is about her ego and emotional regulation when in a conflict that creates a destructive communication pattern.

Many participants reflected upon their experiences of creating or observing peers engaging in actions of destruction between groups and between individuals and how it impacted their actions. Whether an active participant in the conflict or a passive observer, the awareness of the digital footprint becoming more public has tempered some participants need for destructive digital communication versus warmer engagement or absence of engagement. Margaret discusses this point more fully, “Conflict experience has made me aware the way that people talk to each other can become public and I’m like I don’t necessarily want the things that I say and do online to be made public.” Margaret’s reflection on watching others in digital conflict impacting her own conflict approaches speaks to the awareness of a digital footprint more present within the digital spaces compared to conflicts occurring face-to-face.

#### **Subtheme 1d: Intentional word choice**

There are subtle differences between word choices for a digital conflict compared to face-to-face conflicts and resoundingly participants shared in their interviews and elicitations how the intentionality of word choice was more deliberate within digital spaces. One participant shared a word about her process for word choice that stood out among others: strategy. Margaret shared:

You have to make choices, so you have to be strategic about your process and response. I consider the fact that I don't want to have a conversation with the fact that if I don't there will be a consequence possibly based on what the other person tells others, so I make decisions to avoid that consequence without being overly engaged or authentic, thus strategy.

As reflected in her statement, Margaret addressed how she edits her statements strategically to avoid conflict but also defend her position. Other participants talked about the intentionality of their word choice similar to Margaret but did not view it as much of a strategy but rather see it as a process for emotional regulation. Zoey shares, "I would write things when we were arguing, so I would go back and change things I didn't like about what I was going to text back – you can't take your words back in a fight." Participants communicated the strategy involved being able to pause and edit language within digital communications compared to face-to-face interactions. Being contemplative about constructing a response was shared by Margaret later in her interview when she shared, "...you have more time to think about what you are saying and going to say. You write it out and think unlike just blurting something out you have half crafted in your head." Nadine also talks about her preference for digital communication as the pacing allows her the ability to walk away from the conflict until she is ready to be more reflective and intentional. "Obviously if you're upset about a message, you can put the phone down and think about what you're going to say rather than just popping off a bitchy response."

The theme of anticipating the response of the other party impacted word choice and message crafting was also shared by Dominique who said, "...digitally I can edit or erase a text or message...electronically I can type out my thought and read it back and change it, so I don't come off as a total bitch." Zoey, Nadine, and Dominique shared the process of digital communication being a tool for intentional word choice and pacing of the conflict while also being mindful of the perception of themselves crafted by others due to their responses within the digital space.

### **Subtheme 1e. Group conflict escalation**

The final subtheme nested under the first GET explores the group more within the digital conflict looking at both the purpose of bringing in the group and also the impact those conflicts have on the group morale and sense of belonging overall.

During interviews, participants were asked to share their digital conflict experiences and many shared experiences that were between themselves and one other person, but all participants discussed an experience where the chapter was brought into the conflict via a group messaging platform. Several participants shared their own experiences of this phenomenon, but one participant discussed the process by which members are pulled into conflicts they were not a part of and why this process is ineffective for resolution or communication. Phoebe passionately shared:

Everybody spamming the GroupMe with feelings like, 'fuck you, this is your fault' and then responding with 'No this is your fault, and I am upset' does absolutely nothing.

Until we sit down and talk, spamming a group chat does nothing...in person there is an order and structure to fighting to some degree. Everyone gets a say, and voices are heard.

In GroupMe the extra noise and bullshit that people just add because you can't see

everyone but just want to be a part of the fight that honestly isn't even about you makes these girls just like trolls who are reacting to the drama like you would when watching reality T.V. You know The Real Housewives of Sorority!

When the conversations become public within the group via the digital platform there is a considerable impact on the morale of the chapter. Nadine spoke to this impact in her interview by sharing, "When the GroupMe blowup happens it is so stupid and makes me want to quit. We always lose like five girls after the blow-up." The impact of the GroupMe on the member's experience and retention of the members was a shared experience by Leslie also who stated:

The group chat can really kill the morale and connection...it can lead to huge disconnection and apathy in a sorority because who wants to be a chapter full of mean girl drama bullshit? It just starts the downward spiral of trust issues and disconnection.

Leslie and Nadine share that once the group is brought into a conflict via the digital platforms a strong sense of disconnection to the sorority and the daily workings become tainted and negatively impact the experience while also not resolving the issue presented. The experience of having conflicts publicly played out for all to witness not only creates a disconnection among the members who are in the middle of these fights but also shuts down the ability or desire for conflict-resolution conversations entirely within the chapter as shared by Jenny who shared:

I think the GroupMe blow ups really turn me off to having conflict conversations within the sorority because I don't want other people to know about my stuff and can't be honest because I know how sisters will talk about me and tell someone else. That fear is a huge reason why I change how I handle conflicts within the sorority, well I actually don't

handle them, because I am just too scared of the conflict getting around and people knowing my business.

In Jenny's experience, her observing these conflicts playing out and escalating over the group messaging platform creates a dynamic where ultimately, she does not address conflicts or issues with her sisters which begins to negatively impact her membership experience and connection with her sisters whom she wished to have strong relational connections with.

### **Summary of GET 1**

The analysis of the first GET outlines six subthemes to explore how conflicts begin and develop over the digital platform. Further, the experiences shared by the participants and provided in the analysis show the impact of these conflicts impacting their relationships with friends and sisters resulting in a negative membership experience. The subthemes included the desire for communications to remain over text, a fear of face-to-face conflicts or the perception of a face-to-face conflict, a desire to create digital destruction, crafting responses that are intentional more than when in person, and finally engaging the group further in the process to engage others in a conflict that does not involve them but for the desire of public humiliation and ridicule.

### **Group Experiential Theme 2: Digital Dynamics**

The second GET explores the participants' experiences around how the digital dynamics impact their conflict experience and meaning making. While some of the digital dynamics presented themselves in the first GET, the difference in the second GET explores more of the meaning-making from the digital conflict and the role of technology than the process of the conflict. As a major GET, there were four subthemes when analyzing the interview and elicitation data. These subthemes illustrate the interworking of the major theme including how

the technology impacts the conflict using screenshotting and receipts as proof of the conflict which is unique solely to the digital platform. Further, interconnected subthemes will address the participants experiences of their mindset during conflicts of the argument being directed at the phone or screen rather than a person which led to less inhibition in what they might say. Another challenge that comes from the digital space discussed by many participants was the interpretation and meanings behind the words used as the receiver of the messages.

### **Subtheme 2a: Screenshots and receipts**

Within the digital environment, participants indicated having a documented record of what someone has said or a photo they have taken becomes a solid piece of evidence for digital conflicts for use in both recalling who said what and in broadcasting to others what the person said or did. The phrase pulling receipts or screenshotting is the term used to describe the action one party would take to establish the other party's digital footprint. This process makes recalling parts of conflicts or historical aspects of fights often irrefutable and can follow a person well after the artifact was written, taken, or shared. Nadine discussed the process of using receipts to recall and account for who said what:

The nice part of texting is you can go back later which is good and bad because we often use it in a bad way like making sure people are held accountable for exactly what they said and what they meant. Receipts are the bible.

In this statement, Nadine highlights both the positive and negative aspects of pulling receipts when engaging with others in a conflict. Participants shared that a central purpose of using those receipts was to keep accurate records and hold people accountable for what they said when there is a disagreement on the recall of such facts. Leslie cites this as a main motivator for her use of screenshots and shares, "Online it is all about screenshotting things and talking to

other people about it because it comes into play later to prove who said what and when exactly.” Her position supports the theme and use of screenshots as a tool for recall and accountability which is a dynamic present within digital spaces making it vastly different than a face-to-face conflict.

While many discussed their experiences with pulling receipts or screenshotting a conversation with some for later recall, it was Margaret who brought in the dynamic of gender in her reflection. Margaret shared, “I find that I have seen way more girls pull receipts and have a better recollection and strategy during digital conflicts.” Of the nine participants, three others mentioned the belief that women used screenshotting both as a tool for accountability and also as a tactic in the digital conflict which was a unique gender application for this specific dynamic. As part of this reflection, Leslie shared that the consideration of screenshots being taken makes awareness greater but cited this as a female consideration more than her male counterparts. Leslie shared:

It makes girls more aware of what they are saying. Thinking like ‘Oh this person could screenshot this and post it to use against me might make her lean more towards being cordial, like passive aggressive so they are not seen as a bad guy or bitch.

Leslie's response highlights a couple continuing ideas that emerged from these discussions including the ideas of cordial being seen as passive-aggressive language or communication and this concern of perception of the language used painting a picture of bitchiness. She also highlights the knowing presence of screenshotting as a motivator for better regulation of the conversation and her responses which will counter to the next theme discussed.

**Subtheme 2b: It is a screen, not a person.**

One of the most common experiences and realities participants shared within the digital dynamic was viewing the conflict not with a person but rather a screen. Participants shared their view of the fight is often with the piece of technology rather than a person. Zoey discussed this idea indicating that since her conflict partner is not present regular social cues that present during conflicts are absent which impacts how she communicated, "...over social media, you can be as mean as you want because you're not going to see the other person's reaction." This short reflection is an encapsulation of this subtheme.

As participants dug into more about why conflicts tend to escalate more over digital platforms or why aggression increases digitally there were various reasons offered. For example, Leslie shared her perspective:

When you post you can't see the person's reaction. So I think that is particularly why people post rather than say it out loud because you can't see the reaction or face of the person you are talking to when you say the more direct and harsh things to them.

This sentiment was also shared by Nadine who stated, "Not seeing the person, like their emotional reactions, but just the screen, makes the person disappear. As sad as it is to say, I lose all sense of the other human being on the other side." An honest reflection from two participants is that within the digital space creates a lack of human connection and thus increases the aggression of the conflict. Margaret very directly shared her experience with this digital dynamic. She reflected:

It was easier for me to be mean online. I am very good at being direct and like arguably rude about things because it is easier when you don't have to see the emotion of the other person feeling it.

Being unable to see the emotional reaction of the other person came up both as a rationale for why being more direct, harsh, or mean is easier but also as it relates to the impact of the conflict and words used. Shaye spoke to this later in her interview and indicated, “We forget that they [conflict partner] also have complex emotions and just because they are not sitting there in front of us having those emotions for us to witness.” Nadine also added to this theme and encapsulated both the underlying aspects of the subtheme in that using the screen as a tool rather than a conflicting person makes you both feel comfortable being more aggressive while forgoing watching the emotional reactions of the person you conflict with. Nadine shared, “When you are behind a screen you can be way more aggressive to someone, more honest because you are not watching their reactions or looking at them, so the worry or brutal honesty goes away.” Overall, participants overwhelmingly shared their aggression within digital conflicts due to the lack of proximity to the individual and also their self-assurance given the comfort of digital communication compared to face-to-face conflicts. Connected to this concept of increased confidence in conflicts, is the next theme which addresses the lack of inhibitions participants shared within digital spaces.

### **Subtheme 2c: Little inhibition**

A concept unique to the digital space that participants discussed was their lack of inhibitions in digital spaces during conflicts. While this contrasts the earlier subtheme concerning screenshotting of conversations or engagements, many did cite that inhibitions are lower which results in harsher responses and a lack of filtering. Dominique shared this subtheme phenomenon by reflecting, “...digitally it is just word vomit with your fingers, there is no filtering at all.” Unlike face-to-face interactions participants indicated that the lack of filtering leads to more escalated conflicts. Phoebe addressed this point in her interview:

...I feel like people get heated in the moment and they say things in the moment to get it out of their head and heart but then after sit back and try to undo or edit what they said because it was all reactionary and they lost their sense of self and had little to no inhibition.

As Phoebe shared the emotional charge of conflict can lead to a lack of inhibitions but within digital spaces, there is a greater ability to edit messages or change the narrative which is much harder to achieve outside of digital spaces which makes this a unique digital dynamic. Bella added to this lack of inhibition when talking about what people post online that they would often not say out loud or around others in the company. Bella shared:

...specifically, the social media posts that people make are about things they wouldn't necessarily talk about out loud...you'll post something for like a hundred people to see but you wouldn't actually say it out loud, seems wild to me!

Bella's commentary about her experiences with digital conflicts speaks to the continued dissonance many participants had as they often compared their digital conflicts to face-to-face conflicts but were challenged by the differences in actions of themselves and others within the digital space including a lack of inhibition on what they or their conflict partners share. As outlined by the participants, the digital space creates a unique dynamic where inhibitions are not as present as they might be in face-to-face interactions.

#### **Subtheme 2d: Single-sided interpretation and deeper meanings**

The final subtheme within this GET explored how the commentary between the parties is interpreted and the meaning behind the dialogue. When in an in-person conflict it is possible that one or both parties might not understand a point their conflict partner is attempting to make but it is likely in those moments' clarity is sought out by the partner for understanding. As shared by

the participants, clarity of points rarely if ever is requested which leads to a more single-sided interpretation of the person's positions and points. Phoebe shared how this has been her experience:

...I even start misinterpreting things over text, like I don't know how you're trying to say something or what you're trying to actually say. Like are you being sincere or are you being sarcastic? It is really hard for me to tell intent and emotions over a screen, so I have to guess then myself.

Phoebe's acknowledgement that digitally this challenge is more common given you are not in person to hear the tone and inflection of dialogue creates a unique dynamic in the digital space.

Along with the idea of missing social cues deriving from conversations, participants addressed the issue of selecting only specific parts of a conversation to respond to making the conversation seem unilateral. Jenny discussed this exact challenge in her interview and shared;

I feel like people just want to pick out in a text what they want to respond to and what they don't – another big reason why I don't like talking about a lot of things over text because it feels like people just ignore what they want.

The experience of selective response or reaction is not only a challenge to advancing conflict digitally but also creates an issue with context and understanding between conflict partners. Shaye's conflict experience stemmed from a repost she made of another person's content and added a provocative caption which resulted in heavy conflict with many people. Shaye reflected on this experience and how single-sided interpretation led to a lack of context:

Digitally people just clicked through and saw the six words I had written and then assumed they had an entire picture on what I thought about this issue so because of that

and their ideas of my position, it turned into the lack of consideration I had for others and how terrible I am, so it just escalated really quickly.

The broad generalizations that were made about Shaye's perspectives in her reaction to someone else's content increased the issues she faced with many in her private social media messages. Leslie spoke about this spreading of information without context or fact-checking as a means that digital conflicts often start or become escalated. Leslie stated, "...people can just spread information and make things seem super worse without any context or take something completely out of context and just blow it up." These experiences coupled together showcase the digital challenge that presents as a unique dynamic when it comes to the interpretation of a conflict partner's intent which is likely more difficult in a digital medium than face-to-face.

Participants also spoke frequently about the hidden meanings behind what someone meant when they would text and the words, they would use which compliments their earlier statements about intentional phraseology. Participants shared that more than men, women intend a double meaning behind what they say in digital conflicts. Zoey shared succinctly in her interview, "There is always a deeper meaning behind what is being said, especially for girls." While specific gender dynamics will be discussed in more detail in the later themes, the deeper meaning behind words was not only highlighted by Zoey but also by Bella who had more to say on the deeper meanings behind what is said versus what is meant. Bella stated:

When you're dealing with another woman, especially over an online platform, you can't read each other's body language or tone of voice or see their face, you have to go off the words they say but be careful because there is always another motive behind what girls say. Like we all know when someone says they're fine they aren't actually fine but I have

seen really passive-aggressive stuff between girls, so you have to always find that deeper meaning with girls it is either that or I am just hyper paranoid.

While Bella provides a comedic narrative in her delivery during her interview the point, she made is reflective of what was shared by Zoey which is to know that what is being said is not often what is meant and it is a challenge digitally to interpret the deeper meaning behind the message.

### **Summary of GET 2**

The second GET analysis examines the four subthemes which provide a detail of the unique digital dynamic experience participants shared during their interviews and elicitations. While many compared these digital dynamics against face-to-face dynamics, these frequently presented digital dilemmas provide specific hurdles that can often be addressed when in person but create a much more challenging correction. Additionally, the dynamics do nest within and next to subthemes from the first section and foreshadow future themes specifically regarding gender that will be highlighted in other sections of this analysis. The subthemes of the second GET included the active use of screenshots and receipts as a means for recall accuracy and accountability, the lack of human connection during the conflict but rather the anger being directed at the screen and not the person given the inability to see a reaction or hurt, the lowering of inhibitions which results in more blunt and harsh dialogue, and finally the challenging nature of assuming intent of a conflict partner and the meaning behind their words leading to a single-sided interpretation of the others purpose.

### **Group Experiential Theme 3: Relational and Societal Influences**

The third GET examined the participants' relationships with their conflict partners from the lenses of friendship, gender, and societal expectations. Relationships with their conflict

partners played a major role in the conflict as shared by the participants and the value those relationships were given by the participant further impacted how resolution was considered if at all. Since the conflicts described were between women, gender roles and societal expectations or stereotypes were a factor in the meaning-making the participants shared during interviews and elicitations. The third GET contained three subthemes that were determined when analyzing the interview and elicitation data. These subthemes will explore: (a) how the friendship typology determines the desire for resolution or value of the conflict, (b) the way females perceived and valued their friendships with other women, and (c) how society places expectations around women and conflicts that occur between friends and the shaping it had on the participants' experiences.

**Subtheme 3a: Existence of friendship drives resolution outcome.**

The first subtheme within GET 3 was generated during interviews primarily with participants when the discussion came up about the relationship, they had with their conflict partner before the conflict and the status of the friendship after the conflict. Further, within this subtheme was the acknowledgment that sometimes friendships before the conflict did not exist or were not valued thus resolution was not actively pursued or desired. Finally, this subtheme examined the warnings participants provided to their friend groups as a means of vulnerability to prevent conflicts from arising but also to support how resolution should be considered if conflict did arise.

Participants who shared that the friendship became damaged or non-existent after the conflict arose spoke with intentionality that it was the conflict and the actions of the other party that determined a desire for a continued friendship or not. Shaye shared in her response to her conflict partner which read:

I don't want to be arguing with you about the friendship we don't have anymore because my opinion of you has worsened over time, and you are not someone I want to be friends with so resolution isn't something I need or want from you.

This very direct and clear statement by Shaye to her conflict partner was the final communication she sent to her regarding the issue they were hashing out via an Instagram direct message (DM). As demonstrated, Shaye's perspective of this person was no longer salvageable given her conflict partner's comments and actions during this conflict which made furthering this friendship after the conflict not an option for Shaye. Bella also discussed this idea during her interview regarding her conflict partner by saying, "She was showing herself as being someone I couldn't be comfortable with or vulnerable with, so resolution was coming further off the table for me." Similar to Shaye, Bella felt the actions and words used by her conflict partner reflected a more honest picture of who her former friend was which was not someone she wished to continue her friendship with after the conflict was over. While the idea of reflection on the conflict is a determinant of friendship resolution, Zoey came to terms with losing a friend during the conflict. Zoey shared this reflection:

With this girl, I was over the arguing back and forth and at some point, I just remember saying to myself her friendship isn't much to lose because I didn't care about her that much and she didn't make my life better or honestly mine hers so there wasn't a loss here and I remember just ending the conflict and our friendship. Honestly though, a weight immediately felt lifted off my shoulders by ending the toxicity I was having with this girl.

In Zoey's case, the conflict partner provided no value to her life and by her admission, Zoey was not adding anything to her conflict partner's life which made the acceptance of ending the friendship easier for her to grasp. Zoey also reflected in her statement that there was a long-

term toxicity present in this relationship and by ending the conflict, it was resolving both the conflict and the toxicity of this friendship.

Another experience that created meaning for the participants with their conflict partners was not losing a friendship over a fight but rather having a conflict with someone where there was no existing friendship which would have served as a factor to encourage resolution. Margaret shared about a conflict she had with a girl whom she had no relationship with but attempted to engage in conflict. Margaret retold the story by stating, "...we had no relationship to go off of at this point it was like complete cold messaging and I was like I don't know you and I don't want to have a conversation anymore." As she retold this story, she indicated that since she did not know this girl and since there was no desire to defend herself to her or seek to understand mutual points, she simply responded after many messages to her and shared she did not wish to communicate and then blocked her as a means to stop conflicts from getting worse. Similarly to her experience, Leslie discussed how conflicts with people she does not have a meaningful connection to, are redundant and not something she wishes to pursue. Leslie shared, "If I am ever in an argument that feels like it is going in a circle, it just feels stupid. Let's just be done because it's so exhausting to argue at someone that I don't really care about." Many shared that their desire to seek resolution was exhaustive and if their conflict partner was not someone whom they wanted to have a relationship with, a resolution was coming further off the table, and then when a relationship was not present from the beginning of the conflict there was a unanimous feeling that friendship would never be an option.

Unlike Margaret and Leslie, two participants did share how they prevent conflicts from arising with their friends which relied upon their willingness to be vulnerable with one another and felt safe doing so given their deep relationships. This supported the idea that conflict

resolution occurs more frequently when trust and vulnerability is already established between the conflicting parties. Nadine spoke about how her relationship with her friends increases their understanding of her which impacts her desire to want to resolve conflicts. Nadine reflected:

Some of my friends have a better understanding of me and know me so I care more about resolving conflicts with them versus the other ones who don't understand me, so it takes way more effort honestly, I just don't have the energy for it.

As Nadine shared, her resolution is linked to mutual and previously established connections as resolution with others where there is no existing friendship was not worth the energy. The amount of time and energy to spend on the resolution was shared not only by Nadine but also with Leslie as something they both did not wish to waste. Dominique who was more direct in her approaches to conflict shared a similar feeling about her friends and their understanding of her when in conflict and her approach to conflict when not with her friends. Dominique stated:

I just warn people of who I am when they are closer to me as friends because I know I am not perfect and still have work to do when it comes to conflict. I can be very direct and very forward which is off-putting, but my friends know this about me and I talk about it. Those friendships are worth it to me though to change and listen. Girls who fight me with who don't know me, or I don't know them are not worth my time or forcing me to change who I am.

Again, more direct in her communication style in general, Dominique showcased her strong self-awareness and personal confidence while also her ability to hear feedback from her peers and soften. When conflict arises with someone who is not a friend Dominique reflected that it does not lead her to have any desire to change but rather disconnect from that woman entirely.

This positionality speaks to the common thread of all participants that the existence of a friendship or perceived friendship was a stronger indicator of their desire to resolve the conflict citing it as being worth the energy and time while the lack of friendship with a conflict partner made resolution or even engagement in the conflict less likely to happen.

### **Subtheme 3b: Female Friendships and Perceptions**

Another central aspect that emerged from the analysis explored how friendships were viewed by these women with other women along with how they use their friendships within a conflict. There were two ideas that came forward which included a fear of female-based friendships but conversely her need to have of those friendships despite not always feeling valued. These ideas created a tension with one another as many wanted those deep and meaningful friendships and viewed their friends in conflicts as supportive and helpful but also felt they sometimes were forced to act or think in a way they disagreed with to avoid becoming the target of judgement or meanness from their friends.

Participants shared their desire to have meaningful friendships with women as a significant rationale for why they joined a sorority. While several discussed the close personal connections they made with a few or many members, some participants shared how there is still a fear of judgment or rejection by their sorority sisters at times which makes them approach conflicts and friendships differently. Fear of rejection is a large motivator for Bella to adapt and take a passive role when conflicts arise so as to not be removed or judged by the group. Bella reflected:

I've never been the best at like having great relationships with other women like it feels like I'm slightly on the outskirts a lot. I feel like it more of like a fear of rejection, sort of thing from the group like I don't wanna be the one left out of the girls because I've been

there before...I fear being left out of groups of women versus men so sometimes you have to play the mean girl game when you are around them so they don't cast you aside.

This authentic reflection demonstrated how Bella rationalized her choice of being a part of a mean girl group from time to time as she viewed it as an act of survival. The process in which Bella rationalized her choice to remain friends with women who were engaging in mean girl behavior and not challenging them on their mean girl behavior or trying to stop it made her feel she was contributing to the ongoing problem was a powerful reflection. Dominique also discussed this fear of judgment as a rationalizer for being mean towards one another. Dominique stated, "I think I fear the judgment of women more than men, especially after being in a sorority and just seeing how mean girls can be and how quickly they talk about others to others." The fear of judgement by other women leads to a stronger engagement in mean girl behavior which Dominique attributed as a primary driver for such behavior.

Participants also shared accounts where their friendships were an anchor when conflicts occurred and were used as sounding boards and guideposts for action. Zoey talked about how she used her friends as a check on her tone and her intent of messaging to avoid being overly aggressive. Zoey shared, "I usually talk to a best friend and share my response so she can check me on my bitchyness." This idea was also shared very similarly by Jenny who stated, "In this case, I had my friend look at my initial email and she had to rewrite a lot because I was very hot-headed." Both of these participants talked about how friends were guides in providing clarity to the main issues they were having while also filtering their points to be less combative. A large factor of why women used friends as a filtering system for their commentary was the digital dynamic where editing a message or comment is doable unlike when in face-to-face conversations. Shaye shared:

In the digital platform, since this was over Instagram DMs, I had time to go to friends and seek help for what to say back to the messages that were flying at me. I asked them about how could I say what I am trying to say without hurting these girls more than they already thought I was trying to. I was so grateful that I could do this because you can't do that in a face-to-face conflict naturally or without being very policed like in a mediation.

Using friends as general counsel for advice seeking and finding clarity was not always used to de-escalate conflicts. Leslie spoke to this aspect of committee guidance by talking about the groupthink mentality that can come from engaging friends during a conflict. Leslie shared in her elicitation experience about this and shared:

I see a lot of girls who kind of turn the drama into a committee thing. They show it to others or put it in a different group chat and it starts more anger and fighting. It's like that scene in Beauty and the Beast where they are like torch-carrying villagers out to attack but in this case is it some other girl? I have even been asked before by friends in a group chat about what we all knew about a girl so we could use it against her to hurt her. I mean I love my friends but even that is crazy!

Whether using friends for editing commentary to soften delivery or the antithesis of that by ganging up on other women, the participants all shared that their relationships with their friends were meaningful and factored in when conflicts arose with other women in or out of their friend groups and chapters. Additionally, the fear of judgment and rejection from female friends motivated participants to engage or be complicit with others who were in harmful conflicts.

### **Subtheme 3c: Societal expectations and realities**

As part of the interviews and elicitations, participants discussed how gender roles and conflict played a significant factor in how they felt they should approach conflicts. Shaye first

talked about how the expectations of women within society influence their communication practices. “Women should be more passive and be the peacekeepers. That is so stupid! This societal norm forced upon us just means women act more passive-aggressive than assertive.” This passionate reflection not only spoke about the impact of gender norms on communication patterns but how Shaye attributed that norm to problematic, in her view, communication patterns among women citing passive aggression.

Nadine shared a similar stereotype that has been placed on the shoulders of women that impacted her thinking in conflicts. Nadine reflected:

The stereotype is that women can’t control their emotions and we are all catty, but I do know there is truth to some stereotypes so if I do get into a fight, I am hyper-aware of my emotions, so I don’t become the stereotype. I have to say it sucks for women because I am certain that men don’t think about that in their conflicts.

Nadine shared in this reflection that she becomes influenced by these stereotypes during conflicts and works actively not to be overly emotional which can feel inauthentic and emotionally stunting. She further stated that this ongoing awareness is unique to women compared to men in her opinion.

Another admission that was shared by Bella explored her experiences not only with women but as a woman in a male dominated field and her behavior being driven by societal expectations. Bella shared:

...I am in STEM and as a woman, you do feel small in like engineering sort of situations due to the large dominance and presence of men. So, it feels like I don’t have the credibility to stand up myself. When do you have women in the field with you, in those

moments they are often silent also, so you feel alone or to not make waves they agree with males, and we lose a sense of support and sisterhood.

As Bella shared this experience, she began to cry and felt so overwhelmed with her reflection and made a commitment at that time to allow her voice to be present and when women around her remained silent to support the activation of their voice by creating a community in which they felt safe to share knowing they had another woman who would have their back. As the researcher this was a powerful moment to see how numbing expectations can be for emerging adult women but also inspiring because by saying this out loud, Bella began to forge a new path despite these expectations.

### **Summary of GET 3**

Within the third GET, three subthemes surfaced based on the participants' lived experiences. This GET was largely shaped by the influences of societal expectations and norms impacting the participants meaning making of their conflicts which rationalized their behaviors and understanding. Relational factors such as trust and the existence of friendship were found to be very influential factors among women in the likelihood and personal desire to resolve the conflict. Additional subthemes within this third GET focused on the challenge participants faced regarding how gender norms impacted their meaning-making and engagement in conflicts with other women while recognizing that there are unique challenges women face in conflict compared to males but also acknowledging the manufactured nature of these norms and a desire to break out of these stereotypes and norms for the next generation of women.

### **Findings: Second Research Question**

Findings related to the second research question combine results from participant interviews and second interview elicitations in response to the second research question: How do

Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally? The analysis in this section required an examination of both in the various conflict styles of participants and the resolution strategies or considerations they have made in their past experiences. The final GET highlighted the analysis related to this question. The fourth GET included three subthemes which included women and conflict, various conflict styles and their use among participants, and finally, the resolution considerations and strategies attempted.

#### **Group Experiential Theme 4: Conflict Styles and Resolution Strategies**

This final GET examines the participants' experiences around women and conflict behaviors along with discussing conflict styles and resolution strategies attempted during conflicts. The role of gender was an important aspect of the study, given the participants all identified as women and all disclosed conflicts with fellow sorority sisters, making woman-to-woman conflict a central topic to explore within the study. The role of being a woman and having conflict with women was discussed with all participants and was a large part of the discussion and anchor point throughout the interviews and elicitations the participants kept bringing up. During the interviews, all participants were introduced to the conflict styles as outlined by Rahim (2017) with a description of the styles which guided a series of questions. Findings here highlight the tension between the selection of their perceived conflict style versus their actual styles in their digital conflicts during elicitations. The final section of this GET will examine the resolution process including their mindset about digital resolution, the process by which resolutions are offered, and the impact of the resolution on the continuance of a friendship. These subthemes are framed solely within the digital medium rather than face-to-face conflicts.

##### **Subtheme 4a: Women and conflict**

“Girls don’t fight each other with their hands usually, but they do attack each other with their words.” Zoey shared this reflection early in her interview when discussing why she wanted to be a part of the study. Zoey’s reflection that women rarely engaged in physical fights, but verbal altercations was a common theme that others shared in their interviews. For example, Dominique stated, “Women are a lot nastier than men because with women it is targeted and harmful, especially on social media. Their manipulation is calculated and weaponized.” Very strong words were shared by Dominique regarding the intent of women in digital conflicts. Shaye also shared a similar thought in her interview and said, “Women tend to hold onto things more and we tend to be more manipulative and more passive-aggressive.” All three women in their reflections discuss the specific role women in digital conflicts play and describe them using phrases like calculated and manipulative which speaks to the nature of verbal altercations participants felt were more frequent with women.

While the first participants described the nature in which women engage in conflict, other participants described or assigned their perspectives on how women engage in the conflict in a more verbally aggressive manner. Leslie shared:

...women get nastier in conflicts with women versus with men and I think that is because women are so policed by society about reactions. I will say the below-the-belt comments from women and men towards women are always also seem to be about appearance or body shaming. It might not have anything to do with their body but someone that is the final card that seems to get played by men and women towards women.

As Leslie shared at the beginning of her interview, to her the root cause of mean girl behavior is linked to the societal policing of reactions of women who are in conflicts. The second point that Leslie makes is about the use of body shaming comments in digital conflicts which

have long been connected to issues more specific to women and confidence issues. Jenny speaks to this confidence issue but also competition as a rationale for why women engage in these digital conflicts. Jenny stated:

For girls, being a mean girl is based in competition and low confidence. It is easy to tear down other girls because we are walking around terrified of other girls all the time it seems because we are constantly comparing ourselves and finding our own issues in that comparison, so we get defensive and fight. It is like girls want to be shitty and mean to each other because we are often shitty and mean to our own selves which is really screwed up.

As the researcher this was one of the most powerful moments during all the interviews. Watching Jenny share a poignant perspective while also actively taking charge of this perspective to vow to make a change in the future spoke to the power of reflection and discussion. As Jenny shared in her interview, for her the root cause of mean girl behavior is competition and low confidence which is an argument that Leslie also made in her interview. Both participants shared a common experience that others spoke directly to in interviews or mentioned that linked low confidence to mean girl behaviors. At the end of the interview, Nadine shared a hopeful future for women's digital conflicts by saying:

Many just start sharing their thoughts digitally before putting them in the other person's shoes. Females face so much, and our face-to-face fights just seem to be short-sighted, and it is even worse digitally. It is dumb, as women and sisters we should lift each other up and empower one another. I hope that this conversation and shining a light on these behaviors starts to spark the change for all women to be less mean and more meaningful.

#### **Subtheme 4b: Conflict styles**

During all interviews, participants were introduced to the conflict styles written by Rahim (2017) and asked to share their style when in face-to-face conflicts and then also in digital conflicts. Then during elicitations, the conflict styles were brought back up as the conflict was being examined to confirm their style identified or to see if they would identify a different style in the context of their conflict. During interviews all but two participants indicated their face-to-face conflict styles were different than their digital conflict styles which many attributed to the factors in the first two GETs. For this study and the research question, this analysis section will highlight the responses they shared when discussing digital conflicts and their styles. Leslie recapped the responses of the participants which will be used to introduce this section:

Digitally people are the most extreme – totally dominating or totally avoiding. People either want like their mic drop moment where they really get you or get that one-liner or zinger or they don't say anything and just go into hiding hoping the conflict will go away, so they brush it under the rug.

Leslie's reflection discussed the extremes digital conflict can produce which was reflected in the experiences and reactions of the participants of the study. In total, five participants identified as dominators and four identified as avoiders. This section will further analyze these very extreme styles of conflict.

Dominant styles in digital conflicts were the most common and were linked and attributed back to the desire to win the fight with the other person along with the comfort they felt in a digital medium to fight back which was not a behavior they were likely to do during face-to-face conflicts. Margaret discussed this point:

...it is very hard for me to coexist with dominating personalities in conflict and to watch them do conflict in that way. As a woman, it is harder when another woman has this style

because dominating women are ruthless in messages. I know this because I become that person when I am matched with a dominating personality, I become ruthless right back.

Margaret shared that her style becomes reflective of the style used by her conflict partner. For her, the dominating approach leads to ruthless behavior including hateful comments and personal attacks. Dominique shared a similar feeling but admitted her style was commonly more dominating. Dominique shared, "...I am used to being confrontational way more than others because it becomes a defense for me, and I don't wanna lose the fight so I will dominate to win." The idea of domination being driven by winning was also something that resonated with Nadine in her interview as she reflected, "Digitally, I am a dominator. Fighting over a text turns me into a fighter who wants to win and prove that I won the fight." For her, the digital medium is a different approach compared to face-to-face fights, but she did not view a fight as being won or lost in a face-to-face medium compared to a digital medium. Phoebe also talked about the differences in her styles based on the nature of a digital fight compared to a face-to-face conflict. Phoebe shared:

I am a compromising person when I am in person with the other person because we are both present, but digitally it is all dominating...you just blow up at each other saying everything without any filter or care. It becomes pointed and harsh digitally which is never how I would act face-to-face.

This reflection demonstrated another example shared by Phoebe that is similar to Nadine where the medium determined the difference in style. The difference in styles being reflective based on the medium in which the conflict took place is a common experience shared by the participants within the study. The final participant who talked about utilizing a dominating style

was Zoey who framed her use of the style as a response to the feeling of an attack on her character with her conflict partner. Zoey stated:

In this case with my friend, I was more dominating because it felt like the conflict was less about the issue and she began attacking who I am as a person. It seemed like it crossed the line so at that point I started feeling like I needed to win the argument because she was attacking me. Honestly, I think I forgot what the issue was, but I knew since she attacked me personally, I was not going to lose the fight with her.

Similar, to the other participants, Zoey discussed morphing into a dominant style in her conflict style given the desire to win the fight with her conflict partner but in her case, this style was sparked by the more personal turn of attacks she felt was being laid against her. Not all participants took this approach and as Leslie pointed out in her reflection of the extremes, other participants took the other side of style and were avoiding.

Avoidance as a conflict style was shared by four participants and the root cause of why this style was selected by the participants was given that these four participants by their nature did not like any type of conflict whether in-person or digitally. Shaye disclosed her rationale in her interview for being avoidant, “I feel like as a woman I am more inclined to avoid the conflict and talk behind the other girls' back. I never learned how to conflict because girls should avoid it or that’s what I was told.” Shaye’s reaction was connected to a gendered norm that was taught to her early on that she has held onto into her emerging adulthood. She also connects back to the idea of conflict avoidance is not being without a conflict but rather more behind the back of her and her conflicting partner. Bella shared her desire to be conflict-avoidant in her interview and shared, “I am very much an avoider, so I’d say avoiding. I tend to avoid and if I wasn’t doing that, I guess I’m obliging but really for me it’s about avoiding, avoiding, avoiding. I don’t like

conflicts.” Bella did provide another style by nodding to obliging but during her elicitation, she saw the more frequent use of avoiding styles which aligned with her perspective shared during her interview.

Two participants did share that the medium determines their avoidance tendency. Leslie articulated this position in her interview by stating, “I get nervous when I have to look at somebody face-to-face and argue with them. It is a lot easier to just ghost a person who wants to fight or just avoid them.” During her interview, Leslie linked the term of avoidance to the slang term used by digital generations of ghosting which would imply total avoidance or ignoring the other person or groups. This is not the same idea as deflecting or changing the subject but rather avoiding the person to avoid addressing the conflict or person entirely. Jenny, who is also an avoider, shared that her choice is based on the medium but unlike Leslie, she would prefer face-to-face conversation. Jenny shared:

Digitally I am a very avoiding because I often don’t want to resolve the digital fight right now and I don’t want to get into it all over text, so I’d just rather avoid the fight digitally and meet in person. Honestly, though, all my friends would rather talk than text, which is unique, but I think that is why we have really healthy relationships.

Jenny discussed how she did not avoid conflicts but rather used avoidance as a style when the conflict was digital because her desire to resolve is stronger when it can be done face-to-face rather than digitally.

#### **Subtheme 4c: Resolution**

As part of the second research question, this study began to explore how digital conflicts were resolved and the participants’ processes and considerations to reach resolution. During their interviews, many participants indicated that resolution of digital conflicts never actually resolved

but rather just die off and are not brought up again or have some cycle to when they resurface, especially within chapter-wide digital platforms like GroupMe. When asked about specific techniques or technology to support resolution, participants were unable to provide examples of either technique or technology support for resolution. Participants did speak to their experiences regarding the interpretation of the resolution, the impact of being provided an apology, and specifics to language.

All participants struggled to discuss the resolutions of their conflicts and one large factor was how the resolution was interpreted by one or both of the conflict parties. Phoebe shared her experience with a resolution by sharing, “I’ve never resolved one fight over text because things aren’t going to be said or heard in a way that you intended but rather how the other person wants to hear it.” For her, the challenge with digital communication speaks to earlier points made about the single-sided interpretation and selection of points made between the partners that can lead to further miscommunication or hurt feelings between the parties. Phoebe discussed that there is no way to demonstrate a statement or phrase as being genuine digitally so even when a person tries it is solely dependent upon the other person’s interpretation. Zoey spoke to this by sharing what she needs to resolve a conflict, which is not provided in a digital conflict. Zoey said, “If I can hear their tone and what they are saying and the way they are saying it, any conflict can be resolved but that isn’t an option digitally so it’s anyone’s guess what they mean.” This shared position mirrors Phoebe’s point, but Zoey went on further to name the aspects that are missing digitally such as voice and tone which many participants shared were needed to resolve conflicts that do not exist digitally when relying on messaging solely.

Given the absence of tone when messaging is used for communication, one participant talked about how those missing aspects are compensated in language and unique digital features.

Leslie shared in her interview this reflection:

Women use fluffy language like ‘Hey bestie’ or ‘Hey girly’ and that little intro is used for liking everything but especially when you’ve been fighting and you’re trying to squash the drama. You do this because you don’t want to be a bitch anymore so using fluffy language starts to soften you compared to what you were doing before in the fight. I also think you will see people lean hard into emojis and hearts to help show a less confrontational attitude and to demonstrate their genuine desire to resolve. I do think a call would be faster but when you don’t want to do that you just send more hearts and emojis to reflect your tone.

During elicitations, Leslie’s reflection was seen over and over again in real examples. During disagreements, phrases such as “Hey Queen” or “Hey Friend” were used which were often followed by a request or a need for accountability that would then be followed by a heart or emoji. When participants were asked about this technique it was shared that this was used to soften the delivery of the content which they felt could be interpreted as mean or demanding. Leslie also touches upon a common barrier shared by participants, they preferred to keep the conversation digital rather than have a phone call or talk face-to-face.

As resolution was discussed further with participants the impact of using an apology was discussed and often resulted in a negative outcome. Jenny’s statement reflects the most common reaction to the use of apologies in digital conflicts by sharing:

I think if I told her how I was feeling, she would likely apologize but I know her apology would be half-assed and not heartfelt which would make me more pissed so I didn’t even

want to ask for an apology or hear one from her because I would have just ignored it entirely.

Digitally, an apology is not an effective resolution tool according to the participants. As shared by Jenny and reflected in three other participants' experience, using an apology in a digital place is the technique used to indicate you are done talking about the issue and the person is moving on rather than a tool for repair.

#### **Summary of GET 4**

The final GET showcased the role gender plays in conflict style and resolution, the variation of conflict styles of the participants when in the digital medium, and the efforts of resolution taken. This GET provided the strongest responses to answer the second research question guiding this study while also generating the need for further research and education on conflict styles and digital resolutions. The findings within the subthemes of this section explored how being a woman impacted the way the participants engaged in conflicts with other women. Further, this section explored the conflict styles which often are applied to face-to-face conflicts against the digital medium resulting in a narrow application of the styles and the most opposition with one another. Lastly, this section began to explore resolution processes for digital conflicts which provided little to no best practices or trends but rather underlined the behaviors and interpretations that negatively impact digital resolutions.

#### **Conclusion of Findings**

The findings and analysis of this study begin the corpus of literature examining the many aspects of digital conflicts and answers the study's two guiding research questions. Grounded within the experiences shared by participants during interviews and elicitations, analysis of experiences and meaning making were categorized into four group experiential themes (GETs)

unique to the digital space including conflict initiation and escalation, digital dynamics, relational and societal influences, and finally conflict styles and resolution strategies.

Applications of these findings within real-world contexts and back to the literature will be provided in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflicts on digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) among female Generation Z sorority members, and how those women attempt to resolve conflicts digitally. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings and their implications related to the literature and the multi-theoretical framework used for this study. The theories included relational aggression, conflict styles and resolution strategies, and women's cognitive development. This chapter will also include implications for practice, study limitations, and future research.

This study aimed to explore the answers to the two research questions grounding the study. These two questions were:

1. What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms?
2. How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally?

Chapter 4 provides detailed observations of the findings to these questions; additionally, a brief summary will be provided here. Based on interviews, an interpretive phenomenological analysis, and a formal elicitation process involving nine participants who identified as current college sorority women, four major group experiential themes emerged relevant to research questions. These included: (a) conflict initiation and escalation; (b) digital dynamics; (c) relational and societal influences; and (d) conflict styles and resolution strategies. Focusing on the conflicts occurring solely in the digital space, this study contributes to the small corpus of literature on digital conflicts via focusing on digital conflicts and related impacts within groups

and between individuals where there is a deeply rooted connection and helps fill a research gap within the literature.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

Understanding the nuances of conflict resolution strategies applicable within digital media is paramount in an era where digital communication animates the fabric of everyday life, particularly among Generation Z. Navigating the complexities of conflict resolution in the digital age presents a formidable challenge with communication dynamics, conflict styles, and resolution strategies undergoing profound transformations within virtual spaces. This section delves into the intricate interplay between digital communication preferences and conflict dynamics, exploring how study participants leveraged digital media to engage in, escalate, and attempt to resolve conflicts. Drawing from Rahim's (2017) conflict styles framework and insights from emerging adult women, this study illuminates the evolving landscape of conflict management in digital platforms against existing literature. Additionally, this section links the nuanced strategies employed by individuals who navigated conflicts within virtual spaces to the efficacy of traditional resolution techniques; subsequently, this study suggests novel approaches tailored to the unique demands of digital interactions informed by existing discourses and particular, embodied experiences. By exploring communication nuances, conflict styles, and resolution strategies, this section elucidates the multifaceted nature of conflict resolution in the digital realm by linking this study's findings to existing research.

First, this study suggests that the power of digital communication is a thread woven through the lived experiences of Generation Z, which includes use, escalation, and interpretation. Digital platforms and their usage are commonplace within the everyday lives of Generation Z as the preferred media for communication (Leonardi & Vast, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; van

Zoonen & Sivenen, 2023). Participants within this study shared their preferences of digital media largely due to the media's ability to allow users to quickly and frequently stay in communication with friends and peers. Groups depended on digital media to communicate within groups quickly and efficiently. While this may improve the efficiency of communication, it also leads to difficulties when conflicts arise (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000; Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Leonardi & Vast, 2017; McElearney, 2023).

Within the study, participants discussed the central role communication plays within groups and with peers. When conflict arises, the process of communication becomes central to the conflict experiences they shared. Some literature within relational aggression cites that commonly the friendship between two people is used as a leveraging point for resolution (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Within the participants' lived experiences, they shared friendships, which often played a central role to experiences of conflict. In contrast to the preponderance of literature on relational aspects of conflicts, participants indicated they were quicker to walk away from groups or conflict that emerged from non-meaningful or non-mutually beneficial relationships. This study found similarities with social manipulation research, which asserts rumor spreading and ignoring others is a kind or act of social manipulation (Cartwright & Cooper, 2007; Little et al., 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007), as many participants discussed how they used skills such as ignoring conflict partners and/or the collection of negative information to cause further harm when digital conflicts occurred.

Literature has long discussed the impact of cyber bullying among individuals and groups while also highlighting some of the specific dynamics of this bullying technique (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2023; Cowie, 2013; Coyne et al., 2019; Vásquez, 2021). This study examined the consideration that participants gave to both their communicants and processes of communication,

looking at the specifics of how participants engaged in these conflicts with others and in groups. Initially, the researcher interviewed participants, who shared elicitations about how they used digital conflicts and communication to create destruction with words. Participants often discussed how they used harmful or destructive rebuttals or statements against their conflict partners as a means to be as hurtful as possible and to create a degree of digital destruction. When further pressed about why such behavior might occur, participants often connected their rationale to the desire to win the conflict, and the perception they were communicating with a screen and not a person, a concept confirmed by research explaining a person's likelihood to engage in hurtful or harmful speech over digital media compared to face-to-face contexts (Larin, 2022; Marin, 2022; Resyadi, 2022; Tang et al., 2021). This study allows for a similar premise to be found, but capitalizes on the rationale for why such digital destruction can be a tool used in digital conflict communication.

The final point of tension in this study builds upon previous literature which suggests that the interpreting and perceiving of messages in digital spaces is more complex than face-to-face contexts. Previous research frequently examines this phenomenon limited to a single-sided interpretation, or interpretations that draw upon communication which lacks regularly presented social cues, embodied markers of mood or tone, and contextualizations for the language used (Bowie, 2007; Nadal, 2013; Thompson et al., 2011). Additionally, previous research examines how individuals perceive digital conflicts as more escalated and targeted than face-to-face conflicts (Deason et al., 2019; Vásquez, 2021). This study finds similarities in both of these findings through participant feedback which suggests participants often had their own interpretations of what other people were intending to say, and the manner or process of delivering the message. During interviews and in elicitation, participants shared that while they

didn't know exactly the intention behind their conflict partners statement, they felt it was often laced with a deeper meaning or passive aggressive, which often escalated conflicts further. Unlike previous research, this study contributes to and furthers the literature by examining the links between the collective major themes of the desire for digital destruction, the lack of interpersonal communication awareness, and the inability to hear another person's perspective of intended message. These themes suggest digital conflict is often initiated and escalated between parties. The findings of this research and these conclusions provide further context for some of the dynamics that are central to communication styles and practice that will further advance the inquiry of conflict within the digital space.

The analysis of the data also provides a fresh perspective into conflict and conflict styles specifically within the digital medium which builds upon and differs from previous research. This study was grounded in the Rahim (2017) five conflict styles which include: (a) avoiding, (b) dominating, (c) obliging, (d) integrating, and (e) compromising. During interviews and elicitation, after reviewing the five styles, the researcher asked participants to identify their perceived personal style in face-to-face and digital conflicts. While much research exists about conflict styles, their application within digital conflicts is absent from primary research into this field and a gap this study helps to fill. Participants shared about significant differences in conflict styles during face-to-face conflicts as opposed to digital conflicts. Almost all participants claimed they assumed a more avoidant or obliging role in face-to-face conflicts compared to the dominating or aggressive role assumed in digital media. When asked further about the difference, many participants largely cited their discomfort with face-to-face conflicts and their ability to overcome that discomfort during a conflict in a digital medium. Research shows digital conflicts are evaluated as less risky by conflicting parties, which increases the desirability of

starting a conflict over a digital medium (Coyne et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2018; Vásquez, 2021). Further, this research explores the increased nature of hostility in digital conflicts compared to face-to-face media, and finds a similar result with participant experiences as they felt more comfortable engaging in digital conflicts and often had less inhibition in their language and escalation with their conflict partners.

Another factor that this study explores is the identity of womanhood as part of the exploration of conflict. Several studies about women in conflict have been completed previously and have largely focused on face-to-face conflicts among adolescents. There is, however, an absence of looking at conflicts within emerging adult women and the impact to cognitive development of using digital media (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Feshbach, 1969; Frodi et al., 1977; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Werner & Crick, 1999). This study helps to fill that gap by focusing on digital conflicts among emerging adult women. Participants in this study suggested challenges faced during conflict were partly informed or affected by societal expectations of how women ought to act during conflict, and how they are seemingly obliged to protect all relationships. Additionally, they discussed challenges in engaging in conflict without being perceived as a “bitch,” or overly dramatic. Further, participants shared they felt harmful language was more likely to occur with women-on-women conflict, or attacks which directly affected their confidence. Previous research has found similar phenomena in gender-based conflicts, but often found that friendships changed the trajectory of conflicts emerging and resolving (Antonio, 2004; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Menkel-Meadow, 1996).

However, participants noted perceived relationships or friendships with conflict partners were to them direct indications of whether or not conflict resolution was valued, providing a contrast to those previous studies. Indeed, several participants shared many digital conflicts were

with individuals who they did not perceive as friends, or were not interested in perspectives or disagreements. These factors made resolution significantly less likely. Whereas individuals with meaningful relationships with conflict partners would often work towards resolution initially through digital conversations which often moved into face-to-face settings for attempts at resolution. This study helps clarify the role that friendships play among women when resolving digital conflicts.

Finally, this study examines the process of conflict resolution as related to digital media and conflict, grounded in three conflict resolution frameworks, including: (a) conflict management; (b) conflict resolution; and, (c) conflict transformation. Research within these three resolution processes is robust, and covers a multitude of individual and organizational conflicts (Jehn, 2014; Johansson & England, 2021; Lederach, 2017; McElarney, 2023). However, one oversight in current literature is a lack of focus on resolution strategies for digital media-based conflicts. The findings from this study, however, are inconclusive. Some progress was made when examining resolution strategies regarding conflicts occurring within digital mediums, but this study's data differs from literature exploring the three degrees of conflict resolution, management, and transformation. For example, participants in this study shared that conflict resolution is directly linked to the nature and depth of the friendship they have with their conflict partner, indicating that a more meaningful friendship or longer-term friendship was more likely to pursue a resolution than a conflict with a non-friend or stranger occurring digitally. Further, almost all participants indicated that conflict resolution would not be possible over a digital medium and was likely only achievable when in-person, or over the phone, with some exceptions. Latter participant experiences seems relevant to research on contact theory for conflict resolution processes, and the assertion that conflicts were more likely to be resolved if

conflicting partners could be in contact with the other (Allport, 1954; Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Kwon et al., 2018; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Another area of tension is the power and role of an offered apology and the perception of its delivery as sincere and meaningful. Research indicates interpretation and deeper meanings behind conflicts play a direct result on the likelihood of resolution (Coyne et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2018; Vásquez, 2021). This study contributes to that literature as participants shared the disingenuous nature offered by apologies with conflict partners. Participants talked about their perception of the inauthentic nature of those apologies, or feeling the apology to be forced as a social standard, rather than sincere accountability and dedication to changing behaviors or patterns. These findings indicate that given the lack of believability in the apology and the single-sided interpretation and self-determined single-sided interpretation, apologies in the digital space that lack an ownership of responsibility and a commitment to change behaviors are ineffective as a digital resolution strategy.

The exploration of conflict resolution within digital media illuminates the intricate dynamics shaped by evolving communication preferences, conflict styles, and resolution strategies. Participants in the study navigate digital conflicts with a keen awareness of the power of communication, and leverage digital platforms to engage in, escalate, and attempt to resolve conflicts. Moreover, the study unveils the influence of relational dynamics, gender norms, and identity on conflict management strategies, providing valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by emerging adult women in digital spaces. Evidentially, practitioners seeking to effectively address conflicts in the digital age urgently must understanding these complexities.

## **Implications for Practice**

By supplementing and enhancing the existing literature and drawing upon participants' experiences, this study offers valuable guidance for practitioners in crafting tailored interventions and policies to promote constructive conflict resolution and foster positive digital interactions. Through a nuanced understanding of communication patterns, conflict styles, and resolution strategies, practitioners can navigate the multifaceted nature of digital conflict to ultimately advance new and relevant conflict resolution practices in the digital realm. The following section discusses recommendations for application and practice within three areas: fraternal and sororal professionals; organizations and workforces; and conflict practitioners and scholars.

### **Recommendations for Fraternity and Sorority Professionals & Organizations**

This study examines the lived experiences of Generation Z sorority women which gleaned several implications for practice among fraternity and sorority professionals, program designers, and chapter leaders. It is important to recognize that the use of digital media for chapter-wide communication and member-to-member communication are not dissipating; therefore, increasing education and skill building around effective and positive uses of these media should be an urgent priority. Further, this study demonstrates retention efforts could be severely impacted when digital conflict or drama occurs among the chapter making it more likely members will quit their organizations, or disengage in their participation. In order to curb digital conflicts—while also appreciating the continued use and growth of digital communication—national and local fraternal and sororal organizations have an opportunity and obligation to increase the skills and processes by which digital media are used.

First, strategies could be implemented by fraternity and sorority leaders which explore the teaching of conflict resolution skills through the lens of digital media. Participants in the

study shared they have received little to no conflict resolution skills as part of their membership education, nor skills connected to digital conflict resolution strategies. In order to maintain the aspects unique to the digital space, education should be tailored to examine intent, and resolution strategies. To explore the process of intent, education should be provided to members regarding the aspect of single-sided interpretation bias and an increased likelihood to use harmful or destructive language. This should include guidance that conflict while occurring digitally is still with another person who has feelings and reactions to what is occurring between conflicting partners.

When exploring the skills necessary to examine resolution strategies within the digital media, an important skill to build would be the process of walking away or pausing the conflict. Participants often shared the benefit they felt within digital conflicts was their ability to pause initial reactions to formulate a more meaningful reaction and dialogue. Walking away from a conflict is often perceived by the conflicting partner as a desire to not seek a resolution. Alternatively, the equivalent in digital spaces of not wanting to engage in conflict is the act of blocking or “ghosting” an individual. The intention behind these actions is not to engage in further contact with their conflicting partner. This makes resolution highly unlikely to occur. Walking away from digital conflicts, however, means something different in a face-to-face context. In this case we are building the skill of slowing down the pace of a conflict conversation and allowing initial reactions to be subsided and reflected upon before engaging digitally with their conflicting partner. Helping to build this skill would eliminate what this study’s participants shared as a lack of filtering of responses and to the ability to provide a more meaningful and helpful reaction or path forward to a digital resolution. Strategies that would support this skill would include: (a) writing out an initial response message, (b) walking away from the conflict

before sending, and (c) coming back to edit the message to ensure that it creates a forward progression of the conflict. Another strategy to implement for the process of walking away would be to craft a more intentional response or utilize a friend or family member to review the reactionary response of the individual and provide feedback constructively to move the understanding between the conflict partners forward.

Along with walking away from a conflict, another skill that could be developed to help with resolution strategies would be to explore new technological ways to communicate that are still digital but allow voice and body language cues to be observed. Participants shared that meaning and tone behind their conflict partners responses often escalated the conflict. When asked about resolution strategies such as voice texting or video messaging participants indicated they did not consider these options to use for resolution. The benefit of engaging in a voice-to-text or video messaging tools between conflict partners might allow each of the parties to hear the tone and witness the body language of their conflict partner during their discussion. This process of conflict resolution would also address the concern that was shared by many participants who were eager to avoid face-to-face conflicts. These they felt did not have the skill set or ability to come up quickly with reactions and responses needed for a face-to-face conflict. While voice messaging and video messaging platforms do create a quicker sense of response between parties there is still the opportunity to edit and reflect intentionally on what individuals wish to share with their conflicting partners. Voice messaging is also effective given that they are often deleted following their delivery which also supports the challenges participants faced talking about the forever nature and proof of their conversations that occur via text messaging.

The last opportunity that fraternities may employ based on the results of this study to improve practices of digital conflict skill building would be to discuss with members the

liabilities associated with digital communication. As people increase the use of providing proof of communication there becomes a need to be hyper aware of the infinite nature a digital conflict holds. Participants talked about their use of pulling receipts both as a medium of accountability and also to show inaccuracies of statements. Providing members with examples of the impact digital communications can have on their personal and professional lives would support the skill building of considering these factors before sending or communicating digitally with others.

A further examination to consider within the field of fraternity and sorority life might consider exploring policy development and enforceability of policies around digital conflicts similarly to face-to-face conflicts. Many higher education systems and fraternal organizations have policies that outline behavioral expectations around respect and violence including physical or verbal violence. Many have extended these same behavioral standards to digital mediums, but consideration must be given on the violations that occur in the digital space of a person's first amendment rights and their freedom of speech. Would the enforcement of a policy that regulates verbal violence or disrespect occurring digitally from a student's social media post or in a private conversation between students violate freedom of speech rights if regulated by the institution of higher education or fraternal organization? Another consideration to consider is the scope of regulation. When students make posts or engaged in digital conflicts with other students while not on campus or using campus technology can that be regulated by the institution of higher education or the fraternal organization? Does the standard of being a lifelong member of the fraternal organization and the actions of one always facing the possibility of accountability extend to a reasonable scope of enforcement for a member's actions? These questions must be considered and explored further when discussing the possibility of regulation regarding digital

conflict and the standard might be as clearly applied within digital mediums as it has been historically applied in face-to-face mediums.

### **Recommendations for the Conflict Field**

This study provides a new and different way of looking at conflict through the lens of digital media as current research often focuses on various aspects of conflict only pertaining to face-to-face contexts. While this study contributes to emerging scholarship of digital conflicts there are implications of applying this study to practice within the broader conflict field including: (a) the continued need for further research of conflicts within digital media; (b) a reimagining of several conflict lexicons; and, (c) the acknowledgement that the field of conflict resolution skill building must begin to examine resolution strategies within digital media.

First, the field of conflict studies must examine contact theory further and the application within digital mediums. While there is an emerging corpus of literature addressing contact theory within digital platforms (Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Kwon et al., 2018) it is not keeping up with the pace of digital evolution. Conflict theory with a premise largely on the ability of resolution by engaging in perspective taking is challenged drastically in digital mediums where single-sided interpretation or hidden meaning interpretation occurs by one or both conflict partners.

Therefore, contact theory application needs to examine the ability of perspective taking or the lack of ability within digital platforms and reimagine other means by which the foundational principles of contact theory may still hold true in digital platforms or do not exist within digital platforms. In addition to the growing body of literature around contact theory and its application of digital media research exploring contact theories application among groups utilizing digital communication is very limited. While this point can undoubtedly also be listed in an area for

further research, it would behoove the field of conflict studies to explore the practical nature of contact theories via digital media both within groups and in individual communication.

Another area regarding the implication for practice that this study provided to the conflict field is an opportunity to explore the current lexicon used within the field of conflict studies. Participants often shared their experiences using terms and sayings that are currently nonexistent in the conflict literature. For example, conflict avoidance to the participants is the same as blocking or ghosting an individual. When asked further about conflict avoidance the concept was hard to understand as the term avoidance was not the intended action by ghosting or blocking an individual. This dissonance shows the need for an evolving lexicon within the conflict field specific to digital mediums. Another area that would be helpful in the exploration in the lexicon of conflict studies would be the use of emojis or GIFs between conflicting partners. Unlike face-to-face conflicts, the digital space allows for innovative ways of communicating including the use of emojis or digital images between conflict partners. This dynamic is unique to digital conflicts and can both positively and negatively impact resolutions. Much of the lexicon associated within digital platforms does not exist within the conflict studies fields and therefore are often inapplicable to the experiences of those engaging in digital conflicts.

An implication of this finding would be mediators who engage in online asynchronous mediation. Mediations occurring in this format are required to draw conclusions and meanings behind the typed responses of the disputing parties. Given the digital platform disputing parties have access to communication strategies beyond words that add additional layers of interpretation to be considered. Increasing the literature corpus and a reimagining of the language utilized to address digital conflicts the field of conflict studies would continue to adapt with the ever-changing technological landscape.

Finally, the field of conflict studies must begin to teach skills of conflict resolution isolated within digital mediums. Traditionally, effective conflict resolution workshops are often rooted in face-to-face conflict interactions and many of those skills are not applicable to conflicts that occur solely within a digital platform. Conflict resolution practitioners must begin to address resolution strategies that can be applied to in digital mediums which include the use of voice memos, video recording, Zoom dialogues, and future technological advancements.

Conflict studies practitioners must also be prepared to reckon with nontraditional applications of conflict skill terminology. For example, conflict management is defined as the act that neither escalates nor resolves the conflict (McElearney, 2023; Rahim, 2017). Within the study many participants talked about their desire to not maintain contact with their conflict partner but also did not pursue an act of escalation by blocking the individual. Participants shared that they didn't wish to escalate the conflict, nor did they wish to resolve it which would make the act of ignoring their digital conflict partner an action of conflict management. When placed against face-to-face conflicts, conflict resolution practitioners might argue that by utilizing this strategy neither party is actually engaging in conflict management but rather conflict avoidance. This example highlights the differences between face-to-face and digital conflicts and shows the need for an evolved lexicon and skills teaching to be developed by the conflict studies field centering on digital conflicts.

## **Limitations**

This study was designed holistically and soundly. However, as with any study, there were limitations to its design. These limitations include questions around sampling bias, self-reporting bias, the elicitation technique, and the study's generalizability.

First, all participants for this study were recruited from sororities across the United States which might not fully represent the diversity of experiences within all sorority members or current sorority culture leading to a possible sampling bias limitation. While the sampling pool was diverse in the representation of schools both in campus size, chapter size, public schools, private schools, and various sorority chapters, the participants do not speak to the vast experiences shared by all members. Not all participants in the study were white, and while race was not a factor within the design of this study, sororities not housed under the National Panhellenic Conference umbrella can have vastly different experiences in both membership and operations that likely drastically change experiences of digital conflicts. Additionally, the participants in this study volunteered for it, and needed a prior conflict experience to draw from, which could have possibility skewed some of their perspectives or bias which could have led to a self-reporting bias.

Secondly, participants discussed their own lived experiences as part of this study and their recalling of experiences comes from their single-story perspective. The methods of interviewing and elicitation required the participants to self-report which is subject to its own biases such as memory distortion and social desirability. In this case, given that many experiences were about conflicts in which the participants were sometimes the aggressors or responding in less than kind ways, it is possible participants could have eliminated aspects of the experience that paint them in a less positive lens and not reflecting the truest of experiences. While an elicitation technique was used to address this bias, that process had its own limitations.

Another limitation that occurred during the study was the use of the elicitation technique. The design called upon this technique as a tool to triangulate the data between the interviews and research journal, but the process was not without challenges. First, not all participants

participated in the elicitation process which does not provide a consistent picture of the data between all participants. Second, the elicitation was done with provided screenshots by the participants and it is possible full details of the conflict were not provided or omitted to avoid the issue as noted above regarding social desirability. Finally, the elicitation was used as a tool for aligning interview statements and ideologies against real examples and in that approach, participants might have felt challenged by that dissonance which could have impacted their honesty and trust with the study and the researcher.

The final limitation within the study is the transferability of the findings. It would be impossible to transfer the findings of this study to all Generation Z sorority women who have digital conflicts. While these are the themes that were present for the nine participants of this study, such a broad application of these findings to all sorority women would not be advised. The participants in this study were 18-22 years old and were members of sorority within the National Panhellenic Conference which is a unique system of operation and differs from other sorority models within other groups such as the National Pan-Hellenic Council, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, National Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Panhellenic Association, or National Multicultural Greek Council. Therefore, while the findings of this study contributed valuable insights into a research topic that had a limited corpus of literature, caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings beyond broader populations.

### **Future Research**

Future research arising from this study could delve into various avenues aimed at furthering our comprehension of digital conflicts among Generation Z sorority women and extending our insights to broader contexts. One avenue involves investigating cross-cultural perspectives to discern how cultural variances influence the experiences and management of

digital conflicts among young women within sororities. By comparing the experiences of sorority women from diverse cultural backgrounds, such research could illuminate the role of cultural norms, values, and communication styles in digital conflict resolution. Additionally, longitudinal studies could likely provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of digital conflicts over time among Generation Z sorority women. Tracking participants' experiences and communication patterns across multiple temporal variables could elucidate factors contributing to the escalation or resolution of conflicts. Moreover, comparative studies contrasting the experiences of sorority women with those of non-affiliated peers may be able to discern whether membership in a sorority impacts the frequency, nature, or resolution of digital conflicts. Analyzing differences in communication norms, social support networks, and conflict management strategies between sorority and non-sorority members could offer valuable insights into the role of sorority membership in shaping digital conflict experiences, as well as the experiences of digital conflicts outside of the sorority space. Further research is needed on digital communication and conflict generally, as the field of conflict lacks an acknowledgement of digital communication and conflict. Therefore, further research among conflicts that occur in digital formats in various settings such as public settings, workplaces, community organizations or friend groups would help us better understand both the dynamics and development of possible resolutions. These potential research avenues hold promise for advancing our understanding of digital conflicts among Generation Z sorority women and informing the development of interventions, policies, and practices to promote healthy communication and conflict resolution in online environments. A final avenue of future research might consider exploring the regulatory nature of digital conflicts both in policy development and enforceability given the widely different dynamics within digital mediums compared to face-to-face conflicts.

Considerations for future inquiries into this topic might also explore the creation of policy development resulting in less actions of digital conflicts and whether changes in this behavior is motivated by policy or further education on the process of and resolution strategy for digital mediums.

## **Conclusion**

This study explores the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who have experienced relational conflicts inflicted through social media, increasing research into digital conflicts, the resolution process, and impacts on interpersonal relationships. The current lack of literature examining digital conflict resolution provided the need for this study, which viewed these phenomena through the lens of interpersonal relationships experienced in all aspects of life. Given the narrow nature of this investigation, this study used a multi-theoretical framework combining relational aggression, conflict styles and resolution approaches, and women's cognitive development as the grounds for analysis. Specifically, in this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify essential themes and the meaning of lived experiences (Friesen et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2022; Van Manen, 2014). This methodological selection aimed to provide more than description of data and focus specifically on the interpretation and meaning of lived experiences for the participants.

The findings and analysis of this study contributed to the budding corpus of literature examining the many aspects of digital conflicts. Grounded within the experiences shared by participants during interviews and elicitations, analysis of experiences and meaning making were categorized into four group experiential themes (GETs) unique to the digital space including conflict initiation and escalation, digital dynamics, relational and societal influences, and finally conflict styles and resolution strategies. Under conflict initiation and escalation the analysis

linked six subthemes together to explore how conflicts begin and develop over the digital platform which included the desire for communications to remain over text, a fear of face-to-face conflicts or the perception of a face-to-face conflict, a desire to create digital destruction, crafting responses that are intentional more than when in person, and finally engaging the group further in the process to engage others in a conflict that does not involve them but for the desire of public humiliation and ridicule. Within the GET of digital dynamics, four subthemes emerged including: the active use of screenshots and “receipts” as a means for recall accuracy and accountability; the lack of human connection during the conflict but rather the anger being directed at the screen and not the person given the inability to see a reaction or hurt; the lowering of inhibitions which results in more blunt and harsh dialogue; and finally the challenging nature of assuming intent of a conflict partner and the meaning behind their words leading to a single-sided interpretation of the others purpose. The third GET examined relational and societal influences which shaped the participants conflict experiences, where three subthemes materialized which examined how trust and the existence of friendship were found to be very influential factors among women in conflict as a major influence in the resolution of a conflict, the challenges participants faced concerning how gender norms impacted their meaning-making and engagement in conflicts with other women while recognizing that there are unique challenges women face in conflict compared to males while acknowledging the manufactured nature of norms (and a desire to break out of these stereotypes and norms for the next generation of women). The final GET gleaned from the study interrogated conflict styles and resolution strategies among the participants and found three subthemes including, how being a woman impacted the way the participants engaged in conflicts with other women, conflict styles variance applied in face-to-face conflicts against the digital medium, and resolution processes for digital

conflicts. The findings of the study included quotes from participant interviews and elicitations which supported these themes. Discussion of the findings support the literature that Generation Z sorority women prefer communication to occur over digital mediums due to concerns of social anxiety and worry for face-to-face conflicts. Discussion of the findings also suggested that an aim of digital conflict is to engage in a more destructive and hurtful discourse while honoring that without the existence of a relationship, resolution is not actively sought or desired. Findings also suggest a reimagining of the conflict scholarship and lexicon to reflect a more digital landscape and acknowledgement of the dynamics being quite different than face-to-face conflicts.

Suggestions for future research included focusing furthering our comprehension of digital conflicts within broader contexts including cross-cultural perspectives to discern how cultural variances influence the experiences and management of digital conflicts among young women within sororities. Additionally, comparative studies contrasting the experiences of sorority women with those of non-affiliated peers may be able to discern whether membership in a sorority impacts the frequency, nature, or resolution of digital conflicts. Further research is needed on digital communication and conflict generally as the field of conflict lacks an acknowledgement of digital communication and conflict therefore further research among conflicts that occur in digital formats in various settings such as public settings, workplaces, community organizations or friend groups is needed to best understand both the dynamics and possible resolution development. Finally, an exploration into policy development and enforcement regarding digital conflicts on college campuses and the impact it plays on freedoms of speech and the boundaries through which regulation might or should occur would provide stronger data and research into regulatory efforts. The significance of this study provides

exploratory research on a nascent topic and contributes to research showing how relationships, especially among women, impact digital conflicts given the unique dynamics that are present in a digital medium compared to face-to-face media.

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## Appendix A - Research Question Alignment Table

| Research Question                                                                                                                     | Interview Question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Theoretical Framework                           | Artifact Analysis                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| RQ1: What is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who endure relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms? | 1. Tell me about a time where you experienced a conflict with a friend or family member that occurred over social media or text. How did the conflict affect you and the relationship with the other person?                                                         | Relational Aggression & Conflict Styles         | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                                                       | 2. When the digital conflict started how did you respond? How do you usually respond to conflict? How might your conflict response differ during a face-to-face conflict versus digital conflict?                                                                    | Conflict Styles                                 | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                                                       | 3. How did the digital conflict differ for you compared to a face-to-face conflict? How would the conflict been different if you didn't know your conflict partner?                                                                                                  | Conflict Styles & Relational Aggression         | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                                                       | 4. When talking about this digital conflict what would you attribute to the conflict that might be different compared to a face-to-face conflict? How does being a member of the sorority impact those attributes of digital conflict versus face-to-face conflicts? | Conflict Styles & Women's Cognitive Development | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                                                       | 5. How if anyway does your gender impact your conflict experience? How does being in the sorority impact your conflict experience?                                                                                                                                   | Women's Cognitive Development                   | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |

|                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                         |                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| RQ2: How do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally? | 6. When digital conflicts arise, what is your initial action to resolve the conflict digitally? Where did you learn that process? How successful is that in resolution?                                                                                                                | Conflict Styles                                                         | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                  | 7. Are there any strategies or techniques you have observed or personally employed when trying to resolve conflicts digitally? Tell me about those and how have they been used? How might you change your approach when it is a friend or family member versus someone you don't know? | Conflict Styles & Relational Aggression                                 | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                  | 8. How does digital communication influence the dynamics of conflict resolution?                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Conflict Styles                                                         | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                  | 9. Have you ever seen where the conflict remained unresolved? How did that impact the individuals involved and the sorority as a whole?                                                                                                                                                | Relational Aggression & Women's Cognitive Development                   | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |
|                                                                                                  | 10. How does being a member of a sorority change process by which you resolve conflicts with sisters digitally?                                                                                                                                                                        | Relational Aggression, Conflict Styles, & Women's Cognitive Development | Interviews, elicitation, example analysis provided using IPA. |

## Appendix B - Interview & Elicitation Protocol Form

### Interview Protocol Form

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### Interview Protocol 1

#### *Opening Script:*

My name is Will Frankenberger and I am the researcher conducting today's interview with you. Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this study. The goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Generation sorority women who experienced relational conflicts occurring over digital platforms like GroupMe, Snapchat, Instagram, texts, or emails. As the researcher, I hope to gain an understanding of how these conflicts are experienced and meaning is made by conflict partners and how, if at all, resolution to those conflicts is sought out. Before we begin can you answer a few questions to be sure you qualify for this study?

|                                                                     |     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Have you reviewed and signed the informed consent document?         | Yes | No |
| Any questions regarding the informed consent document?              | Yes | No |
| Are you currently a collegiate sorority woman?                      | Yes | No |
| Are you between the ages of 18-23?                                  | Yes | No |
| Have you experienced a digital conflict with another female friend? | Yes | No |

Thank you, as you have answered yes for all qualifying questions I would like to participate in the study. By participating in the study, you would participate in two interviews, the one today and another one we will schedule. If you participate in both interviews, I will provide you with a \$25 Amazon gift card delivered within 5 days following your second interview. You will be allowed to stop your participation at any time and your data will not be used in the study. If you are comfortable and ready, we will move forward with the interview. Do you have any further questions before we begin?

Today's interview will be to understand how you view digital conflict, how you might consider resolution possible with digital conflict and the role, if any, your identity as a woman might play in both the conflict and resolution effort. I have some questions prepared but we will talk informally where the conversation takes us and I might ask you to explain your points more by asking things like "tell me more about that," "can you elaborate on that more for me," or "can you give me an example of that experience?"

- 
1. To get us started, please introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself. I'd also love to hear more about why you joined a sorority and how you would describe your experience with the women so far.
  2. Can you tell me about a time where you experienced conflict with another woman?
    - a. How did that conflict affect your relationship with the person initially?
    - b. Is this conflict still impacting your relationship with this woman today? Why do you think that is the case?
  3. How do you think this conflict would have played out if you were having this conflict face-to-face with this woman versus how it occurred over the digital space?
    - a. Were there any things about this conflict being digital that made you act differently than if you were having this conflict in person?
    - b. Would you have said or not said things if you had this conflict in person versus digitally? Why do you believe there is a difference?
  4. There is a researcher, Rahim (2010) who talks about 5 conflict styles, which I will show you the styles on a screen here [show slide with the styles and descriptors]. Based on these descriptors, which one of these styles best describe your view of your conflict style? Tell me more about how you made that decision.
    - a. Do you feel that as a woman your gender impacts the style you picked? Why or why not?
    - b. Have you ever been told anything about conflict as a woman regarding how you should handle or make conflict? If so, what were some of those things you were told?
  5. Going back to the conflict we were talking about, did your identity as a woman impact this conflict at all? How do you think it did or didn't?
    - a. How did conflict change given that you and your conflict partner were both women? Did it at all? Did you even think about that?
  6. Did you try to resolve this conflict at all? Why did you try or why didn't you try?
    - a. What efforts did you take to resolve the conflict?
    - b. When you attempted that, did it deescalate or escalate the conflict more? What behaviors would explain your response?
  7. Have you even been taught how to resolve conflicts? What about digital conflicts?
    - a. What have you seen as successful or helpful in digital conflicts when you experience it or see others experience these conflicts?
    - b. Do you feel digital conflict resolution is more or less difficult than face-to-face conflict? Why or why not?

8. Given that this conflict was between you and another sorority member, do you feel that this impacted the resolution process? Why or why not?
  - a. What would have been the benefits of resolution?
  - b. What would have been the consequences of not resolving this conflict?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about what we talked about today before we wrap up our first interview?

---

***Closing Script:***

Thank you for taking part in this research interview! I will type up our notes and love for you to review these as a member check to be sure I did not miss anything or allow you to amend the discussion if you see fit. I will email you the transcript following this for your review. I will also provide you with an interview debriefing form with information for your consideration.

Just as a few quick reminders; you do have the right to withdrawal from this study at any time without consequence. If you wish to do so much let me know. I do want to remind you that I will keep your identifiable information anonymous. Lastly, if you do have any issues or concerns, please feel free to contact either my major professor or the IRB board, which emails and contact information can be found on the interview debriefing form.

For the next interview, if you are able and comfortable, I would love for you to find an example of a digital conflict with another woman where together we can talk about the conflict and understand more about how the conflict played out in real time. We will not share names or any identifiable information, but it will be helpful to understand in real time the dynamics of digital conflict. Can we move forward with scheduling your second interview?

Next interview date and time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview Protocol 2**

***Opening Script:***

Hi! Thank you for joining me again \_\_\_\_\_! How have you been doing since the last time we met? I am really excited about today's chat together. Before we move into our example together, did you have any questions from our last chat or new things you wanted to discuss? Did you have a chance to review the transcript? Do you have any edits you wish to make?

Before we begin today, I wanted to walk you through what the plan will look like for our chat. I asked you to provide a screenshot(s) of a real example of a digital conflict you had or witnessed with another woman or between women. What we will do is read through the exchange together and then I will ask questions about the exchange to understand your experience and thoughts on how this conflict played out. Are you comfortable with this process before we begin?

- 
1. Please share the exchange with me and can you tell me a bit about context and the people in the exchange?
  2. When looking at this exchange, when did you feel that this was a conflict? What was the words or behavior that made you feel this was a conflict?
  3. When you realized this was a conflict, what were your initial reactions and thoughts? Did those reactions show in your responses? How?
  4. Did you give thought to how and when to respond? What did you think about and how did that inform your responses?
  5. If you responded thinking you were trying to resolve the matter, what actions did you take that you thought would be resolution based?
    - a. Did the person see your response as a resolution? Why or why not do you think?
    - b. How did the relationship with the person you were conflicting with play a role in your desire to resolve the matter? Did it?
  6. If you were not responding to resolve the matter, what was motivating your responses back to the other person or people?
    - a. How did the relationship with the person you were conflicting with play a role in your desire to not resolve the matter?
  7. We talked last interview about the conflict styles by Rahim (2010) and I showed you this slide [show slide]. You indicated your conflict style was \_\_\_\_\_. Do you feel that this exchange shows this conflict style? Why or why not? Also, if not, what style do you think shows here and why?
  8. If you had this conflict face-to-face, how do you feel it would have changed the dynamic? Would it have changed the resolution?
  9. What do you think would have helped you resolve this matter, assuming you wanted to resolve this, in terms of skills, experiences or support?
  10. Is there anything else you want to share with me regarding this conflict?

---

### ***Closing Script***

Thank you so much for participating in today's interview! Would you be willing to provide me with a copy of this conflict? I will accept either a redacted version from you or I would be happy to redact it for you and show you the redactions. I would only use a redacted version of the example in the dissertation, pending your approval and I would like to also remind you of my commitment to protect your anonymity.

Are you willing to share with me a copy of the exchange we discussed today? Yes                      No  
Would you like to redact the exchange, or would you like me to? Participant Researcher

Also, like last time, I will type up our notes and love for you to review these as a member check to be sure I did not miss anything or allow you to amend the discussion if you see fit. I will email you the transcript following this for your review.

### ***Study Wrap Up Closing Script***

Thank you for participating in this study! I have a few things to cover and then I want to get your email address to send your Amazon gift card. First, as a reminder you can withdrawal from the study at any time by contacting myself or the major professor, without any consequence. I want to remind you that your anonymity is of utmost importance to me, and I will not use any identifiers for you including your name, school, chapter affiliation, or other descriptors such as class year, race, ability status, officer positions held, etc.

While not intended this discussion can bring up some feelings that you may wish to explore more with a mental health professional so if needed, I encourage you to find local or campus resources and if needed, I will be happy to assist you in finding those supports. I thank you again for your participation in this study - your insights and sharing your lived experiences will help others understand how we can provide better outcomes for digital conflicts.

I would love to email you your amazon gift card, what is the best email address for distribution?  
I will send that within 5 days. Do you have any other questions for me before we wrap?

Thank you again and please reach out if anything comes up!

## **Appendix C - Solicitation of Participants Email**

Dear Colleagues:

I hope this email finds you well and enjoying the start of your fall semester! I am studying at Kansas State University in Adult Learning and Leadership, and I am writing to you today asking for help recruiting student participants for my dissertation study. Please consider providing this information and flyer to student leaders within your organization and ask them to share with their members. Additionally, if you have any personal names of students, you would recommend me reaching out to inquiring if they would participate in the study, I would appreciate those names and emails – I will only email them once requesting participation and will not distribute their information to any person or company. All organization names and student names will be confidential and redacted within the publishing of the final study.

The purpose my dissertation study is to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z sorority women who have experienced relational conflicts inflicted over digital platforms. I am interested in looking at digital conflicts and their attempted resolution processes. I have experienced losing members due to this type of conflict and drama and have found little to no research addressing this phenomenon and want to explore it further in hopes to help us as a field understand this phenomenon more and teach skills that would lead to healthy resolution and greater retention within our organizations.

Participants who wish to participate in the study will be asked to participate in two interviews with me via Zoom. They are allowed to opt out at any point in the process if they choose. Participants who complete both interviews will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card. Participant names and organizations will be protected using pseudonyms and never disclosed publicly. At this time, I do not anticipate any risks or intentional discomforts for participants outside of talking about conflicts they experienced and will work to ensure a safe and non-judgmental environment is provided. I anticipate this research to be concluded by the end of the fall semester.

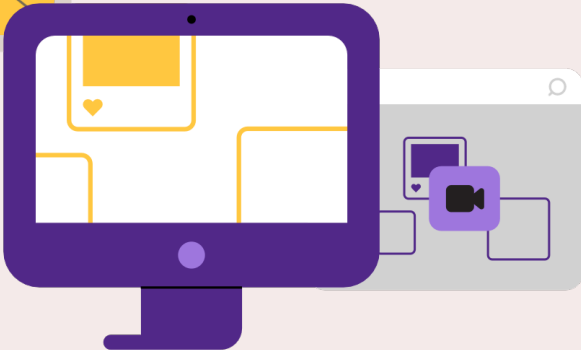
Thank you again for your consideration of this request and passing out this flyer to student leaders – your continued support and collegiality is appreciated!

Truly,  
Will Frankenberger

## Appendix D - Participant Solicitation Flyer



# Seeking Participants



Are you a current sorority woman who has ever had a conflict with another sorority woman over GroupMe, Snapchat, Instagram, text or email?  
You may be eligible for a study exploring the lived experience of Gen Z sorority women who have endured conflicts inflicted over digital media platforms.

**Criteria to Participate:**

- Current collegiate sorority woman within one of the 26 NPC member organizations
- 18-23 years old
- Experienced a conflict with another woman over a digital platform

**Benefits of the Study:**

By participating in this study you will help trail blaze research on how digital conflicts may impact relationship dynamics and what conflict resolution skills are needed to address and resolve conflict that occur digitally.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Contact Will Frankenberger at [wfrankenberger@ksu.edu](mailto:wfrankenberger@ksu.edu)

**Two (2) 60 Min Zoom Interviews**

**Apply Here:**



*This study has been approved by the Institutional Review board at Kansas State University*

## Appendix E - Informed Consent

### Informed Consent

**PROJECT TITLE:** Relational conflicts experienced through digital platforms among generation z sorority women.

**APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT:**

**EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:** Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki, [susanyb@ksu.edu](mailto:susanyb@ksu.edu) and co-investigator Will Frankenberger, Doctoral Student [wfrankenberger@ksu.edu](mailto:wfrankenberger@ksu.edu)

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

**PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH:** The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of relational conflict among female Generation Z sorority members inflicted through digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) and how those women attempt to resolve digital conflicts. This study will be informed by facilitated by semi-structured interviews with emerging adult female collegiate sorority members within the United States. The research aim is to begin to understand how relational conflicts occur over digital platforms so that organizations may begin to understand this phenomenon and work to resolve these matters before they negatively impact the member experience.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:** You will be asked to participate in 2 60-minute semi structured interviews recorded via the Zoom platform. The first interview will focus on the concepts of relational conflict, conflict styles and women's cognitive development when looking through digital communication. The second 60-minute interview will use an elicitation process where we will walk through a lived conflict you have experienced and talk about the conflict in more depth building upon the concepts from the first interview. The researcher, Will Frankenberger is requesting video/audio recording of these sessions via Zoom. The researchers may also observe these sessions. All participants will complete the informed consent and will be reminded of the voluntary nature of this study.

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:** There are no foreseeable physical, psychological, social, or employment-related risks. As with any public training experience, the extent of your participation is up to you.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** The researcher is requesting to video and audio record individual interviews along with a copy of the conflict reviewed in the elicitation. No personally identifying information will be linked to published reports of the study. You may choose for elements of the discussion not to be recorded. The information that will be collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators.

**TERMS OF PARTICIPATION:** I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. I understand that by participating in both interviews of this study I will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card following the second interview.

**Do you agree for the sessions to be video/audio-recorded?** *(Please circle one)*    Yes    No

**Do you agree to allow research activities?** *(Please circle one)*    Yes    No

**Do you agree to participate in an interview?** *(Please circle one)*    Yes    No

---

Signed Name

---

Date

---

Printed Name

## **Appendix F - Interview Debriefing Form**

Thank you for taking part in this research on how Generation Z sorority women experience relational conflict inflicted through digital platforms. Please read the material on this form carefully to learn important information about your experience in this study and ask me any questions that you have. After this debriefing, you may choose to have information I collected about you removed from this research study. I will also answer any of your questions and give you the opportunity to decide whether you would like to have your data included in this study or removed from it.

### **What You Should Know About This Study**

Before you started participating in this research, you were told that the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore Generation Z sorority women's lived experiences of relational conflict inflicted through social media platforms so that organizations may begin to understand, intervene, and prevent such conflict to improve the interpersonal relationships among members.

### **Your Right to Withdraw Data**

Knowing the purpose of this research study, you may decide whether you want to have your data removed from the study or not. If you choose to have your data removed, we will destroy all transcript interview data and eliminate it from any reports or writings. There will be no penalties or negative consequences for you if you withdraw from the study. Before making your decision, please ask me any questions you have.

### **Confidentiality**

Whether you allow your data to be used in this study or not, please remember that the integrity of this research depended on keeping some of the details from you and the other participants. Therefore, it is important that you do not tell anyone else about the details of this study until after permission is granted at the completion of the dissertation. I will keep all information I have about you completely confidential, including your decision about whether to withdraw from the study.

### **If You Have Any Questions or Concerns**

Please keep a copy of this Debriefing Form for future reference. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and the research procedures used, you may contact me, Will Frankenger at [wfrankenger@ksu.edu](mailto:wfrankenger@ksu.edu), or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Susan Yelich Biniecki at [susanyb@ksu.edu](mailto:susanyb@ksu.edu). If you would like to receive a copy of the final report of this study or a summary of the findings when it is complete, please feel free to contact me. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

**To be completed by the Participant**

My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the information in this debriefing form, and (select one)

☐ I give permission for the data collected from or about me to be included in the study.

☐ I DO NOT give permission for the data collected from or about me to be included in the study.

---

(Print Name of Participant)

---

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

**To be completed by Researcher**

I confirm that the participant named above has been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability.

---

(Print Name of Participant)

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(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

## Appendix G - GET Table

| GET 1. CONFLICT INITIATION & ESCALATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Subtheme 1a. <i>Just text me</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                |
| Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | N,#; L#        |
| "I know when I have an argument over text, I am very nervous to see the person again because it's like a pause, but I know the fight will start up again but only back over text."                                                                                                                                                                    | Z, 8; 256-258  |
| "I've seen a lot of examples of like people in a group chat being rancid but then in person they are so kind. It is evident that people are much nicer in person because there's an actual connection which makes it more meaningful."                                                                                                                | M, 8; 258-263  |
| "I would see her at school, and it was like nothing happened because she and I didn't actually argue face-to-face."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Z, 2; 56-57    |
| "Yes, we talk about it in chapter...but it is often since we are talking broadly about it, it is not effective. The President will say something like, 'You know this isn't the first time and won't be the last time but please stop – what is said here, stays here.' It happens over and over again."                                              | P, 3; 88-92    |
| "I kept asking to take this conversation offline and no one ever takes anyone up on that offer, or at least they didn't with me and this situation."                                                                                                                                                                                                  | S, 3; 81-82    |
| "Digitally, it pretends to be personal like a real conversation but then when girls are in person there's no communication - nobody's fighting, like it never existed because they save it, so it all stays digital. So then when we come together in person nobody wants to say it out loud because it makes it more real versus just texting them." | L, 2-3; 65-70  |
| "The girls who use the GroupMe really want to be heard but only will say their feelings behind a screen never in person, but they want to be heard."                                                                                                                                                                                                  | N, 11; 352-353 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Subtheme 1b. <i>Fear of face-to-face confrontation</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                |
| “I think it’s a fear of like direct confrontation. It’s comfortable for a lot of people, so a lot of times it’s like people want to get their feelings out and like want it to be known they’re angry but they don’t want to directly confront the person, but they want everyone else to know who they are beefing with, without saying who.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | B, 2; 62-66    |
| “I’m way more comfortable with navigating conflict in person because digital conflict is a no man’s land. It is the unknown where I get worried and there is a lot of unknown digitally.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | M, 11; 359-361 |
| “I think that is the biggest thing about being able to text somebody in an argument, you don’t have to come up with everything on the spot. I shut down in conflict so it’s easier when it’s over text.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Z, 3; 76       |
| “Even though I was standing up for myself, I wasn’t quite ready for the back and forth of the conflict.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | N, 5; 163-164  |
| Subtheme 1c. <i>Digital destruction</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                |
| “A big, long message got posted from a member right before graduation which just liked ripped the group and a bunch of leaders to shreds about being transphobic and racist. So, she posts this and then just dips. Like blows up the group and then left so no one could respond or even defend themselves that she like named in her post. She literally dropped a drama bomb and ran off so then of course the group backlash just started blowing up but them member who started the entire thing just left. I still think it was super shitty to poke the bear and then run away.” | L, 7; 215-221  |
| “...in our GroupMe it is just a free-for-all and people just jump down each other’s throats trying to prove who is the most enraged and hurt.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | P, 7; 226-227  |
| “In the GroupMe pretty much all of the comments are just pointed and rude. It is mean girls who love being mean girls.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | P, 3; 98-99    |
| “I get hotheaded, and I’ll just start going in and I won’t stop, it is a slippery slope.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | D, 7; 235      |
| “People just start popping off about their opinions, again needing to be heard because they feel silenced, but they don’t actually want to talk or resolve just like revolt almost.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | N, 8; 253-254  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| “Conflict experience has made me aware the way that people talk to each other can become public and I’m like I don’t necessarily want the things that I say and do online to be made public.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | M, 6; 196-198  |
| Subtheme 1d. <i>Intentional word choice</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                |
| “You have to make choices, so you have to be strategic about your process and response. I consider the fact that I don’t want to have a conversation with the fact that if I don’t there will be a consequence possibly based on what the other person tells others, so I make decisions to avoid that consequence without being overly engaged or authentic, thus strategy.”                                                                                              | M, 8; 247-250  |
| “I would write things when we were arguing, so I would go back and change things I didn’t like about what I was going to text back – you can’t take your words back in a fight.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Z, 4; 113-114  |
| “...digitally I can edit or erase a text or message...electronically I can type out my thought and read it back and change it, so I don’t come off as a total bitch.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | D, 7; 220-222  |
| “Obviously if you’re upset about a message, you can put the phone down and think about what you’re going to say rather than just popping off a bitchy response.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | N, 5; 156-157  |
| “...you have more time to think about what you are saying and going to say. You write it out and think unlike just blurting something out you have half crafted in your head.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | M, 5; 161-162  |
| Subtheme 1e. <i>Group conflict escalation</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                |
| “I think the GroupMe blow ups really turn me off to having conflict conversation within the sorority because I don’t want other people to know about my stuff and can’t be honest because I know how sisters will talk about me and tell someone else. That fear is a huge reason why I change how I handle conflicts within the sorority, well I actually don’t handle them, because I am just too scared of the conflict getting around and people knowing my business.” | J, 10; 317-324 |
| “Everybody spamming the GroupMe with feelings like, ‘fuck you, this is your fault’ and then responding with ‘No this is your fault, and I am upset’ does absolutely nothing. Until we sit down and talk, spamming a group chat does nothing...in                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | P, 4; 124-130  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| person there is an order and structure to fighting to some degree. Everyone gets a say, and voices are heard. In GroupMe the extra noise and bullshit that people just add because you can't see everyone but just want to be a part of the fight that honestly isn't even about you makes these girls just like trolls who are reacting to the drama like you would when watching reality T.V. You know The Real Housewives of Sorority!" |               |
| "...in person there is an order and structure to fights...everyone gets a say, and voices are heard rather than the extra noise and bullshit that happens digitally when you can see everyone."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | P, 7; 227-228 |
| "The group chat can really kill the morale and connection...it can lead to huge disconnection and apathy in a sorority because who wants to be a chapter full of mean girl drama bullshit? It just starts the downward spiral of trust issues and disconnection."                                                                                                                                                                          | L, 6; 178-182 |
| "When the GroupMe blow up happens it is so stupid and makes me want to quit. We always loose like five girls after the blow up."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | N, 8; 265     |
| <b>GET 2. DIGITAL DYNAMICS</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |               |
| Subtheme 2a. <i>Screenshots and receipts</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |               |
| "The nice part of texting is you can go back later which is good and bad because we often use it in a bad way like making sure people are held accountable for exactly what they said and what they meant. Receipts are the bible."                                                                                                                                                                                                        | N, 6; 170-174 |
| "Online it is all about screenshotting things and talking to other people about it because it comes into play later to prove who said what and when exactly."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | L, 3; 72-74   |
| "I find that I have seen way more girls pull receipts and have a better recollection and strategy during digital conflicts."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | M, 7; 227-229 |
| "It makes girls more aware of what they are saying. Thinking like 'oh this person could screenshot this and post it to use against me might make her lean more towards being cordial, like passive aggressive so they are not seen as a bad guy or bitch."                                                                                                                                                                                 | L, 5; 152-155 |

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| Subtheme 2b. <i>It is a screen not a person.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |
| “When you post you can’t see the person’s reaction. So, I think that is particularly why people post rather than say it out loud because you can’t see the reaction or face of the person you are talking too when you say the more direct and harsh things to them.”                     | L, 3; 89-92   |
| “When you are behind a screen you can be way more aggressive to someone, more honest because you are not watching their reactions or looking at them, so the worry or brutal honesty goes away.”                                                                                          | N, 6; 178-180 |
| “Not seeing the person, like their emotional reactions, but just the screen, makes the person disappear. As sad as it is to say, I lose all sense of the other human being on the other side.”                                                                                            | N, 6; 184-185 |
| “We forget that they [conflict partner] also have complex emotions and just because they are not sitting there in front of us having those emotions for us to witness.”                                                                                                                   | S, 4; 133-134 |
| “...over social media you can be as mean as you want because you’re not going to see the other person’s reaction.”                                                                                                                                                                        | Z, 5; 153     |
| “It was easier for me to be mean online. I am very good at being direct and like arguably rude about things because it is easier when you don’t have to see the emotion of the other person feeling it.”                                                                                  | M, 5; 158-160 |
| Subtheme 2c. <i>Little inhibition</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |               |
| “...I feel like people get heated in the moment and they say things in the moment to get it out of their head and heart but then after sit back and try to undo or edit what they said because it was all reactionary and they lost their sense of self and had little to no inhibition.” | P, 4; 113-115 |
| “...digitally it is just word vomit with your fingers, there is no filtering at all.”                                                                                                                                                                                                     | D, 4; 129     |
| “...specifically, the social media posts that people make are about things they wouldn’t necessarily talk about out loud...you’ll post something for like a hundred people to see but you wouldn’t actually say it out loud, seems wild to me!”                                           | B, 4; 105-106 |

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| Subtheme 2d. <i>Single sided interpretation and deeper meaning</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                |
| “When you’re dealing with another woman, especially over and online platform, you can’t read each other’s body language or tone of voice or see their face, you have to go off the words they say but be careful because there is always another motive behind what girls say. Like we all know when someone says their fine, they aren’t actually fine but I have seen really passive aggressive stuff between girls so you have to always find that deeper meaning with girls it is either that or I am just hyper paranoid.” | B, 6; 195-199  |
| “...I even start misinterpretations things over text, like I don’t know how you’re trying to say something or what you’re trying to actually say. Like are you being sincere or are you being sarcastic? It is really hard for me to tell intent and emotions over a screen so I have to guess then myself.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | P, 5; 153-156  |
| “I feel like people just want to pick out in a text what they want to respond to and what they don’t – another big reason why I don’t like talking about a lot of things over text because it feels like people just ignore what they want.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | J, 10; 306-309 |
| “Digitally people just clicked through and saw the six words I had written and then assumed they had an entire picture on what I thought about this issue so because of that and their ideas of my position, it turned into the lack of consideration I had for others and how terrible I am, so it just escalated really quickly.”                                                                                                                                                                                             | S, 4; 122-126  |
| “There is always a deeper meaning behind what is being said, especially for girls.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Z, 6; 198-199  |
| GET 3. RELATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                |
| Subtheme 3a. <i>Existence of friendship drives resolution outcome</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                |
| “I don’t want to be arguing with you about the friendship we don’t have anymore because my opinion of you has worsened over time and you are not someone, I want to be friends with so resolution isn’t something I need or want from you.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | S, 3; 104-108  |
| “...we had no relationship to go off of at this point it was like complete cold messaging and I was like I don’t know you and I don’t want to have a conversation anymore.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | M, 4; 125-127  |

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| “Some of my friends have a better understanding of me and know me so I care more about resolving conflicts with them versus the other ones who don’t understand me so it takes way more effort honestly, I just don’t have the energy for it.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N, 6; 199-201 |
| “She was showing herself as being someone I couldn’t be comfortable with or vulnerable with so resolution was coming further off the table for me.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | B, 9; 302-303 |
| “With this girl, I was over the arguing back and forth and at some point, I just remember saying to myself her friendship isn’t much to lose because I didn’t care about her that much and she didn’t make my life better or honestly mine hers so there wasn’t a loss here and I remember just ending the conflict and our friendship. Honestly though, a weight immediately felt lifted off my shoulders by ending the toxicity I was having with this girl.”        | Z, 6; 185-187 |
| “If I am ever in an argument that feels like it is going in a circle, it just feels stupid. Let’s just be done because it’s so exhausting to argue at someone that I don’t really care about.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | L, 7; 224-225 |
| “I just warn people of who I am when they are closer to me as friends because I know I am not perfect and still have work to do when it comes to conflict. I can be very direct and very forward which is off-putting but my friends know this about me and I talk about it. Those friendships are worth it to me though to change and listen. Girls who fight me with who don’t know me or I don’t know them are not worth my time or forcing me to change who I am.” | D, 7; 218-220 |

| Subtheme 3b. <i>Female friendships and perceptions</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |               |
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| “I’ve never been the best at like having great relationships with other women like it feels like I’m slightly on the outskirts a lot. I feel like it more of like a fear of rejection, sort of thing from the group like I don’t wanna be the one left out of the girls because I’ve been there before...I fear being left out of groups of women versus men so sometimes you have to play the mean girl game when you are around them so they don’t cast you aside.”                                                 | B, 5; 150-157 |
| “In the digital platform, since this was over Instagram DMs, I had time to go to friends and seek help for what to say back to the messages that were flying at me. I asked them about how could I say what I am trying to say without hurting these girls more than they already thought I was trying too. I was so grateful that I could do this because you can’t do that in a face-to-face conflict naturally or without being very policed like in a mediation.”                                                 | S, 5; 158-161 |
| “I see a lot of girls who kind of turn the drama into a committee thing. They show it to others or put it in a different group chat and it starts more anger and fighting. It’s like that scene in Beauty and the Beast where they are like torch carrying villagers out to attack but in this case is it some other girl. I have even been asked before by friends in a group chat about what we all knew about a girl so we could use it against her to hurt her. I mean I love my friends but even that is crazy!” | L, 5; 139-142 |
| “In this case, I had my friend look at my initial email and she had to rewrite a lot because I was very hot headed.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | J, 4; 117     |
| “I usually talk to a best friend and share my response so she can check me on my bitchyness.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Z, 4; 111     |
| “I think I fear the judgement of women more than men especially after being in a sorority and just seeing how mean girls can be and how quickly they talk about others to others.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | D, 8; 266-268 |

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| Subtheme 3c. <i>Societal expectations and realities</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                |
| “Women should be more passive and be the peacekeepers. That is so stupid! This societal norm forced upon us just means women act more passive aggressive than assertive.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | S, 8; 261-262  |
| “The stereotype is that women can’t control their emotions and we are all catty, but I do know there is truth to some stereotypes so if I do get into a fight, I am hyper aware of my emotions so I don’t become the stereotype. I have to say it sucks for women because I am certain that men don’t think about that in their conflicts.”                                                                                                                  | N, 7; 224-226  |
| “...I am in STEM and as a woman you do feel small in like engineering sort of situations due to the large dominance and presence of men. So, it feels like I don’t have the credibility to stand up myself. When do you have women in the field with you, in those moments they are often silent also, so you feel alone or to not make waves they agree with males and we lose a sense of support and sisterhood.”                                          | B, 5; 139-142  |
| GET 4. CONFLICT STYLES AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                |
| Subtheme 4a. <i>Women and conflict</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                |
| “Many just start sharing their thoughts digitally before putting them in the other person’s shoes. Females face so much, and our face-to-face fights just seem to be short sided, and it is even worse digitally. It is dumb, as women and sisters we should lift each other up and empower one another. I hope that this conversation and shining a light on these behaviors starts to spark the change for all women to be less mean and more meaningful.” | N, 10; 333-336 |
| “Women are a lot nastier than men because with women it is targeted and harmful, especially on social media. Their manipulation is calculated and weaponized.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | D, 9; 273-275  |
| “Women tend to hold onto things more and we tend to be more manipulative and more passive-aggressive.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | S, 6; 191-192  |
| “Girls don’t fight each other with their hands usually, but they do attack each other with their word.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Z, 8; 245-246  |
| “...women get nastier in conflicts with women versus with men and I think that is because women are so policed by society about reactions. I will say the below the belt comments from women and men towards women are always also                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | L, 9; 299-302  |

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| seem to be about appearance or body shaming. It might not have anything to do with their body but someone that is the final card that seems to get played by men and women towards women.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                |
| “For girls, being a mean girl is based in competition and low confidence. It is easy to tear down other girls because we are walking around terrified of other girls all the time it seems because we are constantly comparing ourselves and finding our own issues in that comparison, so we get defensive and fight. It is like girls want to be shitty and mean to each other because we are often shitty and mean to our own selves which is really screwed up.” | J, 8; 239-242  |
| Subtheme 4b. <i>Conflict styles</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                |
| “Digitally people are the most extreme – totally dominating or totally avoiding. People either want like their mic drop moment where they really get you or get that one liner or zinger or they don’t say anything and just go into hiding hoping the conflict will go away so they brush it under the rug.”                                                                                                                                                        | L, 8; 248-251  |
| “...it is very hard for me to coexist with dominating personalities in conflict and to watch them do conflict in that way. As a woman it is harder when another woman has this style because dominating women are ruthless in messages. I know this because I become that person when I am matched with a dominating personality, I become ruthless right back.”                                                                                                     | M, 10; 331-333 |
| “...I am used to being confrontational way more than others because it becomes a defense for me, and I don’t wanna lose the fight so I will dominate to win.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | D, 7; 211-212  |
| “Digitally, I am a dominator. Fighting over a text turns me into a fighter who wants to win and prove that I won the fight.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | N, 10; 321-322 |
| “I am a compromising person when I am in person with the other person because we are both present, but digitally it is all dominating...you just blow up at each other saying everything without any filter or care. It becomes pointed and harsh digitally which is never how I would act face-to-face.”                                                                                                                                                            | P, 7; 200-204  |
| “In this case with my friend, I was more dominating because it felt like the conflict was less about the issue and she began attacking who I am as a person. It seemed like it crossed the line so at that point I started feeling like I needed to                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Z, 7; 234-235  |

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| win the argument because she was attacking me. Honestly, I think I forgot what the issue was, but I knew since she attacked me personally, I was not going to lose the fight with her.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |               |
| “I feel like as a woman I am more inclined to avoid the conflict and talk behind the other girls back. I never learned how to conflict because girls should avoid it or that’s what I was told.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | S, 8; 247-248 |
| “Digitally I am a very avoiding because I often don’t want to resolve the digital fight right now and I don’t want to get into it all over text, so I’d just rather avoid the fight digitally and meet in person. Honestly though, all my friends would rather talk than text, which is unique, but I think that is why we have really healthy relationships.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | J, 7; 225-227 |
| “I am very much an avoider, so I’d say avoiding. I tend to avoid and if I wasn’t doing that, I guess I’m obliging but really for me it’s about avoiding, avoiding, avoiding. I don’t like conflicts.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | B, 4; 131-133 |
| “I get nervous when I have to look at somebody face-to-face and argue with them. It is a lot easier to just ghost a person who wants to fight or just avoid them.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | L, 7; 218-219 |
| Subtheme 4c. <b><i>Resolution</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |               |
| “Women use fluffy language like ‘hey bestie’ or ‘hey girlie’ and that little intro is used for like everything but especially when you’ve been fighting and you’re trying to squash the drama. You do this because you don’t want to be a bitch anymore so using fluffy language starts to soften you compared to what you were doing before in the fight. I also think you will see people lean hard into emojis and hearts to help show a less confrontational attitude and to demonstrate their genuine desire to resolve. I do think a call would be faster but when you don’t want to do that you just send more hearts and emojis to reflect your tone.” | L, 8; 260-265 |
| “I’ve never resolved one fight over text because things aren’t going to be said or heard in a way that you intended but rather how the other person wants to hear it.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | P, 5; 146-147 |
| “If I can hear their tone and what they are saying and the way they are saying it, any conflict can be resolved but that isn’t an option digitally so it’s anyone’s guess what they mean.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Z, 6; 172-173 |

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| <p>“I think if I told her how I was feeling, she would likely apologize but I know her apology would be half-assed and not heartfelt which would make me more pissed so I didn’t even want to ask for an apology or hear one from her because I would have just ignored it entirely.”</p> | <p>J, 9; 280-282</p> |
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