

The Bitch, The Bimbo, and The Bad Ass

The problematic characterization of sorority women's friendships in popular culture

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Abstract

Through taking a look into the ways in which popular culture stimulates strict stereotypes of American sororities and college life, we juxtapose these problematic and recurring themes against those discovered through research on friendship within these organizations in reality. Not only do we work to expose the problematic rhetoric that occurs within popular culture forums, but through doing so, we show just how incorrect this script is. In reality, sororities queer this popular culture script through providing women with leadership opportunities in a women-lead organization. Although the feminist activist potential of sorority life is not entirely explicit due to negative popular culture representations of Greek life, we argue that sororities are actually full of potential for feminist activism through its focus on women's friendship, leadership, and professional opportunities.

Introduction

Sororities are all-female organizations designed with the ideal of creating life-long friendships in the form of ‘sisterhood’. These affiliations are found throughout various universities throughout the United States alongside similar organizations called fraternities.

While these organizations give students opportunities to find housing, comradery, and philanthropic prospects, American popular culture has framed sororities and fraternities as highly toxic. Through various forms of media such as television, books, movies, and the internet, these institutions are portrayed as party-centered, wealthy, self-centered, power-hungry establishments that serve to alienate and humiliate their members. Sorority’s adverse portrayal casts a problematic representation of the women who join these organizations. Women are cast as unintelligent, bossy, boy-crazed, and women-hating individuals. Popular culture places women in competition with one another instead of including a more representative script that would help challenge problematic and often inaccurate stereotypes. The starkest and lasting tropes within these portrayals are The Bitch, The Bimbo, and The Bad Ass.

The Bitch

One of the most widely recognized tropes within popular culture’s representation of sorority women is The Bitch. She embodies the antagonist, the villain, the girl who others will work heroically to “bring down”. Popular culture designed this character for us to hate. The Bitch epitomizes evil, wickedness, and serves as an important figure in the representation of sorority life within popular culture. She illustrates an important character within the script because she gives us, the viewer, a way to root for the “other girl”, the one who doesn’t fit within the sorority culture and disrupts the self-indulgent, boy-obsessed, popularity driven organization.

The Bitch acts catty, putting other women down in her path; she holds some type of leadership position, some kind of privatized, privileged power that she wields over her subordinates. The plot's entire premise is that The Bitch will stop at nothing to yield power as the prettiest, most popular, most well respected woman not only in her sorority but on campus. The design of this character further represses powerful women. For, we as the audience immediately and strongly dislike her and long to watch her learn a lesson. This further pits women against one another, for we ache to see her overthrown. Not only does she exhibit actions and attitudes associated with the horizontal hostility among women, but the audience is encouraged to partake in the enmity as well with The Bitch at its focus. The Bitch is displayed prominently through the *Sydney White* and *Scream Queens*.

In the 2007 romantic comedy *Sydney White* the antagonist Rachel Witchburn is her sorority's president. *Sydney White* plays on the classic Disney movie *Snow White*; throughout the film Rachel Witchburn is compared to the Evil Queen and her magic mirror. In lieu of a mirror Witchburn asks a social media platform who reigns as the the most popular girl on campus. She is distraught when she notices Sydney White, the protagonist, gain momentum in the school's social ranks. Sydney possess the potential to disrupt Rachel's life and status on campus, so Rachel vows to destroy Sydney at all costs (*Sydney White*). While this trope's downfall is humorously positioned and perhaps even appears "empowering" through dismantling the system of problematic hierarchies, this stereotype seeps its way into real life women's perceptions of sorority women and those in positions of leadership. Instead of looking at these women through a lens of admiration and respect, we are given leaders who have self-centered motives. One of the most dramatic examples of the Bitch is Chanel Oberlin of the 2015 comedy-horror television show *Scream Queens*. This revolves around the assumption that sororities are vapid institutions

built upon the ideals of class status. The girls at the head of Kappa Kappa Tau, led by Chanel, focus entirely upon consolidation of wealth and popularity on campus. We see that within this script is built within a heteronormative lens, the status quo of the popular culture representations of sororal and fraternal organizations. This is overtly expressed through jokes about Chanel's boyfriend potentially being attracted to his male roommate, further polarizing those of sexualities deviating from the norm (*Scream Queens*).

Popular culture categorizes sororities as being filled with women-hating women, whose sole purpose of joining a sorority is to elevate her own status. While there may be some real-life instances of this behavior, there is substantial variation among this stereotyped "norm." It is problematic that we view women of power with this lens of hatred and self-validation. These women-only spaces may serve as one of the only times a woman will see all people in positions of power or leadership as all-female. In fact, this can be an empowering ideal that some women may not have the opportunity to experience based upon these stereotypes. Thus, popular culture representations of women in leadership need to deviate from this stereotypical and problematic trope. We must see women in these positions as dynamic characters, flawed but more inclusive instead of the white, middle-class, Bitch that serves as the dominant character within portrayals of sorority women.

The Bimbo

The Bimbo is a highly criticized figure within popular culture. She is characterized as vapid, unintelligent, and hypersexualized. Her main role is that of being all together consumed by sex. She's an oversexed character that goes to indicate the promiscuity that goes alongside with being in a sorority. The Bimbo is typically cast alongside The Bitch. She's seen as the minion, the loyal follower who abides by whatever she's told. While we see that The Bimbo is

characterized for the male gaze, there tends to be some instances or references towards female encounters. However, we do not view The Bimbo as a lesbian but as a “loose” woman who experiments with different areas of sexuality.

The character of The Bimbo further polarizes women’s sexuality. Alongside The Bimbo, a character is cast as her opposite, virginal. Throughout the plot, The Bimbo is referenced as a slut or whore. This explicit characterization further oppresses women’s sexuality, shaming them for expressing their sexual freedom openly. By portraying women’s sexual desires as being unnatural if they’re seen as being with many partners or in non-monogamous relationships, this trope further represses and objectifies the type of woman who joins a sorority. The Bimbo is seen as undesirable as a role model, but desirable for men’s pleasure.

In the 2008 romantic comedy *The House Bunny* portrays the protagonist, Shelly Darlington, as a highly promiscuous woman. After facing rejection at the Playboy Mansion, she decides to attend a university and become a house mother for a sorority of ‘misfits’. She uses her sexuality to help the women become more desirable to men on campus and defeat the ‘chaste’ sorority. Throughout the entire movie Shelly works diligently to overcome her bimbo status after she falls for an intellectual man. Thus, the entire plot of the movie demonstrates that a woman’s worth is directly linked to her sexuality. In order to win the love and affection of a man, Shelly must overcome her past to be seen as desirable. She transforms her persona to fit the ideal that her new love interest would find most appealing long-term (*The House Bunny*).

Girls Gone Wild, a pornographic entertainment franchise, has several videos where sorority women perform sexual acts on one another, men, and/or expose various parts of their bodies on camera. This franchise continued to produce various films with sorority scenarios of women such as “Sorority Girl Orgy” or “Sorority Sluts in Filthy Hazing” (*Girls Gone Wild*).

Hypersexualizing the bonds of the women within the organization indicates that living in an all-women's environment is an innately sexually repressive situation, leading to or causing women to become overwhelmed by their sexual desires.

The hypsersexualization of sorority women further catalyzes issues relating to rape culture. The Bimbo is the girl who never says no, who enjoys all forms of sexual interaction at any time. This trope further stereotypes sorority women as 'down for anything'. Placing women at the disposal of men further perpetuates misogyny and further objectifies women. When we continue to objectify these women, we no longer see them as human. They are a tool, an object at the desire and whim for men's pleasure. What we do not and need to see in popular culture is praise for the consensual embrace of her sexuality.

The Bad Ass

Unlike the Bimbo or the Bitch, who have negative connotations attached to them, the Badass is an oppositional trope that seems to be almost post-feminist. The Badass is not like other girls; she is a down-to-earth, spunky individual who seems to negate sorority stereotypes just by her membership in one. While the Badass might seem on the surface to be liberated from cultural stereotypes of femininity - she drinks, she likes sex, she's one of the guys - the figure of the Badass represents the ways in which women are pushed to adopt masculine social scripts in order to succeed socially. Additionally, the trope of the Badass is riddled with internalized misogyny through claiming individuality from a homogenous category of "other girls", presumably feminine ones, she creates a hierarchy of womanhood in which one form of womanhood, a more masculine one, is better than others. The phrase "It's a girl-eat-girl world out there," might be perceived as relatively harmless, but its implications are sinister. One article from Total Sorority Move, a popular website frequented by sorority women, states a list of 21 ways to prove that you're unlike other girls to potential male suitors. Right off the bat one can see that the Badass is not only different from other girls, she's superior. The Badass dismantles the idea of femininity. She is going to come out on top in this girl-eat-girl world with a man and a sense of accomplishment for proving that she can roll with the guys.

But in order to come out on top, to prove her superiority both to fellow women and to men, the Badass must denounce femininity and adopt masculine practices. In a society that values the masculine over the feminine, this comes as no surprise. One of the methods the article provides for proving your uniqueness is to loudly and often talk about sex, to have opinions about sports, and to drink beer. While all of these actions are available to people regardless of gender expression, society associates these actions with men, especially college men. However,

with the Badass the elusive realm of men's masculinity isn't closed to women; the Badass penetrates the gender barrier and parties right alongside them. She rises above the Bitch and the Bimbo to the level of men themselves; she transcends femininity so much so that some may point to her as an example of why sexism doesn't exist anymore.

Ironically, the Badass illustrates how sexist ideologies get pressed into the minds of the very people they are designed to oppress. As everyday feminism writer Sian Ferguson argues, when women claim that they're "not like other girls," they are implying that being "like other girls" is a bad thing. "Of course," Ferguson writes, "no girl is like other girls... I feel like the phrase... is informed by the idea that girls are usually all the same." With media examples that give us the same negative feminine tropes over and over again, like *Girls Gone Wild*, *The Neighbors*, and *House Bunny*, it makes sense that women would want to differentiate themselves from these stereotypes. However, the Badass' way of asserting her individuality creates a hierarchy of good and bad womanhood with herself, a masculinized self, above other or less respectable women.

While the article reads satirically, satire is designed to poke fun at very real ideas such as the idea that women should prove themselves to be unlike the apparently homogenous category of 'other girls'. The Badass is unique, superior. She's ride or die. She adopts masculinity as a way to infiltrate our still very much androcentric world. Her adoption of masculinity does more than allow her to hang with the guys; it sets up a system that privileges one way of being over another, masculinity above femininity, and sets women in competition with one another for the male gaze. The Badass seems like a feminist ideal, but she is a hollow one, a pipe dream, a masculine figure in a so-called 'postfeminist' age that must degrade other women and femininity in order to come out on top.

Reality

Media representations of sorority women constantly bombard us with images and stories that seem to fit all sorority women into three oppressive categories: the Bitch, the Bimbo, and the Badass. However, sorority women do not merely reproduce patriarchal ideologies. While it is true that some sorority aspects encourage these stereotypes, sorority spaces, as a whole, actually promote feminist values of solidarity and respect, while simultaneously providing women with invaluable relational and professional opportunities.

To see that sororities actively encourage women's solidarity, one can look at the reasons why sororities were created and why they are still around. Alpha Phi was founded in 1872 at Syracuse University as a way for the ten original founders to create a personal and educational support system in a time when women were largely discriminated against in higher education. Alpha Phi founder Clara Sittser Williams noted that the founders were concerned with creating a "circle of sympathetic friends," encouraging "mutual improvement," and keeping a high standard of academic work (alphaphi.org). Helen Mary Dodge, a founder of Gamma Phi Beta, felt that women needed "a social center, a place of conference, a tie which should unite us in the midst of a more or less hostile atmosphere" (gammaphibetahistory.org). Other founders' stories sound similar. In a time when women were still being discouraged from attending higher education, sororities were founded to foster solidarity, respect, self-improvement, and academic excellence.

These feminist values do not stay mitigated to the past; sororities continue to create feminist spaces today. According to the National Panhellenic Conference, 43% of sorority and fraternity members report not only being employed full-time, but also being actively engaged in their workplace, as opposed to 38% of non-Greek graduates (National Panhellenic Conference Annual Report). Sorority membership encourages women to pursue careers after college and

makes the transition from college to workplace easier through participation in meetings, executive boards, committees, and officer positions that prepare sorority women for life after school (National Panhellenic Conference Annual Report). In this way, sororities teach women valuable skills that are applicable to life after college, and encourage female independence by giving women resources to go into the workforce to support themselves financially.

In terms of social issues, sororities are also spaces in which women can form bonds and foster solidarity. Lisa Handler writes that through the language of sisterhood, “[sororities] structure and formalize bonds among women, institutionalizing women’s friendships and legitimizing close and caring relationships between women” (238). Allowing women to form close bonds with one another through this kind of formalizing of friendships opens up spaces for women to share their gendered experiences and find solidarity. While sharing gendered experiences can bring sensitive topics to the table, women are encouraged through their close friendships to confront these issues head on. For example, sorority alum Carter Sherman notes that Greek women are coming together to speak out against issues such as sexual assault. The Bradley University Panhellenic community hosted a Take Back the Night event during which participants organized a candlelight vigil walk throughout campus to honor victims of sexual assault (Hollis).

Historically Black sororities bring black women together in solidarity and allow them to share their specific racialized and gendered experiences. Originally founded to give the relatively few black women on college campuses spaces to come together, black sororities are deeply invested in helping their communities and “[improving] the American experience of blacks and women across the country” (Johnson 2015). Just last year, black sororities Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sigma Gamma Rho, and Zeta Phi Beta campaigned on the behalf of Loretta

Lynch, who was recently elected as the first black US Attorney general. Through providing spaces in which women could come together in solidarity, these black sororities further encouraged women to get politically involved on their own behalves to enact lasting political change.

These examples constitute but a small portion of the ways in which sorority spaces encourage the growth and development of feminist values. While it is important to recognize the problematic aspects of sororities, it is equally as important to see the feminist potential within these organizations and help devise ways in which we can further our feminist goals and principles.

Conclusion

Popular culture would lead us to believe that all sorority women can be divided into three strict categories of the Bitch, the Bimbo, and the Badass, all of which portray sorority women as having excess of negatively feminine traits. The categorization of women not only divides them, but creates a hierarchy with the Badass presumed to be superior over the others due to her more masculine behaviors and attitudes. The reality is that actual sorority women queer these narrow perceptions. Sororities create spaces in which women can build solidarity and respect for other women and also encourage women to take on leadership positions in spite of a culture that denounces ‘bossy’ women. Through bringing women together, sororities have further potential to increase solidarity and become spaces for political organizing.

However, it is important to remember that sororities, like all organizations, are not feminist by nature, but by the work that they do and encourage. Therefore, sororities must actively work to promote feminist values. Going forward, we suggest that sororities promote feminist values such as an intersectional analyses of experiences through increasing diversity.

Sororities must actively recruit women of color, queer women, and women of lower class statuses in order to allow for further consciousness-raising and solidarity building. For example, as of 2014, 12% of University of Alabama students are black, yet only one black woman pledged a historically white sorority in 2003. And notice that our popular culture examples only feature thin, white, presumably straight women. This is unacceptable - all women regardless of identities and status should have the opportunity to be involved in Greek life. Current recruitment practices and racist, classist, and homophobic attitudes may deter women from joining sororities. Paid dues for being a sorority member, for example, tend to be relatively expensive, thereby limiting the pool of possible members - and since people of color are disproportionately affected by poverty and classism, we see less women of color in sororities today. Additionally, women of color and queer women may feel as if they cannot pledge a sorority because they do not see themselves represented in the current sorority population. It is evident that recruitment practices must be re-evaluated with an intersectional feminist lens in order to be not only accommodating to, but welcoming of, all women. Only when all women will be represented in the sorority system will productive, revolutionary, intersectional feminist work be done.



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BACKGROUND

We work to expose the problematic rhetoric that occurs within **popular culture forums**, but through doing so, we show just how incorrect this script is. In reality, sororities **queer** this popular culture script through providing women with **leadership opportunities** in a **women-lead organization**. Although the feminist activist potential of sorority life is not entirely explicit due to negative popular culture representations of Greek life, we argue that sororities are full of **potential for feminist activism** through its focus on women's friendship, leadership, and professional opportunities.

THE BITCH

the sorority's leader who is in constant, unwavering competition with women seen as a 'threat' to her power.

Examples

Sydney White: Rachel Witchburn

Scream Queens: Chanel Oberlin

Problematic Reinforcements

Horizontal Hostility

Associations of women in leadership positions

White privilege



THE BIMBO

the hypersexualized sorority slut who's only value resides wholly in her sexuality and ability to please men.

Examples

The House Bunny: Shelly
Girls Gone Wild

Problematic Reinforcements

Sexual freedom & repression within sororities
Male gaze
Rape culture



THE BAD ASS

the 'other girl' who gives up parts of her femininity to dismantle the sorority system.

Examples

Total Sorority Move

Problematic Reinforcements

Value of femininity

Female competition

Postfeminisim



THE BAD ASS

21 Ways To Let Him Know You're Not Like Those Other Girls

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Nice Move

1. Talk about all the sex you have and love.

Loudly and often.

2. Drink beer.

Fuck a vodka cran, you are a real woman.

3. Stop wearing bras.

Is that your nipple peaking through your shirt? Oops,



REALITY

History

Alpha Phi

- Mutual improvement
- High academic standards

Professional Opportunities

Meetings

Executive boards

Committees

Officer Positions

Solidarity

Take Back the Night

Black Sororities



CALL TO ACTION

Actively promote feminist values within sororities

Challenging the Tropes

- Activism
- Continuing leadership

Diversity

- Gender identity
- Sexuality
- Race
- Class

