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## “Selling Sisterhood”: (Re)Viewing White Sorority Women’s Self-Portrayals in Recruitment Videos

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et al.: "Selling Sisterhood": (Re)Viewing White Sorority Women's Self-Portrayals in Recruitment Videos  
"SELLING SISTERHOOD": (RE)VIEWING WHITE SORORITY WOMEN'S  
SELF-PORTRAYALS IN RECRUITMENT VIDEOS

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*Amidst the contemporary higher education and student affairs research landscape, there is a critical need to explore how sororities engage social media — specifically how their participation in these particular mediums may reinforce negative stereotypes about these organizations. This qualitative study engaged a content analysis of the top 100 most viewed National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sorority recruitment videos. Findings highlight how many of these videos overwhelmingly cast strong signals to viewers regarding gender, race, and social class. Findings suggest that researchers and practitioners must better understand how these videos overtly and covertly highlight sorority life on college campuses and the implications therein.*

It is no secret that sororities and fraternities within United States post-secondary contexts have often been shrouded in controversy within societal and education discourses. DeSantis (2020) asserts that the well documented commentary from external and internal critics has been self-imposed by fraternity and sorority members due to a pervasive litany of self-inflicted missteps and irresponsible behaviors. Prominent societal critique of fraternity and sorority culture(s) have been highly publicized by media sources that have highlighted heightened levels of body image expectations (Berbary, 2012) and objectification (Basow, Foran, & Bookwala, 2007) of women in sororities. Considering that 45.5% of young adult female characters on prime-time television (Smith et. al, 2013), 22% of television commercials (Messineo, 2008) and 71% of music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2012) include some form of sexually objectifying portrayals of women, it is quite curious that women in turn use these media sources to reify self-sexualizing behaviors. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward et al., 2016). Ironically, while media forums have profited off of the overly sexualized objectification of young women for decades (Aubrey & Frisby 2011; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Conley & Ramsey 2011; Smith et al., 2013; Vandenbosch et al., 2013) they are the same entities who have also criticized women

consumers for creating their own self-sexualized content.

For example, in 2015, the University of Alabama's (UA) National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) potential new member (PNM) sorority events made national news. UA's Alpha Phi chapter's recruitment video sparked widespread media controversy and was met with polarizing reactions from current students, alumni, and various university stakeholders. In the wake of this media firestorm and after receiving over 500,000 views on YouTube, UA's Alpha Phi chapter removed the video that had gone viral and deleted all their social media accounts (Plucinska, 2015; Rein, 2015). Ultimately, the video was largely criticized and accused of blatant objectification and sexualizing of women, lacking diversity, and lending to stereotypes about sororities in general (Bailey, 2015; Rein, 2015; Stump, 2015). A.L. Bailey (2015), a journalist who was one of the most scathing critics of Alpha Phi's video expressed: "To the incoming PNMs, this video has a clear sales pitch: beauty, sexuality, and a specific look above all. They're selling themselves on looks alone, as a commodity...So who is buying what they're selling" (para. 8)?

To be fair, this media occurrence was not the first (nor last) mainstream story that chronicled or depicted sorority or fraternity members in a less than desirable light (see Brady, 2018;

Hughey, 2019; Torres, 2019). Similarly, this particular instance at UA served as a provocative signal that illuminated larger contemporary conversations that have been occurring within the realms of higher education and student affairs. In a way, it further underscored how students have the power to reify problematic or troubling behaviors during their experiences as members of sororities or fraternities during their undergraduate involvement in these organizations. While recruitment videos have become a popular engagement tool for sororities around the country, it appears that how this particular facet of the PNM process is used to engage prospective members needs to be further explored.

### Significance of Study

There have been a substantial number of studies that have explored the positive benefits associated with collegiate fraternity and sorority membership (e.g. Barnhardt, 2014; Kimbrough, 2003; Mitchell, Gipson, Marie, & Steele, 2017). This scholarship has highlighted the myriad academic advantages and social outcomes that derive from students being involved in fraternities and sororities. Harris and Harper (2014) contend that previous studies have largely asserted that students involved in these organizations benefit from “higher levels of leadership and engagement in educationally purposeful experiences, racial identity development gains, stronger sense of belonging, higher grade point averages, and select cognitive development gains” (p. 704). The extant literature has also underscored the negative consequences of fraternity and sorority membership. Previous studies have extensively detailed the impact of hazing (Allan & Madden, 2008; Parks & Spencer, 2013; Tingley et al., 2018); involvement in binge-drinking behaviors (Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001; Lasky, Fisher, Henriksen, & Swan, 2017; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2009); and pervasive issues regarding racism and discrimination (Morgan,

Zimmerman, Terrell, & Marcotte, 2015; Park, 2008; Zimmerman, Morgan, & Terrell, 2018) within these organizations. Amidst this vast and nuanced body of work, a need now exists to advance knowledge of how fraternities and sororities manifest particular objectionable behaviors within *both* post-secondary contexts *and* the online realm.

Amidst the contemporary research landscape, there is a critical need to explore how these particular communities engage social media (e.g. *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, etc.) — specifically how their participation in these particular mediums may reinforce or lend to negative inferences about these organizations. Taylor and McArdle (2018) contend that the manner in which fraternities and sororities utilize social media forums remains a large and important research gap. Further, while there is emerging research that has explored how sororities and fraternities use social media forums such as *Twitter* (Taylor & McArdle, 2018) and the effects that the continuous consumption of social media content has on fraternity and sorority members and how it shapes intra-group perceptions of their organizations *and* themselves (Ortiz & Thompson, 2020), these studies have not yet addressed how race, gender, and social class identities may influence how sorority women *choose* to portray themselves across these mediums. Ultimately, our scholarship seeks to expand insights surrounding how NPC sorority women may contribute to our perceptions of how they participate in *and* lend to *their* portrayals of race, gender, and social class. Thus, our study was guided by the following research question: In what manners do NPC recruitment videos depict race, social class mores, diversity, and gender norms?

### Review of Relevant Literature

In our review of the literature, we underscore the major themes within the extant scholarship pertaining to how sorority culture has been

depicted in various media discourses. We then delve into how issues surrounding gender, race and racism, and social class have affected sororities within post-secondary contexts. Overall, we sought to provide a thoughtful and comprehensive view of how previous studies illuminated sororities, sorority women, and the often-times contested issues within this realm of higher education.

### *Depictions of Sorority Life in Media Discourses*

Much of the research exploring sorority experiences places emphasis on a student culture heavily impacted by illegal drug activity, binge drinking, and involvement in hazing activities (Robbins, 2005; Ortiz & Thompson, 2020). Psychological and physical abuse, coupled with discrimination based on racism, sexual orientation, and elitism also appeared in previous studies as stereotypical behaviors that were widely held about sorority women (Robbins, 2005; Fouts, 2010; Ortiz & Thompson, 2020). "Whether based on personal experience, media concoction, or popular rumor, sororities are understood and represented in American popular culture in various ways ranging from respectable, women-affirming societies to sites of conformity, anti-feminist domination, and compromised morals" (Berbary, 2012, p. 606). The aforementioned views manifest within cinema, television, and other popular media forums. Specifically, television and film have often illustrated sorority cultures by including specific aspects that convey pervasive misogyny, partying cultures, hazing, or academic woes (Wasylikiw & Currie, 2012). These depictions often minimize the positive aspects of these organizations and instead prominently features risk-taking activities (Wasylikiw & Currie, 2012).

Further, as the use of social media among adults between 18 and 29 years-old in the United States has increased from 12% in 2005 to 90% in 2015 (Perrin, 2015), depictions of sorority life that were once only consumed through

non-fiction news pieces and fictitious films can now be viewed in a myriad of self-published ways across multiple social media platforms. Considering that 95% of future college students have at least one social media profile and many espouse that social media influences their college choice decisions (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013; Sutter, 2016), it has become quite common for sororities to use media forums during their time in their respective organizations beyond their larger societal media presences.

Previous research asserts that social media engagement, especially during PNM recruitment processes, has become almost essential for sororities (Fouts, 2010; Zuckerman & Kretovics, 2003). Interestingly, sororities use Twitter most often for internal messaging among their current members and alumnae, and when using this medium, sorority members rarely promote positive behaviors (Taylor & Mcardle, 2018). Ortiz and Thompson (2019) also found that the more sorority women in their study identified with their identity as sorority women, the more likely they were to engage with media geared towards fraternities and sororities that often include stereotypical depictions of these groups. Moreover, greater engagement with this type of media was related to a higher likelihood of self-stereotyping and imparting negative stereotypes within their respective organizations. Further, within social media forums, NPC recruitment videos have served as a way for sorority members to display what they believe the benefits of sorority membership to be. Ultimately, sororities have become quite strategic in how they have chosen to represent their chapters through the selection of specific images in an effort to positively brand themselves, and sometimes, even to dispel widely held stereotypes of sorority life (Kurtyka, 2015). Consequently, these types of practices on social media sites can affect both its creators and its consumers—especially women identified students—as studies have connected social media use with body image issues and self-objectification (Fardouly, Willburger, &

Vartanian, 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

### *Contested Issues among Sororities and Sorority Women*

*Race.* Issues surrounding race and racism are prevalent among historically White fraternities and sororities. Park (2012) asserts that on many campuses nationwide these organizations are almost exclusively divided by race as a whole. When considering the aforementioned, it is critical to note that contemporary historically White fraternity and sorority cultures in U.S. higher education were founded on the absolute right to exclude students who were not White (Barone, 2014; Harris, Barone, & Finch, 2019). Further, as Harris, Barone, and Finch (2019) express, these organizations' foundations were deeply rooted in racial exclusion and favored White students, and today, they still practice de facto segregationist practices so that they can continue to restrict their membership. For example, The University of Alabama's sorority system did not formally desegregate until 2013 (Ford & Crain, 2013). The influence of exclusion—both perceived and real—from historically White fraternities and sororities has had lasting implications for both PNMs and those who are unaffiliated within post-secondary contexts (Harris Combs, Stewart, & Sonnett, 2017).

Across the literature it has also been made evident that White sorority women lack meaningful cross-racial interactions and interracial friendships (Park & Kim, 2013; Matthews et al., 2009). Further, previous studies also found that after White women seek and attain sorority membership it is often into largely homogenous organizations/chapters and they are less likely to forge close friendships with non-White peers, are more likely to oppose interracial dating and marriage, and also are more probable to engage in overt and covert levels of symbolic racism on their respective campuses (Park, 2008; 2012; Sidanius, Levin,

van Laar, & Sears, 2008). Similarly, in their study exploring how White sorority members make meaning of race and racism, Zimmerman, Morgan, and Terrell (2018) found that their participants experienced significant barriers to cross-racial interactions and often minimized topics surrounding race and racism. Ultimately, due to the nature of NPC sororities being predominately White environments, and considering their problematic histories, these organizations have increased potential to engage in racially insensitive activities (Davis & Harris, 2016). As such, there is a concerted need to further explore their cultures, and how these organizations have contributed to troubling incidents that have pervasively occurred on our nation's college campuses and now within the social media sphere.

*Class.* White women have often been situated as gatekeepers within the American cultural and symbolic realm and regarded as prime authorities in gatekeeping processes and mores associated with social class standing (Stuber, Klugman, & Daniel, 2011). Moreover, when considering the aforementioned, sorority affiliation has been a highly visible source of this brand of stratification within post-secondary contexts. As such, during PNM processes on U.S. college campuses nationwide, the social class backgrounds of prospective members have been and are taken into consideration and used as a deciding factor when choosing which women are able to gain membership into NPC sororities (Matthews, et al., 2009). White middle-class/affluent students are more likely to be considered "desirable" for membership within historically White sororities than their low-income/working-class peers (Stuber et al., 2011).

Ultimately, PNMs have been dismissed from being considered for NPC membership based on their social class status (Robbins, 2005). Further, judgement and acceptance based on one's social class background does not end after recruitment has concluded. During and after initiation, these women are made well

aware of the "classed" expectations that will be placed upon them. These include: maintaining aesthetic appearances by wearing certain brands of clothing, specific grooming practices, the ability to engage in international travel during breaks, and even being expected to acquire expensive technology (e.g., smart-phones, brand name laptops, smartwatches, etc.) (Matthews et al., 2009; Robbins, 2005). As Park (2008) expresses, NPC sororities are often viewed by their members and PNMs as being a domain for not only "White girls" to thrive, but "rich White girls" in particular. Overall, social class identities intersect greatly amongst NPC members and influence their PNM processes and profusely impact how members navigate once initiated.

*(Re)Framing Gender.* Historically White sororities have served as forums that inculcate and protect specific gender norms for White women who have been wedded to particular symbols and beliefs (Harris Combs, Stewart, & Sonnett, 2017). Previous studies have found that White sorority women have used their privilege to become powerful and influential forces within higher education contexts (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Further, with regard to how gender manifests within these organizations, Basow, Foran, and Bookwala (2007) expressed that there were heightened levels of body objectification and social pressure among sorority women relating to how they were expected to (re) present themselves to their peers once attaining membership. Overall, sororities have been found to be social spaces that instill potentially harmful expectations surrounding body image and expectations surrounding how gender should be performed during initiation and after (Berbary, 2012).

Further, sorority women often encounter particularly intense social pressures based on gender norms that may lead to them being objectified based on their gender identities. This is a direct byproduct of problematic misogynistic and patriarchal values that they often face during their times in their respective chapters

on their campuses (Berbary & Johnson, 2012). What has been absent from the literature thus far is critique and exploration that delves into a critique of Whiteness and how it is juxtaposed alongside gender identity when exploring White sorority women. Alongside their race and gender identity development, how they create and reify Whiteness along with their privileged identities has largely been overlooked (Harris, 2019). This is a much-needed critique to challenge dominant ideologies and provide an explicit analysis that explores how gender and Whiteness affect sorority cultures (Harris, 2019).

### Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in an *organizational culture and symbols* conceptual framework (Hatch, 1997). Within sorority structures, chosen symbols that reflect their culture(s) often serve as important mechanisms for their public facing images (Grunig, 1993). These organizations use particular imagery to convey the ideas, philosophies, and viewpoints that are imbedded in their cultures (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011). Ultimately, the organizational culture and symbols concept communicates that these entities (re)present their values with internal (members) and external (nonmember) audiences (Shields, 2004).

When considering the aforementioned, stereotypes that potentially may be produced by sororities based on their members' race, class, and gender often serve as unsanctioned or informal representations of these groups. Thus, although these organizations may attempt to control their brands through the use and publicity of specific symbols and images, at the same time, these structures also deliberately shape and define their organizational images (Plowman & Chiu, 2007; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Symbols and images that are put forth by sororities for instance can be and often are (mis)interpreted outside of the parameters of meaning and understandings set by these organizations (Tindall, Hernandez, &

Hughey, 2011). However, as Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey (2011) express, the images that sororities choose to situate their identities when communicating with their chosen audiences come in many forms including visual communication. An organization's image evolves based on both the choices of the organization and their audience (Shields, 2004). Sorority imagery is closely tied to the symbols they choose and prompt audiences to then associate these emblematic representations with said groups. For instance, within this study, the images and self-representations that were chosen by various NPC groups for recruitment purposes were deliberate and intentional in their messaging. However, in the case of UA's Alpha Phi Chapter, the visceral response was unexpected.

### Methods

This study utilized content analysis as a means of systematically reviewing, identifying, and classifying the images, symbols, and messages that were inherent within the top 100 viewed NPC sorority recruitment videos viewed in 2017. Content analysis is an empirically grounded method of examining texts and images in order to identify messages and meaning (Krippendorff, 2004). As a research method, content analysis has myriad advantages, including the ability to provide nuanced insights into media perceptions and allow new distinctions into topics that have been previously understudied (Lai & To, 2015). Within this study we applied content analysis as a forum to analyze social media forums through a structured series of activities, including: (Krippendorff, 2004):

- Establishing clear criteria for selecting the media analyzed,
- Identifying a set of discrete themes,
- Systematically tabulating and summarizing data
- Interpreting patterns that emerge from the identified themes.

Using the aforementioned steps, we compiled

the top 100 sorority recruitment videos viewed in 2017 on *YouTube*. Exclusions were made of any repeated videos from sorority chapters at the same institution, as well as any videos that were not considered to be explicitly geared towards recruitment (e.g. an advertisement for an event or strictly a slideshow of photos). It is important to note that we did not initially intend to only solely examine NPC sororities; however, these sororities were most represented in the final compilation of videos.

The average number of views per video was 65,198. The videos' publish dates ranged from 2010-2017, with only 3 videos representing 2010-2013 and 3 videos from 2017. The average year was 2015, with 78.5% of the videos published between 2015-2016. Once the videos were identified, each video was viewed at-least 5 times by each member of the research team. During the viewings, research team members memoed their views to inform the research and coding processes during as we engaged the research process.

After viewings were completed, each video was coded by the research team using the organizational culture and symbols conceptual framework. Each member of the research team inductively coded the recruitment videos individually to start, developing lists of emergent "raw codes" (Carspecken, 1996, p.150). Following each viewing of the recruitment videos, the researchers met to discuss their interpretations and make meaning of the focus group data. During these meetings we challenged each other about the accuracy of our interpretations and the influence that our identities and respective lived experiences had on our interpretations (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Our codes and subsequent themes were continually revised and refined to build consensus about how we arrived to the fully formed categories and themes. Individual coding was an important choice for our analysis as to not limit or compromise the analytical potential of the team in any way. Themes were generated



once the coding and analysis processes were complete. At the conclusion of our respective coding, thematizing, and research debrief meetings, we decided on the overarching themes and then our findings were grouped together into a comprehensive list.

### Researcher Positionality

As a research team, we each made meaning and were aware of our various identities and social locations during our engagement with this study and the topics we sought to center within this work. Author 1 is a student affairs administrator at a medium sized university who identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman from a working-class background who was a first generation college student. Her research interest's center women identified students and how they reconcile their race, social class, gender, and gender identities at historically White institutions (HWIs). Author 2 is an assistant professor of higher education administration at a research extensive historically White university in the Deep South. He identifies as a Black, queer, cisgender man who comes from a low-income community and was a first-generation college student. His research foci are primarily driven by the intersections of race, class, and sexuality that are inherent among marginalized students, faculty, and administrators who are present in contemporary higher education contexts. Author 3 is a doctoral candidate in a higher education administration program at a research extensive university in the South. She identifies as a Black, cisgender, heterosexual woman who comes from a middle-class background. She is currently an Associate Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life. Her research interests center equity issues in higher education and their relationship between policy and practice in higher education contexts. All members of the research team are members of fraternities and sororities—Author 1 is a member of an organization within the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and authors 2

and 3 are members of organizations within the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC).

### Findings

During our review of the most viewed sorority recruitment videos viewed in 2017 on *YouTube*, we found prominent themes. These themes included: Social Class and Status Markers, Tensions with Race, (Re)Presenting Gender, and An Incomplete Story.

#### *Social Class and Status Markers*

A majority of the recruitment videos conveyed symbols, "performances," and activities that are often associated with high socioeconomic status. Examples included the University of Miami's 2015 Delta Gamma recruitment video where there were scenes of members on a yacht. The 2016 Rutgers University Zeta Tau Alpha recruitment video featured members in extravagant cars, luxuriating in rooftop pools, and even vacationing abroad. Other signs of social class included how women were outfitted. High-end designers were very visible across most videos. This behavior suggests much for student affairs practice. They show how these videos can symbolize how these organizations may not be seen by PNM's as viable options for low-income students. Furthermore, not a single video depicted a sorority member working or having a job. Rather, these videos presented sorority members driving luxury vehicles and living in expensive homes, but did not show exactly how they were afforded these lifestyles.

Another obvious sign of social class displayed in these videos that must be considered is that chapters deliberately showcased sorority members in lavish locations throughout the videos, both on campus and quite literally across the world. Even the sorority houses that were shown in these videos were very well maintained and nicely decorated, with many of them being mansions. These videos also prominently featured campus locations that were



typically inaccessible to the general public, such as the football stadium. For example, in Delta Gamma's 2016 recruitment video at Washington State University, you can see members on the university's football field in multiple shots with several football players and even the university's mascot. This shows that the sorority not only has connections to university officials that allowed them to have private access to the field but that they also have close relationships with these collegiate athletes.

An additional signal of how these members' covertly and overtly connoted socioeconomic status were the number of wardrobe changes that were prominently featured. Even though the majority of their choices could be described as "casual outfits," their changing outfits 12 times within a 140-second video as displayed in The Ohio State University's Alpha Phi chapter in their 2017 recruitment video connotes an explicit level of financial excess that these women were afforded. One must also consider that a majority of these videos were professionally produced using high-end cameras and even drones. It seemed that the quality of the videos only improved as the years progressed. The aforementioned illustrates the rise in popularity of using these types of videos as a form of recruitment and the push for more costly videos, which will only leave sorority chapters with the means to produce these types of media at a potential considerable advantage during recruitment activities.

### *Tensions with Race*

The majority of the videos reified the belief that NPC sororities are all White organizations. Interestingly, a consistent theme across many of the videos was that if a chapter did have a person/s of color in their chapter, they were frequently shown throughout the video, almost as a prop to counteract this particular stereotype. These instances appeared to be used as intense measures to counteract the view that the chapter was not "progressive" or "accepting" of non-White members. For example, while women of

color only accounted for a small percentage of the women in the videos, one person of color was shown at least once in over a third of the recruitment videos. Further, for almost half of the videos, sororities displayed "school spirit" by filming at their institutions' athletic facilities, with several featuring student-athletes—many times these were Black male athletes. Not only do these images underscore their social connections in how they gained access to these facilities but also calls into question if these were instances of interest convergence. Bell (1980) expresses that Whites will only pursue or express the *appearance* of racial equality when they converge with their needs, interests, or expectations. Thus, in alignment with interest convergence, Black students, and popular athletes in particular were only featured when it benefited these majority-White sororities.

Ultimately, NPC recruitment videos largely conveyed all-White chapters. Whiteness was the norm. The ways White sorority women chose to depict racial diversity within their sorority experiences potentially illuminates how their racial attitudes have been formed and how non-White members are impacted during their involvement. Additionally, while our research did not initially intend to feature NPC sororities, this calls into question if sororities representing other councils, such as the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and the National Multicultural Greek Council, simply do not use these types of videos as a recruitment tool and why.

### *(Re)Presenting Gender*

Gendered tropes were also apparent in the recruitment videos. Many of the videos featured sorority women wearing swimsuits and other clothing often deemed "revealing" for women within the broader societal context. The music used in the videos also even had a "feminine" tenor to it. Popular female pop stars were featured in video soundtracks. Also, many of the songs chosen featured lyrics and messages associated with "girl power," friendship between

women, and that "girls" lead "fun and care-free lives."

Another manner in which these women were gendered in these videos was in how they chose to portray themselves in their campus involvement. When depicting how sorority members were active on their respective campuses, cheerleaders and dancers were most featured, while other co-curricular involvement was noticeably absent (e.g., student government, community service engagement, and student activism, etc.). Also, while illustrating that sorority members were supportive of their institutions' athletic entities, a majority featured support of their schools' football team, and none of the recruitment videos depicted sorority members involved in or supporting other women's sports teams.

There was also a certain "brand" of femininity being emphasized in these videos. Sorority members frequently presented themselves in mostly all-white dress in recruitment video scenes. Because White has historically been deemed a symbol of "purity," "light," and "goodness," with regard to White women (Decker, 2014), it almost appears as if these sorority members were also attempting to portray chastity in *juxtaposition* to the overt themes of sexual enticement that were also prominently displayed. Or, rather — did these particular portrayals further reify that NPC sororities are majority White spaces? Further, when considering image, a small percentage of women who could be deemed "plus-sized" comprised the entirety of the videos. Overall, at best one "plus sized" woman was shown in *maybe* two-thirds of the videos. What was curious was that while as many of the videos had a "token" woman of color, a majority of the videos also had a token "plus-sized" sister included.

It is important to consider that this particular brand of "tokenization" is based on *size* and *appearance*, and that it derives from a specific ideal of femininity which is quite grounded in Whiteness and White womanhood within the American societal context. As Strings (2020)

contends, during the 18th century there was an ushering in of a deliberate model of "American Beauty" that was cultivated for White women. This new standard of beauty connoted and almost mandated that slender aesthetics should be seen as the standard amongst White Anglo-Saxon protestant women. Ultimately the mores and principles associated with "American Beauty" glorify an archetype rooted in multiple and colliding features of scientific racism, White Anglo Protestant austerity, and rigid values surrounding health and beauty (Strings, 2020). When juxtaposing these norms against the few number of women whose bodies were/are not considered *thin*, within these PNM videos they were featured as if there is *some* room for women who do not fit a *particular* archetype. Similar to racial tokenism, in a sense, Whiteness still operates with regard to even how tokenization around "body size" appeared in PNM videos.

Sororities that veered from the status-quo or "tradition" were few and far between, but that is not to say there were not any that did. For instance, the 2015 recruitment video by the Chi Omega chapter at The University of Alabama showed members playing basketball, wakeboarding, and not wearing makeup throughout their recruitment video. The 2017 recruitment video for Alpha Phi at The Ohio State University even opened their video discussing how they prided themselves on "being groundbreakers," hoping to challenge and confront particular myths through their recruitment video. While their video did show a sister ice skating and another in a science lab, they still continued many of the themes found in most of the other videos, including wearing matching outfits, and multiple ensemble changes.

### *An Incomplete Story*

Interestingly, almost half of the top viewed videos were created by NPC sororities in the Southern region of the United States. This calls into question many factors revolving around how regional context may influence particular

gender or racialized values within the American societal context. For example, these chapters prominently featured songs in their videos with male vocals more so than their counterparts in other regions. There was also a heavy reliance on underscoring the cultural symbols affiliated with the sororities. The sororities' Greek-letter symbols were constantly shown throughout the videos, and a majority prominently showed members in groups displaying the unique hand symbols of their respective organizations. Also, these chapters' videos were also more prone to feature Black chapter members and/or Black male athletes in their recruitment efforts. It also appeared that there was a particular "brand" of student life being conveyed in these videos.

Overall, while none of the recruitment videos that were analyzed showed members consuming alcohol, or at bars or clubs, these portrayals definitely portrayed sororities as always having an upbeat "fun" atmosphere. Also intriguing was that when members were interviewed and/or discussed their experiences, while they discussed "sisterhood" in almost one third of the videos, the conversation(s) lacked depth. Most answers were vague, repetitive, and provided little insight into their lives as sorority members. In stark contrast to the "fun" lifestyle that was being conveyed in these videos, it was quite noticeable that there was a considerable lack of insight into the "business-side" of sorority experiences. Little to none of these recruitment videos featured chapter meetings, philanthropic endeavors, or programmatic efforts. There appeared to be an over reliance on the social benefits that could be afforded to PNMs — a holistic perspective of sorority life was lacking.

## Discussion

To begin to unpack the impact of the recruitment experience, this study focused on a particular facet of the formal recruitment process held annually by the College Panhellenic Council (CPC). The use of social media as a platform to

advertise participation in membered Panhellenic Council organizations is a popular practice, and as such, this study sought to expand the research regarding how during recruitment NPC sorority women may contribute to perceptions of race, gender, and social class through use of social media.

Specifically with regard to race, legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) theorized how the law protects Whiteness as a form of property that upholds White supremacy in the American societal context. While intangible, she explains that Whiteness has the innate ability to function as a tangible form of property like finances or land acquisitions (Harris, Barone, & Finch, 2019). In considering these arguments, Whiteness actively operates in manners that actively excludes, and also moves in manners that dictate repute and status (Harris, 1993). At HWIs nationwide, in direct contrast to Blackness which has been made by the majority to symbolize deprivation in arguments that derive from toxic fallacy, Whiteness more often than not symbolizes a particular brand of privileged and fragile "freedom" that can only function at the expense of Black degradation. Within higher education contexts Blackness is used as a form of currency in environments that are overwhelmingly controlled by Whiteness. How does this relate to NPC recruitment? The random placement of women of color and Black male athletes in recruitment videos are ways that Blackness is used as a commodity in recruitment videos.

To be multiculturally competent is not a gained characteristic. Rather, it is an emergence of education, training, and practice with deference to the idea that the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, dis/ability, and religion, are an intrinsic part of our everyday environments. All behaviors are shaped by culture; therefore, culture-centered [practice] is responsive to all culturally learned patterns (Pedersen, 1997). Readdressing one's approach to the social, political, and individual cultures that dictate the societal norms is no small task. "Whether

practitioner or teacher/scholar, it appears that multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills are enhanced when diversity issues are a significant aspect of one's duties or interests" (Pope & Mueller, 2005, p. 686). For those students that do not identify as members of a marginalized group, there is a necessity for them to engage in learning opportunities that would broaden and provide depth to their understanding of the lived experience of individuals within marginalized populations as well as creating understanding of oppression and their role in maintaining it (Pope & Mueller, 2005). Multicultural and culture-specific education may also help to counteract stereotyping and automatic social processes leading to prejudice against ethnic minority individuals (Abreu, 2001; Steele, 1997). This leads toward discussing the development of multicultural competency as student affairs professionals.

Further, Panhellenic Council recruitment is based on a mutual selection process in which both the potential new member and the organization's membership make selections on each other. Rank, drop, release, top pick, and grade risk are a few terms associated with the recruitment and selection process. It is important to state that by nature of their founding purpose, all fraternities and sororities exhibit exclusionary practices typically based on their stated and written requirements for membership. However, the highlight of particular stereotypes in line with systemically powered identities within race, social class, and gender feeds a dynamic within the sorority experience and perpetuates problematic behaviors and toxic environments.

As stated, recruitment of new members is centered within the sorority experience because it lends to the perpetuity of the organizations. If a process that focuses on identifying the type of people that will be selected to continue the legacy of an organization is rooted in racism, social classism, and genderism, it is inherent that these behaviors will continue to pervade the community at large. Therefore, the perpetuity of

an organization also rests in the ability to evolve in an ever-progressing environment. Those fraternity and sorority communities that decide to heed the impact of the findings of this study will find that the outcome will result in a more diversified and inclusive fraternity and sorority community.

### Implications for Practice

Within fraternity and sorority life, particular to the NPC, we explored how sorority recruitment videos were potentially and in essence *selling* a particular experience. Among these videos there were verbally communicated cues that conveyed "traditional" tenets of sisterhood and friendship. However, visually, these videos deliberately underscored a connection between potential membership and physical attractiveness, as well as Whiteness as currency and Blackness as commodity. Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) professionals often convey overt and covert messaging from campus advisors and inter/national offices to have undergraduates attract and recruit as many PNMs as possible. There have been very recent discourses within FSL entities regarding what this calculated advertising will mean for the sororal experience. These recruitment videos have the potential to influence the caliber of members that may be attracted to a *particular* experience that is being both curated *and* then enacted. Thus, there are several factors to consider in these important broader conversations.

There has been a push to "mass market" the sorority experience thus creating a culture where current members focus on quantity versus quality. FSL administrators should challenge students and their chapter advisors to re-think their priorities. If resources allow a chapter to create a video for the purpose of recruiting, these organizations should (re)consider how these PNM conduits could provide a more holistic view as opposed to creating videos that are meant to appeal to a buyer's market. Chapter members

dancing in bathing suits, opulent displays on yachts, or placing the only woman of color in strategic manners portray myopic portrayals of sorority life. There is a need to understand that intentionality regarding the recruiting process is crucial if fraternities and sororities seek to be sustainable organizations.

Organization leadership, including both headquarters staff and chapter advisors, should challenge the lens of overtly or covertly directing quantity over quality during PNM processes. Additionally, advertising diversity without commitment to actualized plans for inclusion could be characterized as misleading. Leaning organization membership tactics into mainstream methods of advertising does not always lend towards the specific values on which these historically White organizations were founded. Further, chapter advisors and FSL administrators must consider how organizations are advertised with/in accordance of the values that these sororities espouse. Sharing videos of sorority sisters at philanthropic events, at sisterhood events, or conducting business at a chapter meeting would perhaps provide a more holistic view. In order to ensure the members you are attracting are committed to your organization and to assist in the retention of those members is to show the truest depiction of your organization.

A divergence is also present between what sororities “advertise” and what is actualized during the social experience in particular to NPC sororities. For chapters that are using these commercialized videos to advertise an opulent, fun, or “sexy” experience may find that this is the type of member they may attract. These organizations would benefit in embodying diverse displays of sisterhood, philanthropy and women’s empowerment. However, there is an incongruence present. What one can surmise is that chapters believe it is necessary to “sell” one thing in the recruiting process and then expect something else during membership. These videos also largely center Whiteness as capital and

Blackness as a commodity. There appears to be a juxtaposition in the recruiting process that exists as a foundational undertone.

Helping students to understand that the path to strong fraternity and sorority membership can be achieved by connecting with PNMs and current members on critical contemporary issues. These vital conversations could prove valuable in the PNM experience. In their book, *Generation Z Goes to College*, Seemiller and Grace (2016) reference strategies for engaging students from Generation Z and state that current members should: 1) Make time for genuine face-to-face interactions and not allow for technology to be the sole forum for connection. And 2) Authentic interactions during the PNM process are critical. Structuring recruitment efforts around actionable strategies such as these could be beneficial. While the NPC does seek to enforce values-based recruitment, there has been very little formal implementation of this process. In direct contrast, there are still largely enforced methods of recruitment that rely on the superficial as opposed to connecting with prospective members on the values of the organization.

## Conclusion

As we highlight throughout our study, sororities have significant control over how they choose to depict their versions of “the sorority experience”, especially within social media realms. Throughout this study, we underscore how sorority recruitment videos have the power to reify and cast strong signals to viewers regarding gender, race, and social class. In essence, it appears that these organizations “sell” a particular brand of sorority life across multiple online platforms that are viewed by millions of constituents including prospective members, potential college applicants, and society writ large. Further, these particular student organizations are highly influential in shaping campus cultures (Zimmerman, Morgan, & Terrell, 2018). This study highlights that while

sororities have the ability to use their social media platforms to dispel misconceptions and counteract negative perceptions, they too often *willingly* choose to reify these issues via their use of recruitment videos. Further, there is structural and ideological stratification present among sororities that must be addressed. If these recruitment videos are meant to serve as a symbolic window into sorority life, and quite possibly college campuses as a whole, then these organizations have a responsibility to illustrate reasonable depictions that are inclusive of all of their constituents.

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