How Does Greek Life Membership Affect What Students Perceive as Salient?

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Abstract

Research suggests that alcohol consumption and partying behavior play a central role in Greek Life culture. We sought to explore this stereotypical phenomenon experimentally by using a technique called Cultural Priming. We primed participants with either a Greek Life cultural prime or a Honors Society cultural prime, and measured whether they found party-related or academic-related items more salient in a typical college setting. We believe that the objects students reported to be more salient may have reflected an inclination towards the underlying behavior associated with those objects, given the participant's prime condition. While our findings provide some support that cultural priming of Greek Life and Honors Society mentalities worked, we did not have any significant findings for the effects of our moderators, pre-existing Greek Life membership (PEGL) and pre-existing Honor Society membership (PEHO). This suggests that our study activated one of many subcultures within the individual, rather than members of each group embodying one subculture and representing that subcultural mindset. We hope that our research encourages future studies to further examine the culture of Greek Life by 1) using cultural priming to experimentally measure Greek Life culture, and to start measuring concrete aspects of behavior that are stereotypically associated with Greek Life organizations, such as alcohol consumption, and 2) approaching from different angles in order to create a multidimensional approach to this culture in order to garner a more comprehensive perspective of Greek Life culture.

How Does Greek Life Membership Affect What Students Perceive as Salient?

Fraternities and sororities play a large role in American collegiate student life. At UC Santa Barbara, roughly 12% of undergraduates are members of Greek Life organizations, which equates to “approximately 2,400 students” (The Regents of the University of California). However, other schools with a stronger Greek Life presence, such as DePauw University in Indiana, report that “just under 70%” of their students are “affiliated with” a Greek Life organization (Go Greek). While fraternities and sororities hold a sizable presence on college campuses, it is the assumptions, stereotypes and behaviors associated with them that generate controversy.

There is a stereotype, which is supported by research, that college students, especially Greek life members, engage in excessive partying and unhealthy drinking behavior. A study by Scott-Sheldon et al found that Greek Life members tend to immerse themselves in unhealthy and risky practices, including drinking more alcohol, as well as increased cigarette smoking and larger numbers of sexual partners, compared to the average college student (2008). This is further supported by a longitudinal study which recorded drug use in high school seniors as they transitioned into college and throughout their college experience. They found that freshmen students who joined a Greek Life organization engaged in binge drinking considerably more than non-Greek Life students, and that alcohol consumption increased throughout students’ college years (McCabe et al, 2005). Another article studying fraternities concluded that fraternities play an influential role in encouraging alcohol consumption and developing unhealthy drinking habits in new members. They found that alcohol is a crucial part of social events — making

involvement in alcohol-related activities important in forming a sense of belonging within the Greek Life community (Kuh, 1993). It is important to study and understand the culture of Greek Life as it influences many young students entering college during a time of uncertainty and change.

In order to study this Greek Life stereotype experimentally, we used cultural priming for our manipulations, i.e. presenting participants with a cultural cue in order to activate a certain cultural mindset. There are many studies showing that cultural priming is effective and strong enough to give insights into many different faucets of culture. By studying bicultural individuals, Benet-Martinez et al were able to change participant's perceptions of a given situation just through culturally priming different subcultures these bicultural individuals belonged to (2003). A study by Gardner et al used cultural priming to study the differences in emotions between Eastern and Western cultures, rendering cultural priming as strong enough to influence one's emotional goals (1999). A study by Vohringer et al shows that children can be primed as well, and suggests that the effects of priming reaches across cultures, supporting that priming is reliable and can be used to test differences between cultures, as the brain mechanism for priming seems to be an innate human trait (2015). Cultural priming is this effective because of a concept called Frame Switching, in which individuals can "switch" between different cultural mindsets they identify with when presented with stimuli from one of these cultural groups (Zhang et al, 2013). Given this research, we felt confident in using cultural priming as a technique to experimentally implement culture.

However, cultural priming has primarily been used in cultural psychology studies examining differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Our study will expand this

technique to fit the relevant cultural world of the average college student — who has most likely been exposed to partying and the idea of Greek Life, as well as studying and the notion of Honors Societies.

We believed that cultural priming would influence what participants would perceive as salient. We measured this by looking at the saliency of objects that either related to partying or studying behavior. We assumed that the objects most salient to the individual would reflect the underlying behaviors associated with the objects, deeming those associated behaviors as more favorable by the individual, given their current frame of mind affected by their cultural prime condition. We showed participants these objects in a dorm room, which serves as a classic college setting. By presenting these objects in a quintessential college scene, we theorized this may extrapolate to the participant's perception of their time in college. Thus, we sought to examine if and how cultural priming of Greek Life affects what type of objects and thus, behavior students would find most important within their college experience.

We went about exploring this question by first implementing cultural primes: a Greek Life prime and Honors Society prime, in order to activate either a party-inclined or academic-inclined cultural mindset. We were curious to see if priming with Greek Life would lead to automatic association with partying, assessing the Greek Life stereotype. We hypothesized that participants primed with the Greek Life condition would report higher object saliency for party-related objects compared to those in the Honors Society prime condition.

We also realized that pre-existing membership in either a Greek Life organization or an Honors Society may affect participants' results, and so we included these moderators. The moderator we were most interested in for our research was Greek Life membership. We

hypothesized that participants who have pre-existing membership in a Greek Life organization will report higher object saliency for party-related items compared to participants who are not members of a Greek Life organization. We also hypothesized that participants who have pre-existing membership in a Honors Society will report higher object saliency for academic-related objects compared to those who are not already members of a Honors Society.

Finally, we hypothesized that the effect of cultural priming on an individual's saliency of objects in a given context will be affected by current Greek Life membership, such that individuals who are placed in the Greek Life condition will report higher object saliency for party-related items compared to those in the Honors Society group prime, and this effect would be even more pronounced in those who are already members of a Greek Life organization in their actual lives.

Methods

Participants

Participants were pulled from a psychology research class at UC Santa Barbara. Mild coercion was used, as participation in research studies was required for the class. However, students were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, our survey was distributed on the social media platform, Facebook, where no coercion was involved, but no compensation was provided, other than our gratitude. All participants were either undergraduate students or of average undergraduate student age, which we defined as ages 18 to 23. We analyzed 80 participants' data for this study.

Materials

We showed participants an image of an average dorm room. The image was created by taking a stock image (Anonymous) and photoshopping in various items that either related to partying or academic behavior. We took pictures of these items ourselves and photoshopped them into the main background dorm room image.

We had the participants complete a free recall task, asking them to write the first five items they remembered from a given image. We also used a nameless scale used in another study (Marcell & Williams) that we labelled as the "Object Saliency Scale." We modified this scale by asking how confident the participant was that the item was actually in the picture, rather than asking how relevant the item was to the picture's meaning. Refer to the appendix for the image and "Table 1" in "Figures and Tables" for the Object Saliency Scale.

We choose the Greek letters for our Greek Life group by looking up Greek letters and writing down which ones seemed like they were commonly used to label Greek life a organization. We randomly chose letters out of a hat, resulting in naming the group ΛΕΠ (Lambda Epsilon Pi). We looked up Greek life organizations at school to get an idea of Greek life words that are commonly used and to make sure we were not using the name of a real Greek Life organization at our campus. For the Honor Society group, we used a random-letter generator to randomly select a letter, which was "K". We wrote out our descriptions based on common activities each group participates in.

Procedure

Before conducting our experiment via the online platform Qualtrics, we submitted an IRB form to Dr. Woods and it was approved. Within our survey, we first gained consent from the participant, and then asked basic demographic questions, including their age and gender. Next, we randomly assigned the participant to one of two of our IV conditions: Greek Life affiliation prime or Honors Society affiliation prime. Our Greek Life condition was designated "ΛΕΠ (Lambda Epsilon Pi)" and our Honors Society Group was called "Group K". Placement into the group was accompanied by a description of the group, including weekly activities the group participates in. These descriptions for each prime group can be found in the appendix. We then gave participants a filler task. All participants received the same filler task, which asked participants to identify how many letter "s" were in a given passage. All participants were given the same passage for the filler task. Afterwards, participants were shown an image of a dorm room for three seconds. This image included six photoshopped objects: three party-related items and three academic-relates items. See appendix for this image. Following the picture, participants were asked to complete a free-recall task, listing the first five items they remember. Then, participants completed the "Object Saliency Survey". Both of these methods aimed to measure our dependent variable, object saliency. Next, we added a manipulation check, asking the participant to what degree they identified with their assigned group. We then measured potential moderators, asking students if they are involved in a Greek organization or Honors Society in their real life. We finished the experiment by debriefing the participants via an online form.

Results

Participants were recruited from UC Santa Barbara's Psychology 120 Fall 2017 class as well as through the social media platform Facebook. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 23; data was deleted for participants outside of this age range. This was to ensure that all participants were of undergraduate student age. The total amount of participants after deleting those who were outside of our age range was 80 participants. 11 participants (13.8%) were members of a Greek Life organization and 6 (7.5%) were members of an Honors Society.

Our moderators were transformed into acronyms PEGL (Pre-existing Greek Life) and PEHO (Pre-existing Honors Society). We coded our items by giving party-related items a 1, academic-related items a 2, and neutral items a 0. In theory, a higher score would indicate a higher saliency for academic-related items, whereas a lower score would indicate a higher saliency for party-related items.

Four 2x2 between-subjects ANOVAs were conducted in order to see if our cultural prime manipulations and moderators PEGL and PEHO had an effect on object saliency.

We wanted to test whether or not pre-existing membership in Greek Life would have an effect on participants' object saliency as measured by a free recall task. The data was analyzed using a 2 (Prime: Greek Life or Honors Society) x 2 (PEGL: Yes or No) ANOVA on free recall. The main effect of our cultural prime on free recall was significant [F (1, 76) = 4.34, p = .04] such that those in the Greek Life prime remembered more party-related items (M = .71) compared to participants in the Honors Society prime (M = 1.18). The main effect of our moderator PEGL was not significant (F (1, 76) = .03, p = .86) such that those who were already members of a Greek Life organization did not remember party-related items more than

participants who were not members of a Greek Life organization (*Ms* = .82 vs .96). Lastly, there was not a significant interaction between prime condition and PEGL on free recall (F (1, 76) = .21, p = .65) such that the effect of our cultural prime on object saliency as measured by a free recall task was not affected by the moderator PEGL in the study. See Table 2 and Figure 1 in "Figures and Tables".

We wanted to test whether or not pre-existing membership in a Honors Society would have an effect on participants' object saliency as measured by a free recall task.The data was analyzed using a 2 (Prime: Greek Life or Honors Society) x 2 (PEHO: Yes or No) ANOVA on free recall. The main effect of our cultural prime on free recall was significant [F (1, 76) = 6.82, p = .01] such that those in the Honors Society prime remembered more academic-related items (M = 1.18) compared to participants in the Greek Life prime (M = .71). The main effect of our moderator PEHO on free recall was not significant [F (1, 76) = .84, p = .36] such that those who were members of an Honors Society did not remember more academic-related items compared to participants who were not in an Honors Society (*Ms* = .67 vs .96). Lastly, there was not a significant interaction between prime condition and PEHO on free recall [F (1, 76) = 1.96, p = .17] such that the main effect of our cultural prime on object saliency as measured by a free recall task was not affected by the moderator PEHO in the study. See Table 3 and Figure 2 in "Figures and Tables".

We wanted to test whether or not pre-existing membership in Greek Life would have an effect on participants' object saliency as measured by an object saliency scale. The data was analyzed using a 2 (Prime: Greek Life or Honors Society) x 2 (PEGL: Yes or No) ANOVA on object saliency. The main effect of our cultural prime on object saliency was not significant [F

(1, 76) = .14, p = .71] such that participants in the Greek Life prime did not rate party-related items as more salient compared to participants in the Honors Society condition (*Ms* = 2.96 vs 3.19). The main effect of our moderator PEGL on object saliency was not significant [F (1, 76) = 1.21, p = .28] such that members of a Greek Life organization did not rate party-related items as more salient compared to participants who were not in a Greek Life organization (*Ms* = 2.88 vs 3.10). Lastly, there was not a significant interaction between prime condition and PEGL on object saliency [F (1, 76) = 2.69, p = .11] such that the main effect of our cultural prime on object saliency as measured by an object saliency scale was not affected by the moderator PEGL in the study. See Table 4 and Figure 3 in "Figures and Tables".

We wanted to test whether or not pre-existing membership in a Honors Society would have an effect on participants' object saliency as measured by an object saliency scale. The data was analyzed using a 2 (Prime: Greek Life or Honors Society) x 2 (PEHO: Yes or No) ANOVA on object saliency. The main effect of our cultural prime on object saliency was not significant [F (1, 76) = .01, p = .94] such that participants in the Honors Society prime did not rate academic-related items as more salient compared to participants in the Greek Life prime condition (*Ms* = 3.19 vs 2.96). The main effect of our moderator PEHO on object saliency was not significant [F (1, 76) = .58, p = .45] such that members of an Honors Society did not rate academic-related items as more salient compared to participants who were not members of an Honors Society (*Ms* = 2.83 vs 3.09). Lastly, there was not a significant interaction between the prime condition and PEHO on object saliency [F (1, 76) = .52, p = .47] such that the main effect of our cultural prime on object saliency as measured by an object saliency scale was not affected by the moderator PEHO in the study. See Table 5 and Figure 4 in "Figures and Tables".

Discussion

We wanted to examine if a more party-inclined or academic-inclined mindset could be activated by priming students with either a Greek Life mindset or Honors Society mindset. We hypothesized that students in the Greek Life cultural prime would rate party-related items as more salient compared to those Honors Society prime, whereas those in the Honors Society prime would rate academic-related items as more salient compared to those in the Greek Life prime. We also hypothesized that pre-existing membership in a Greek Life organization or Honors Society may impact participants' results. Finally, we hypothesized that pre-existing membership may have an affect on our cultural prime's effect on object saliency.

Our findings suggest that being a member of a Greek Life organization or an Honors Society did not influence people's scores. This deviates from previous research, such as studies by Scott-Sheldon et al, McCabe et al and Kuh, that support the stereotype that Greek Life members participate in partying behavior and dangerous alcohol consumption more than the typical college student.

However, our cultural prime manipulations for recall were significant. This supports previous research that testifies to the effectiveness of cultural priming. For our research, this implies that Greek Life is indeed a subculture that can be culturally primed. Our results support the idea that our research did in fact stimulate a subculture of either a partying-related or studying-related temporary mindset within the student. This makes sense as many college students engage in both partying and studying behavior. There are many students who are not members of Greek Life but who still engage in partying behavior and consume alcohol. Greek Life members are also students, so they study as well. One reason we did not find a main effect

for our moderator may be due to this phenomenon of overlapping behaviors — participants encompass both subcultural mindsets, and our study may have simply activated one or the other depending on the cultural prime. However, we did not find a significant effect with our second measure, the object saliency scale, so we cannot confirm that our manipulation was effective with strong reliability.

One limitation we encountered was a lack of adequate scales to measure the saliency of objects given a specific context. We found a nameless scale used in a previous study and called it the "Object Saliency Scale." Therefore, this scale already had low internal validity nor was it very reliable as it has only been used once before. Moreover, we adapted this nameless scale, thereby further lowering our scale's internal validity. Another limitation lay in the fact that we created the dorm room picture we showed to participants by choosing a stock dorm room photo and photoshopping in particular potentially salient objects. Because we created this image, it also holds low internal validity. Various items may have been more apparent compared to others due to the size, placement, color and brightness of specific objects; all of which are confounds as we hoped participants would notice objects based on the object's meaning as either a "partying" or "studying" type of item. Additionally, many people noticed neutral items, such as the bed, which renders it difficult to detect if there was an effect of the prime or not. This created another limitation within our coding — neutral items were coded with 0 and so this pulled the score lower if a neutral item was more salient.

Going forward, researchers should consider finding or devising more effective ways of measuring object saliency. Free recall may not have been the strongest method due to the issue of neutral items. Future researchers should look for more reliable and valid scales. If they cannot

find any, they should conduct tests to check and improve the validity of the scale in order to have a more valid and reliable measure.

Additionally, researchers should consider conducting more research regarding culturally priming Greek Life, since cultural priming is commonly used in eliciting Eastern vs Western mindsets but, as to our knowledge, has not been utilized for Greek Life culture until this study. Furthermore, much of the research studying Greek Life is correlational, and it would be beneficial to use this cultural priming technique in order to study Greek Life experimentally in order to draw causal conclusions. Future research may try to measure behavior, such as alcohol-related or other stereotypical Greek Life behavior, after Greek Life priming, in order to more explicitly study the effects of Greek Life membership on behavior.

Most, if not all, research on Greek Life is not only correlational, but also focuses on the negative aspects associated with Greek Life, such as unhealthy alcohol consumption habits and risky sexual behavior. If we are to study Greek Life as a culture, we propose studying other aspects of Greek Life as well, to include a range of studies that together form a more balanced approach in order to garner a richer understanding of the Greek Life community as a culture. In conclusion, we hope our study, which provides some support that Greek Life culturally priming is effective, will ignite interest in further studying and developing Greek Life as its own culture and its subsequent effect on student perceptions, motivation and behavior.

References

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Figures and Tables

Table 1: Object Saliency Scale

How confident are you that these items were in the image?

	Very Confident (1)	Moderately confident (2)	A little bit confident (3)	Not too confident (4)	Not very confident (5)	Not confident at all (6)
White board						
Beer cans						
Stack of books						
Music party poster						
Laptop						
Red solo cup						

Table 2: PEGL and Cultural Prime on Free Recall

	Greek Prime	Academic Prime	Marginal Means
PEGL	0.57	1.25	0.91
No PEGL	0.74	1.18	0.96
Marginal Means	0.66	1.22	

Figure 1: PEGL and Cultural Prime on Free Recall

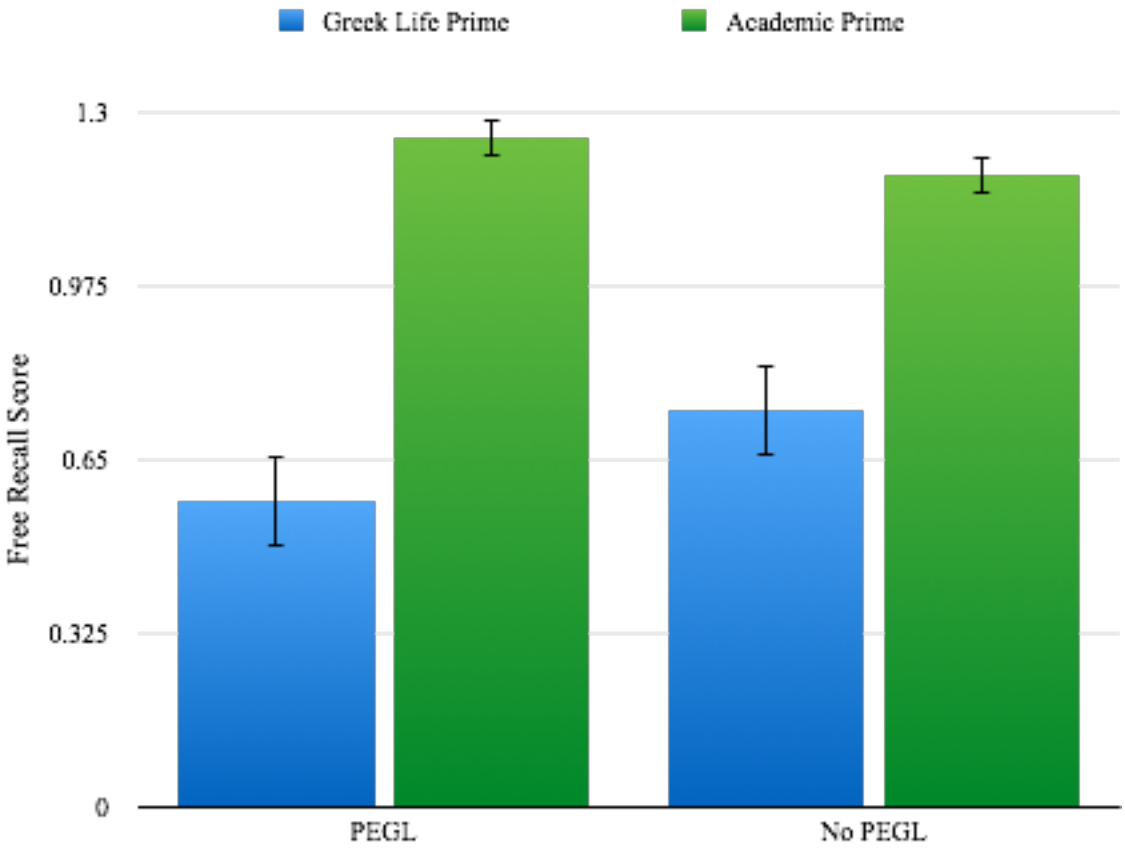


Table 3: PEHO and Cultural Prime on Free Recall

	Greek Prime	Academic Prime	Marginal Means
PEHO	0.00	1.33	0.67
No PEHO	0.77	1.17	0.97
Marginal Means	0.39	1.25	

Figure 2: PEHO and Cultural Prime on Free Recall

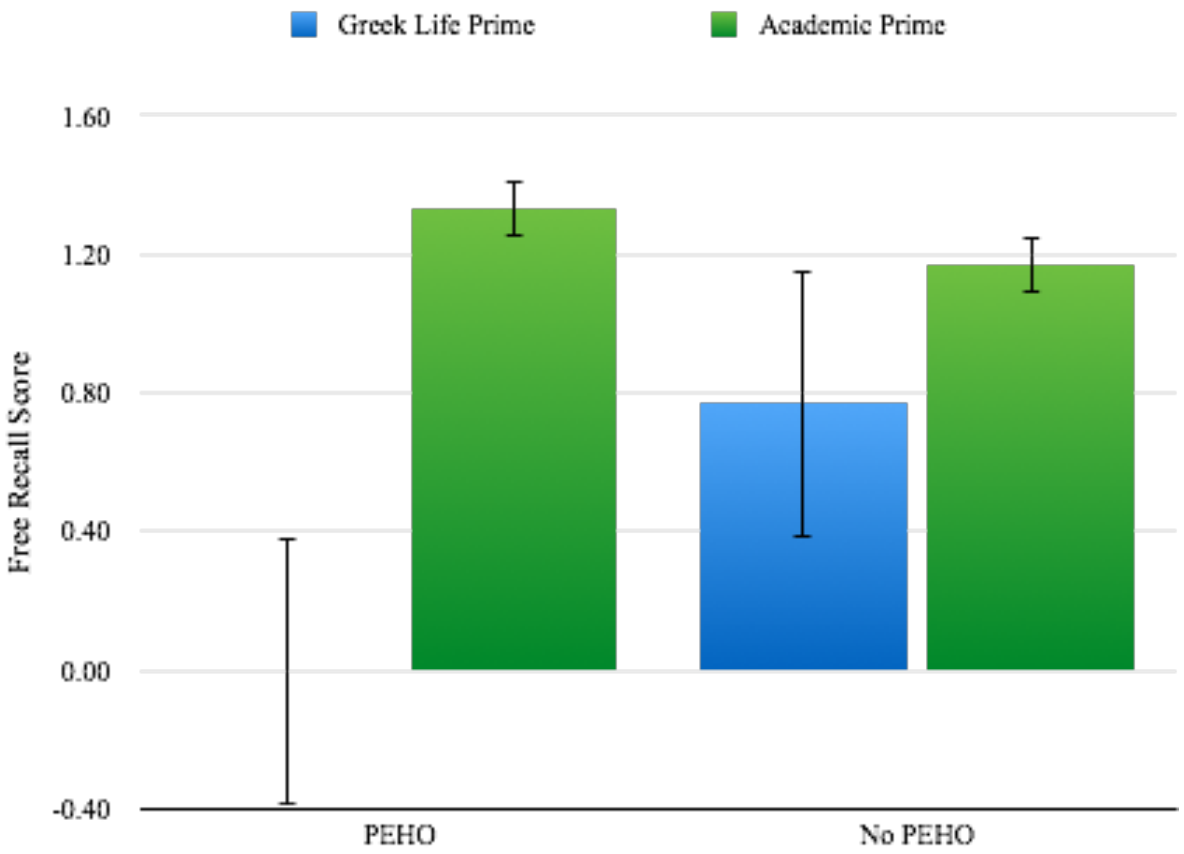


Table 4: PEGL and Cultural Prime on Object Saliency Scale

	Greek Prime	Academic Prime	Marginal Means
PEGL	3.07	2.54	2.81
No PEGL	2.93	3.26	3.10
Marginal Means	3.00	2.90	

Figure 3: PEGL and Cultural Prime on Object Saliency Scale

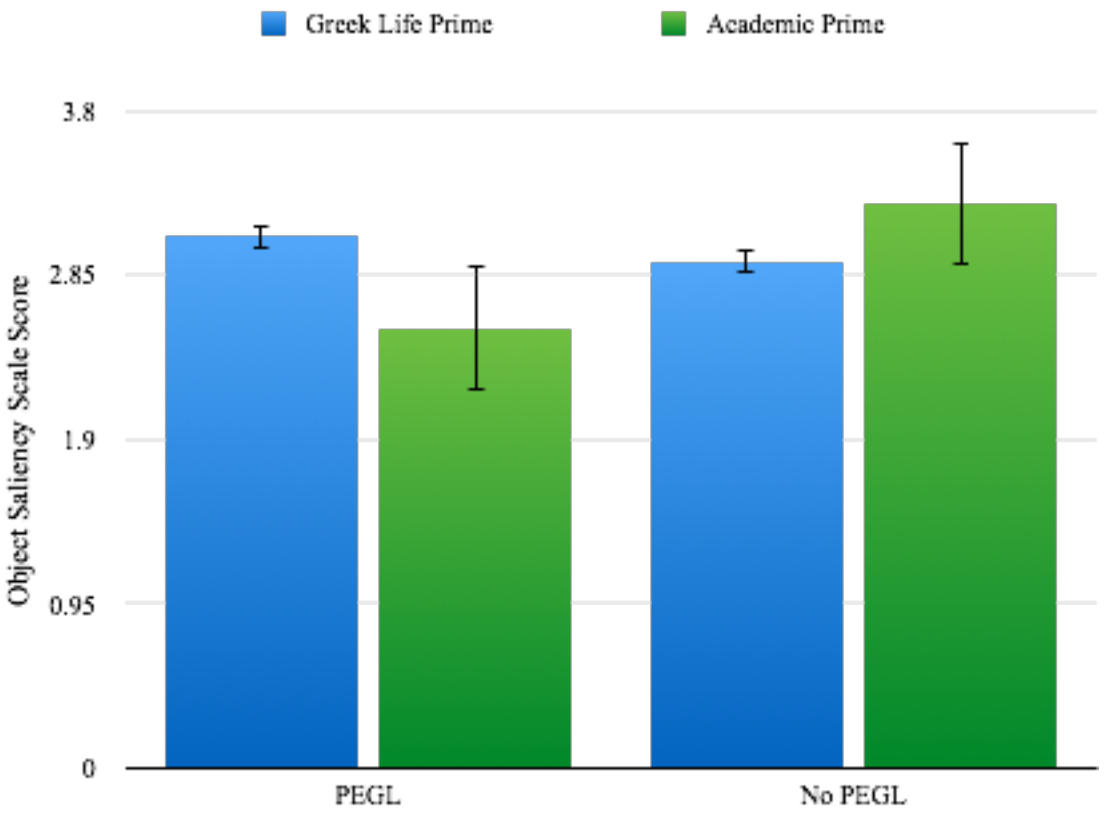
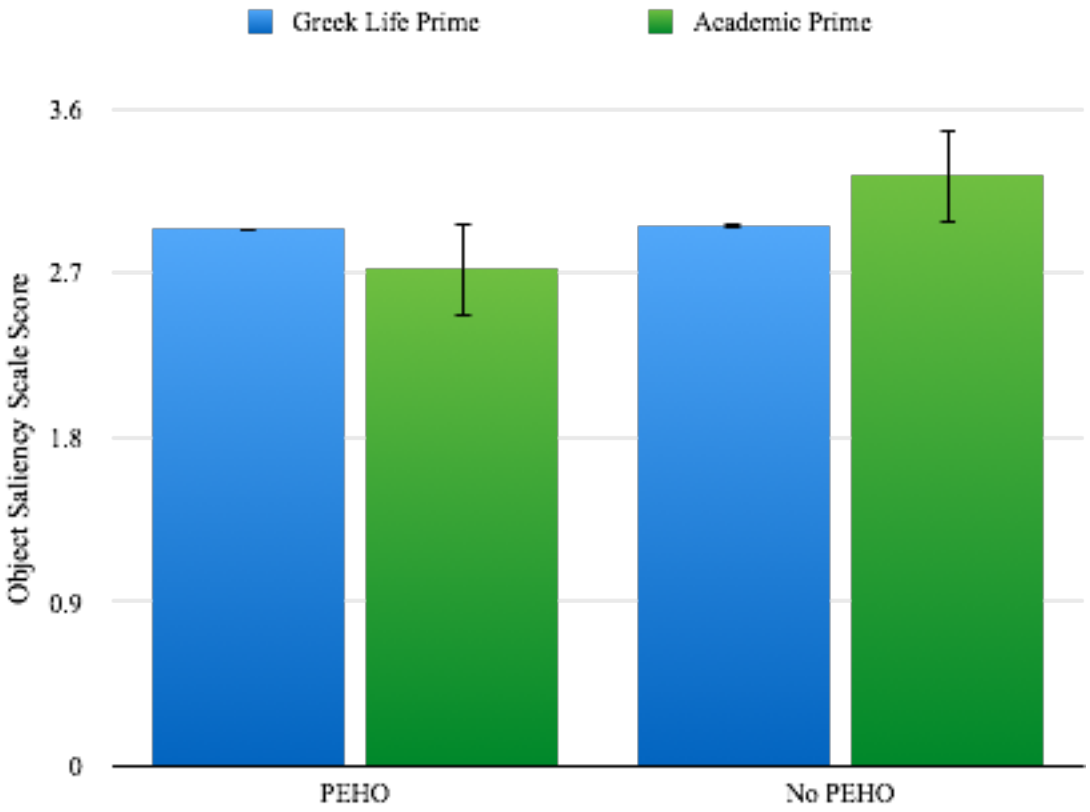


Table 5: PEHO and Cultural Prime on Object Saliency Scale

	Greek Prime	Academic Prime	Marginal Means
PEHO	2.94	2.72	2.83
No PEHO	2.96	3.23	3.10
Marginal Means	2.95	2.98	

Figure 4: PEHO and Cultural Prime on Object Saliency Scale



Appendix

Greek Life Prime Script

Congratulations! You are now a member of group ΛΕΠ (Lambda Epsilon Pi).
Lambda Epsilon Pi is a social networking group.

On Mondays, your group holds a weekly meeting to discuss the current affairs of your group.
On Tuesdays, your group has social gatherings with other groups similar to your group, and you get to mingle with more people.
On Wednesdays, your group hosts "Wine Wednesday" where you socialize with your group.
On Thursdays, your group volunteers for community service or a philanthropy.
On Friday nights, you go out and party with your "big" aka your mentor as well as with a few other members of your group.

Honors Society Prime Script

Congratulations! You are now a member of Group K.
Group K is an Honors Society group.

On Mondays, your group holds a weekly meeting to discuss the current affairs of your group.
On Tuesdays, your group studies in the library together.
On Wednesdays, your group hosts a lecture series about some academic topic you all share an interest in.
On Thursdays, your group volunteers for community service or a philanthropy.
On Friday nights, your group watches a documentary and eats pizza together.

Dorm Room Picture

Photoshopped academic-related items: White board, stack of books, laptop

Photoshopped party-related items: Beer cans, Music party poster, Red solo cup