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**Southern Belles and Greek letters:  
Examining gender, race and class at  
University of Alabama – How  
sororities maintain and reinforce  
inequalities and power structures.**

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## 1.0 Introduction

Inequality is a complex issue globally, and the United States of America is no exception. Inequality play out in various parts of American life, impacting individuals and communities in profound ways. Understanding inequality in USA requires an exploration of how inequalities play out, who they effect and how they may intersect. It also requires a study of the structures and mechanisms that maintain and reinforce inequalities and discriminations, providing valuable insights into the broader issues that shape American society.

At the very top of the societal hierarchy, we encounter the elite. This privileged class holds a prominent position, wielding significant influence and enjoying a disproportionate share of resources and opportunities. Their children are sent off to the best education money can buy, and many choose to engage in the party scene at campus. Social clubs called sororities and fraternities are perfectly adapted to their luxurious lifestyle, and give an elite experience of university. Sororities and fraternities are also arenas for power and influence over the university, and only a small group of people get to participate in these privileges.

This thesis will look at the exclusive female social clubs (sororities) at University of Alabama, and it will use intersectionality (intersecting inequalities) as a theoretical framework to uncover the several challenges within sororities. Sororities are arenas for intersecting inequalities and maintaining inequality and privilege. Sororities are also extreme, but relevant, examples of how power can be underlying in structures and why some people continue to be privileged and others suppressed. Intersectionality is both about social categories and how structures (e.g. law and politics) contribute to discriminate and privilege groups of people (Losleben & Musubika, 2023; Nash, 2008). Therefore, the thesis will look at both the social categories, focusing on gender, race and class, and how they intersect. Also, looking at the structures that maintain and reinforce inequality, using the case of sororities as an example.

This thesis will start with an theoretical overview over the concept relevant to intersectionality. Then it will introduce the case of sororities and Greek life at University of Alabama, broadening the case in the discussion and analysis. This thesis will look at the following question: What does intersectionality show us about the case of sororities at University of Alabama, and why do these findings matter?

## 2.0 Theoretical concepts

### 2.1 Theories of Gender

Different authors have different theories about what gender is, and at the core of this question is the distinction between sex and gender. Sex and gender are not the same. Sex is the biological and physical differences between people, e.g. chromosomes, hormones and genitalia (Butler, 1999; Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Biological sex is usually recognised as either XX for females or XY for males. Some people are born with either too little or too many X- or Y- chromosomes, giving them the genitals of one sex, and the chromosomes of another (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). This is what we refer to as indeterminate sex or “intersex” individuals (El-Bushara, 2000). Gender on the other hand can be more difficult to define as people have different understandings and assumptions of gender.

The most common understanding of gender today defines it as the social constructs, e.g. norms, desires, history and upbringing, that distinguishes between males, females and other genders (Big Think, 2023, 2:15; Butler, 1999; Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Butler (1999) discusses how gender is performative, meaning she sees gender as something a person does rather than an innate biological trait (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). While recognising the biological differences between genders, she doesn't believe that they determine who we are in some final way (Big Think, 2023, 1:55). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist perspective, Butler (1999) discusses that social factors, rather than biological determinants, affect people's behaviour. Beauvoir states that “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Butler, 1999, p. 12), challenging essentialist views of gender. A contrast to viewing gender as a social construct, is viewing gender as a fixed construct, often referred to as gender essentialism. Gender essentialism theory is the view of gender as somewhat the same as sex and considers gender differences as rooted in biology (Skewes et al., 2018). In contrast to Butler (1999) and Beauvoir, gender essentialism theory states that male and female (and other genders) behaviour are inherently different, primarily because of biological sex (Skewes et al., 2018). For example, gender essentialism is the view that women are naturally more peaceful than men because of biological factors.

Butler's (1999) exploration of gender as performative, means looking at the ways masculinities and femininities are acted out, including how people dress, behave and think

based on their given sex (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Traditional associations to genders include men as masculine, and women as feminine, referred to as the traditional gender roles. Masculine traits include dominant, independent, rational, strong, while feminine traits include submissive, dependent, emotional, weak (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Simone de Beauvoir argues that traits associated with men and women are not like two electrical poles, because men represent both the positive and neutral, while women represent only the negative (Beauvoir, n.d.). There are many ideas about groups of people, such as different genders, that are oversimplified and not necessarily true, referred to as stereotypes (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Stereotypes prevent us from seeing the differences in people's experiences. Gender roles reveals the link between traits attributed to masculinity and femininity and the distribution of power within society.

Beauvoir (n.d.) discusses how everything in society is based on men, such as history, religion and so on. She also says that a change in the economic situation for women alone is not enough to transform the woman (Beauvoir, n.d.). Women are stereotyped as more emotional and men as more rational, and this makes men seem like naturally fit leaders compared to women. The social structure where men often dominate society as they have more power e.g. as leaders of families and institutions and use this power to oppress and exploit women, is what we refer to as patriarchy (Beasley, 1999; Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Some believe that one sex is better than another, which is called sexism (Macionis & Plummer, 2012).

Lukes (n.d.) presents the three-dimensional view of power which considers power as something beyond observable actions (first dimension) and agenda-setting (second dimension) and considers power as something that is embedded in social structures and systems (third dimension). The three-dimensional view is a type of power that can influence people without them knowing it and is considered a deeper form of power (Lukes, n.d.). It is important to mention that in most cases of unequal power distribution, everybody loses something, both those privileged and less privileged.

All societies have a concept of gender, but gender isn't the same in every culture. Traditional Western culture has operated with two genders: male (masculinity) and female (femininity), which has been viewed as two opposites. Other cultures view gender as a spectrum, something fluid and some operate with an additional third gender (or more). Even though our

understanding of gender has expanded, there are still many constraints to those that doesn't fit the traditional views on gender.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was founded by Raewyn Connell to describe the dominant and main ways of being a man in society which allows for men to dominate over women (Macionis & Plummer, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). I will borrow her definition and use the term in a femininity context. There is a dominant and socially acceptable way of being a woman and feminine in society, and this is what we refer to as hegemonic femininity. In the South, many of the hegemonic feminine gender roles and stereotypes are influenced by the image of the Southern Belle. The term "Southern Belle" comes from the Antebellum era of elite, White, Southern women (Roberts, 2014; Seidel, 1985). The traditional image of the Southern Belle is a young, unmarried daughter of a wealthy family who lives on a plantation (Roberts, 2014; Seidel, 1985). The Belle symbolizes feminine beauty and charm, even though she doesn't always conform to beauty standards (Seidel, 1985). A typical description of the Southern Belle in the 1850s included describing a young woman, one of God's most beautiful creatures, fairness with rosy cheeks, pail golden brown hair and blue eyes (Roberts, 2014). The Southern Belle is portrayed as cheerful but also naive and somewhat vain (Seidel, 1985). The Belle reflects society expectations of Southern women in the Antebellum period, which still reflect the hegemonic way of performing femininity in the South. The Belle is built on the conservative culture of the South.

## **2.2 Feminist theory**

Feminism is a controversial and misunderstood term by many. Feminism is an umbrella term, with many branches and ideas attached to its name. Overall, we can say that feminism is the social and political ideas and movement that work to define and promote gender equality (Beasley, 1999; Macionis & Plummer, 2012; Mendus, 2005). Feminism is the advocacy for economic, political and social equality between the sexes, and the view that women are disadvantaged in comparison to men (Beasley, 1999; Mendus, 2005). Feminism has also influenced social theory. Feminist theory emerged from feminism, and by theory we specifically mean research, politics and ideologies etc. Feminist theory is concerned with analysing women's (and others) experiences in society (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). The South is known for having a conservative culture which has affected the feminist movement in the South.

Kroløkke and Sørensen (2006) looks at feminist history especially in Europe and the U.S., and the multiple “waves” of feminism which all had different characteristics and goals. The first “wave” of feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, with the focus on issues such as access to education, employment and securing women’s right to vote (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). Kroløkke and Sørensen (2006) explains that the first wave of feminism was mostly lead by middle-class White women. The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s and 70s and addressed equality on all levels of women’s life, with focus on issues such as reproductive rights, sexual liberation, legal equality and ending discrimination (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). Kroløkke and Sørensen (2006) examines how the second wave was concerned with women of colour and third world women, introducing the concept of intersectionality (intersecting inequalities). The third wave emerged in the early 1990s and focused on LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual +) matters, effects of globalization, and challenging gender stereotypes and gender roles (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned, the second and third wave of feminism were more concerned with women of colour, third world women and intersecting inequalities. Authors such as Mohanty (1988), Anzaldúa (1990) and Lugones and Spelman (1983) writes about how historically, people of colour, people of different cultures and religions and people of different classes, have been neglected in many practises including politics, law, feminist theory and in society in general. Mainstream feminism has been based on White middle-class women (Anzaldúa, 1990). Women of colour and third world women have often been viewed at as a singular homogeneous group, with a singular voice and often is represented by Western-feminism (Anzaldúa, 1990; Lugones & Spelman, 1983; Mohanty, 1988). These women have been perceived as powerless victims with traditional cultures and underdeveloped societies. This way Mohanty (1988) explains that by not letting third world women represent themselves, Western feminist scholars have taken ownership over their experiences of discrimination (Anzaldúa, 1990; Lugones & Spelman, 1983). By doing so, they have contributed to stereotypes and incomplete information about third world women. Generalizing the issues into all men vs all women, ignores the complexities of the issue. This reinforces colonial ways and the patriarchy in society.

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<sup>1</sup> It has been discussed if there has been a fourth wave of feminism in 2012 with the #MeToo movement, which focused on violence, sexual harassment and sexual abuse against women, in places such as work, the street and on campus (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

### **2.3 Race in USA**

USA is a multi-cultural and diverse country which has had a lot of focus on “race” through its history. It has been a common practise dividing people into groups based on physical features such as eye shape/colour, skin colour, height, hair texture etc. which are a product of small genetic differences linked to geographical heritage (Macionis & Plummer, 2012; Sussman, 2014; UNESCO; 1952). More people have chosen to step away from the term race, as genetic variations within the human species does not clearly follow the traditional racial categorizations (Sussman, 2014; UNESCO, 1952). Scientists highlight that there are greater genetic variations within “races”, than there are between racial groups (Sussman, 2014; UNESCO, 1952). Therefore, many scholars consider the term "race" to be a cultural and social constructed concept, rather than a biological reality (Sussman, 2014). Many choose to rather use terms such as ethnicity or nationality to describe the diversity among people. The term race is very commonly used in USA and will therefore also be used in this text. This text will use and discuss the American interpretation of race. Socially, the term race, and its misconceptions, has been used to justify discrimination and inequality (Sussman, 2014). There should be no mistake, all people are part of the same biological species (Macionis & Plummer, 2012).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2022), which collects data on race in USA, explain that the reason why they are concerned with the topic of race is because of civil rights, to track social differences based on race and to use these data to promote equal opportunities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The U.S. Census Bureau (2022) specify that the racial categories they use are generally based on the social definition of race. The races that dominate in the state of Alabama are White people (approximately 65%) and Black/African American people (approximately 27%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

There are several issues with the term race and the definitions of race categories. First, it is a misconception that there is one common understanding of race or racial categories. Countries and practises use and define race in different ways. Second, racial categories can have multiple meanings. In the U.S. it is common to divide between “White” and “Black” people. “White” is used to describe people with European (and other) origin and “Black” for people with African origin. At the same time, “Black” is also used as a term to describe all non-Whites, such as Asians (Collins, n.d.). “White” and “Black” are also used to describe people`s



skin colour, disregarding their race. Race, and the terms associated to race, are problematic because they are unclear and have multiple meanings. Also, the terms are problematic because they assume that people are “White” or “Black” which can reinforce stereotypes and discrimination. Race can also be problematic as there are stereotypes connected with the different race categories. For example, race is associated with personalities, looks and behaviour (Sussman, 2014). Those who don’t measure up to the stereotypes can experience racism.

Racism is defined by Macionis and Plummer (2012) as the belief that one race is naturally superior and better than another. Additionally, cultural factors may be an origin of this superiority and discrimination (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). The racism issues in the South have primarily and historically been against Black people.

The South-eastern region of USA has a deeply rooted history of racial issues. The “South” includes states like Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). With good conditions for agriculture, the European colonies started importing slaves (mostly African origin) from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to work on plantations (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Eventually, the Northern part of USA grew opposed to slavery in contrast to the South who still favoured slavery because of economic gain, the bible and racist attitudes (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, a member of the antislavery Republican Party, most of the South separated from the North leading to the American civil war (1861-1865) (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Despite losing the war, which granted enslaved people basic civil rights, the Jim Crow laws still created a system of legalized racial control (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023; Carson, 2023). The civil rights movement started in the mid-1950s and was a mass protest movement against racial discrimination and segregation in the South (Carson, 2023). The movement resulted in the civil rights act of 1964, and accomplished crucial equal-rights legislation (Carson, 2023). Figures like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks played pivotal roles in this movement.

Race and class are closely linked. Macionis and Plummer (2012) states that even though two-thirds of all poor in USA is White, overall African American people are almost three times as likely to be poor as White people.

## 2.4 Class in USA

Sociologists disagree on the definition of class. To summarise, in the U.S. class is both the economic (income, work) and cultural/social aspects (lifestyle, identity) that divide people into groups of more and less privileged (Macionis & Plummer, 2012; Howard Community College Press, n.d.). I will divide between economic class, which focuses on economy, and social class, which focuses on social factors, even though the two are interconnected. For clarity, this text will focus on the four most common categories of classes in the USA, which Howard Community College Press (HCCP) (n.d.) explains consists of lower, working, middle and upper class. It is common to divide these classes in two, such as dividing the middle class in upper-middle and lower-middle class (HCCP, n.d.). In the U.S., resources are unequally distributed, and some people have more opportunities and power than others, referred to as social stratification (Bottero, n.d.; HCCP, n.d.). In the U.S., economic classes are commonly divided geographically by area. An example is how a neighbourhood with more crime, pollutions and lower property prices will have people from the lower class. Similarly, a neighbourhood with higher property prices, less crime, less pollution and more attractive jobs will draw the upper class. This way you get segregated areas of wealth and poverty. I choose to define classism similarly as racism and sexism, as discrimination on the basis of class, thinking one class is superior to another and having prejudice against certain classes.

The case in this thesis looks at an elite setting and its hegemonic norms, therefore it is necessary to say something about the upper class. The upper class of USA is recognised as a very small percentage of the population, who holds a lot of wealth, power and influence (HCCP, n.d.). The term “old money” is used to describe families of inherited wealth, where the family usually has been situated in the upper class for generations. These families distinguish themselves from “new money” (people who have built their own wealth, newcomers to the upper class) as “old money” families have strong social ties and are familiar with norm and expectations that comes with wealth (HCCP, n.d.). This shows how class is more than just economy and that social factors also heavily influence class. All other classes aspire to their way of life and try to emulate them.

Children tend to grow up and reproduce the same class as their parents, and this is partially caused by two factors. First, class is closely linked with lifestyle and how children are raised (Bottero, n.d.). Politics, religion, education, interests and so on varies between social classes, for example, people from the upper social classes tend to have more focus on education and

have the means to afford it (Bottero, n.d.; HCCP, n.d.). Second, American society is structured in a way that continuously privilege wealthy people, and disadvantages poor people (Bottero, n.d.). An example is the American school system. Schools are mostly funded by local taxpayers, therefore schools in wealthier areas will generally be better than those in poorer areas (Øgård, 2020). Wealthier schools have better resources, resulting in greater chances of good grades, resulting in greater chances of attending higher rated universities. All these factors, added with how expensive higher education is in the U.S., can make higher education less accessible to those who come from lower class families. This way, the American school system reproduces inequalities. The American dream is recognised as being able to build yourself up from nothing, being able to change your class in society, referred to as social mobility (HCCP, n.d.). While the idea of upward social mobility is appealing, it is not a common reality for many.

## **2.5 Intersectionality**

The term “intersectionality” is defined in different ways by different scholars. Most scholars including Crenshaw (1991) and Nash (2008) agrees that intersectionality has something to do with how social categories, such as gender, race, class and sexuality, intersect and form people’s lives and experiences of inequality. Oppressions such as racism, sexism and classism (to name a few) happen at the same time and overlap (Losleben & Musubika, 2023). This is what civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw wanted to cast light on when she established intersectionality as a concept between the late 1980s and early 1990s (Nash, 2008). Intersectionality comes from critical race studies, which was a response to the lack of focus on race in law (Nash, 2008). Crenshaw (1991) states how women of colour would be victims of a “double” disadvantage, as the categories of race and gender intersect. She explains using an example from a court case where five Black women sued a workplace for not hiring Black women. The court concluded that since the workplace had hired women and had hired Blacks, there were no sex discrimination and no race discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). What the court failed to see, is how all the women where White and all the Blacks where male. They did not see how Black females where victims of both discriminations, which together made them completely excluded from the workplace. As a result of not having intersectional politics, anti-racism reproduces patriarchy and sexism; and feminism reproduces racism (Crenshaw, 1991; Losleben & Musubika, 2023). Collins (n.d.) argues that within the U.S. culture, sexist and racist ideologies are passed through the social structures to a degree that they have become normalised and seen as inevitable.

Since Crenshaw (1991) established intersectionality as a concept, the term has become popular and widely spread in feminist theory and other fields. Intersectionality is built up around mainly the categories of gender, race, class and sexuality. As the term has developed and been used by other scholars, social categories such as ethnicity, religion, functional ability, nationality, geographical position and other lines of differences have been included in the definition (Losleben & Musubika, 2023; Thun, 2023). Intersectionality is both about identity (social categories), and how structures (law, politics etc.) contribute to discriminate and privilege groups of people (Losleben & Musubika, 2023; Nash, 2008). Oppressions create, reinforce and maintain structures of oppression (Losleben & Musubika, 2023). Overall, intersectionality has been conceived as an important term for the field of gender and race studies. Many scholars highlight the importance of recognising how gender, race and class etc. intersects and point to intersectionality as a tool for analysing and improving gender, race and class discrimination (Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, n.d.; Connell, 2016; El-Bushara, 2000; Lugones & Spelman, 1983; Mohanty, 1988).

There are some issues with the term intersectionality that needs to be addressed. First, the definition of intersectionality is quite open and broad, but the use of the term is quite narrow, and it lacks precision (Nash, 2008). Looking at how Crenshaw (1991) uses intersectionality, she is mostly concerned with Black and African American women. I therefore think that it can be difficult to know who intersectionality relates to and when it applies just looking at the definition. Second, Nash (2008) points out the fact that Black women are used as the prototypical subjects for intersectionality which can ignore other marginalized groups and people's experiences. When intersectionality refers to gender - it mostly refers to women, and when it refers to race - it mostly refers to Blacks. This phenomenon is parallel to what El-Bushara (2000) criticises about gender and development, how the word "gender" is only associated with women. This is problematic because these associations are incomplete as gender doesn't only mean women, and race doesn't only mean Blacks. Also, considering race and gender are misunderstood terms, and may hold negative associations, this phenomenon contributes to stereotypes about women and Blacks as victims and less worth.

## 3.0 Sororities at University of Alabama

### 3.1 Greek life at University of Alabama

On campuses across the United States of America, the term “Greek life” refers to the activities and concerns of sororities and fraternities, exclusive single-sex student clubs that blend academics with social life (Lønnå, 2018; McCabe, 2022). Sororities (sisterhoods) are for women and fraternities (brotherhoods) are for men. The clubs are named after Greek letters and are therefore called “Greek Letter Organizations”, that are primarily for undergraduate (bachelor) students (Lønnå, 2018; McCabe, 2022). Each club has its own house where most members live, and there are usually multiple clubs at each university (McCabe, 2022).

Sororities offer female students networking opportunities, community, lifelong friendships with like-minded people, partying opportunities and help with academics, which are some of the reasons why women choose to join a sorority (McCabe, 2022). Each sorority has its own theme, traditions, goals, rules, philanthropy cause (charity), rituals and so on. Those who join a sorority gets an elite experience of university. Those who live in the sorority houses get the pleasures of enjoying private chefs, living in a mansion, beautiful scenery and a short walk to campus (Fleit, 2023). Once you are a member of a sorority, you are member for life (Lønnå, 2018). When a sorority member graduates, they become an alumni, and many alumni end up sponsoring their sorority.

University of Alabama (UA) is a public university, located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in USA. The UA Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (OFSL) (n.d.) writes that University of Alabama is the home to 70 social Greek-letter organization, where around 12 000 students are active in UA Greek community which comprises 36% of the undergraduate students. UA has gained a lot of attention in recent years for being the largest fraternity and sorority community in USA (UA OFSL, n.d.).

To become a member of a sorority at University of Alabama, you have to participate in a recruitment process, referred to as “Rush”. Rush is a mutual selection process between PNMs (potential new members) and existing sorority members (McCabe, 2022). At UA, Rush consists of four rounds over the duration of nine days, where PNM’s visit sorority houses and

talk to sorority members (McCabe, 2022). For each round both PNM's and existing sorority member rank each other till the PNM's are left with their top two houses where they hopefully get a bid (offer) from one of the houses (McCabe, 2022). Once a woman has gotten a bid, they are officially a member of the sorority, and it is tradition to run the sorority mansion where they will be spending their next university years (Fleit, 2023). Rush can be a stressful process for many, and a lot of time, energy and money is spent into preparing for Rush. Many women also choose to hire a coach to increase their chances of getting into a sorority (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023).

In 2021, the phenomenon of UA's Rush gained widespread attention on the social media app TikTok under the hashtag "BamaRush." Videos showcased the elaborate preparations, synchronized dances in the doorways of the sorority houses, and vibrant outfits, portraying an alluring yet peculiar performance (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023). The digital exposure brought the sororities at UA into focus, creating articles and a social media-driven narrative around this aspect of university life. Additionally, it was made a documentary under the name "Bama Rush", directed by Rachel Fleit (2023), which looked at Rush at University of Alabama. The documentary gained a lot of attention, and sparked rage in the sorority world.

### **3.2 Dark side of Greek life**

Sororities (and fraternities) have for many years sparked conversations, controversies and conspiracy theories, and many people have compared sororities to cults. A part of this reason goes beyond what you see on the outside of the sororities and what they post on social media, but rather what you don't see on the inside. Both fraternities and sororities started out as secret societies/clubs. A lot of what the sororities do are secret, especially everything related to power structures and politics, as well as many traditions, rituals and rules (Fleit, 2023). For example, the Greek life at UA has been associated with "the Machine", a secret group of selected sorority and fraternity members who meet late at night in fraternity basements to discuss politics and other campus matters (Corrigan, 2023; Fleit, 2023). The machine is known for rigging elections in favor of the Greek community (Corrigan, 2023). Some people have come forward to speak about their experiences, even though they must be careful, and many choose to stay anonymous. The Machine has been accused of stalking, harassment and assault against people who have defied the Greek community (Corrigan, 2023). The secretive nature of Greek life makes it difficult to address the negative aspects of sororities.

### **3.3 History of sororities**

Sororities are as fraternities, founded on exclusivity. At the time sororities were founded, racism, sexism and classism were very much a thing (as it is today), which we can see translates directly within sorority laws and norms, but also in less obvious ways.

Sororities were founded in 1850s-70s by White, middle/upper-class women as a response to the exclusive and secretive male fraternities (Lønnå, 2018; Rothman, 2016). This was before the first wave of feminism and during the civil war. At this time there were not a lot of women in higher education, as many institutions were only open to men, and the women that was allowed to study experienced sexism within the campus walls (Rothman, 2016). Women needed academic and social support from each other to show that they could attend university, and sororities gave women that space (Rothman, 2016). Despite overcoming sexism in some ways, the essence of these sororities was to facilitate for women to become the ideal Southern lady for fraternity men to eventually marry (Cottom, 2023; Freeman, 2020). As sororities has changed over the years, their values and core ideas have in many ways stayed the same. This is what some of the critiques of sororities today is based on.

Many of these norms are based on the fraternities, as ranking of the sororities are based on what men in the fraternities thinks of the sororities (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Fleit, 2023). The sororities with the “hotter” women get ranked higher, and therefore they become more popular, more exclusive and more people want to join these sororities referred to as the “top tier” houses (Fleit, 2023). The women get rewarded by performing hegemonic femininity, therefore they get an incentive to follow the stereotypes of sorority women and rule out those who doesn't measure up. Thus, we can see how the “marriage material” rationale is still prominent in sororities today, and Cottom (2023) points out how joining an elite sorority will groom you into the ideal partner for a fraternity man.

## 4.0 Discussion and analysis

### 4.1 Sexism: The performative nature of Rushes

During Rush, performing Southern hegemonic femininity is important. When it comes to behaviour, PNM's are encouraged to be sweet, outgoing and polite, and many portray a Southern accent (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023). These are all traits associated with the old stereotypes about how Southern elite White women should act. PNM's are discouraged to talk about five topics, which by Fleit (2023) is described as the five B's, including "Booze" (alcohol), "Boys" (fraternity men), "Bucks" (money), "Bible" (religion) and "Biden" (politics). It is ironic that they can't openly discuss the five arguably most crucial aspects of sorority life, which are fundamental to the very foundations on which sororities were originally established. However, they can (and must) show their stance in a discrete way. For instant, they can't talk about money even though it is crucial for participating in sorority life. Still, they show that they have money through talking about their favourite holidays, and through their expensive designer clothing, jewellery and perfectly maintained bleached hair (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Fleit, 2023).

When it comes to clothing and looks, women are encouraged to present themselves in feminine clothing. The typical dress code for sorority Rush is colourful dresses, heels, lots of accessories, curled hair, make-up and fixed nails (Fleit, 2023). When it comes to looks regarding physical appearance, many of the women portray traditional feminine stereotypes of thin, athletic body, long hair (often blond) and conventional pretty (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023). Other stereotypes they must measure up to are white-skin (Cottom, 2023), but gladly a little bronzed. Many choose to bleach their hair and use self-tan to alter their physical appearance to match the stereotype of sorority women. The lengths to which women must go to match the hegemonic femininity shows how sexism operates in sororities.

Focusing on sexism within the UA sororities, following the hegemonic feminine gender role is about Southern conservative norms and power. The hegemonic femininity role within sororities is narrow and unrealistic, as women strive to appear as the image of the Southern Belle (Fleit, 2023; Freeman, 2020). Both looks and behaviour matches the image of the Southern Belle including feminine clothing, Southern accent and performing traits associated with the feminine. Roberts (2014) argues that beauty in the South at its core has historically



been about power, which becomes transparent in sororities. The sororities that follow the norms of hegemonic femininity, are usually ranked higher in the Greek system, giving them more privileges and honours than the lower ranked sororities (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023). For the sororities to defend their positions in the Greek hierarchy, they must keep their sorority members in check, on how to talk, dress, act and aspire (Cottom, 2023). This also means opting out those who doesn't measure up to the hegemonic gender roles. The strive is to be cute and not sexy to avoid being labelled as "trashy" which becomes clear during the Rush process (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Cottom, 2023). Overall, sorority women must adopt a hyper feminine behaviour and look, while settling for masculine power (Cottom, 2023). The women must also juggle many aspects of how to behave, and all the double morals to avoid terrible labels (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). The cute videos on TikTok show how hard it is for young women today in the South to live feminist lives (Cottom, 2023).

#### **4.2 Racism: The segregated nature of Alabama**

The longstanding presence of segregation and racism within Greek life at the University of Alabama has only recently gained widespread attention. UA has a long history with race discrimination and segregation. The former governor of the state Alabama stood in the Foster Auditorium doorway in an unsuccessful attempt of blocking Black students from registering at UA (Ford & Crain, 2013). UA did not accept Black students until 1963, revealing the deeply rooted challenges of racial discrimination (Ford & Crain, 2013). A year later the civil rights act was issued, which might explain why UA opened its doors in the first place. Racism is still a huge issue in the sororities and at UA.

Ford and Crain (2013) wrote an article in the UA student paper on how at least two Black women was rejected from all the 16 Panhellenic sororities during formal recruitment. One of the women was considered the ideal sorority candidate with a 4.3 GPA from high school and roots in local and state public services (Ford & Crain, 2013). In the article, a Tri Delta member is interviewed and states: "[She] got excellent scores. The only thing that kept her back was the color of her skin in Tri Delta. She would have been a dog fight between all the sororities if she were white." (Ford & Crain, 2013). The article further explains how alumni where the ones behind the reason why the women didn't get a bid (Ford & Crain, 2013). The article ended up gaining a lot of attention at University of Alabama, and measures were taken to end segregation and racial discrimination in the sororities.

Sororities at UA are still discriminating based on race (Cottom, 2023). There is no list over the racial distribution within the sororities, but looking at their social media it is clear that most of the members are White, despite the fact that approximately 11,6% of the enrolled student in the fall of 2023 were Black (UA, n.d.). Looking at racism within sororities, it is clear how the hegemonic gender role is based on White women, both regarding looks and behaviour (gender performance). Skin colour and hair colour are adapted to stereotypes about White women.

Racism is such a big issue in the South, which makes it important to look at racism at a state level to understand racism in relation to sororities. Focusing on Black people, almost 27% of people identify as Black or African American in the state Alabama. The University of Alabama (n.d.) writes on their website that 11.6% is a record number of enrolled Black students, with an 10% increase from 2022, and most likely is the highest number of minority students enrolled at any of the universities in Alabama (UA, n.d.). Comparing the numbers makes it clear how racism is institutionalised into practises and starts before entering university. These numbers reveal something about the relationship Alabama and the South has to non-White races, and how historical racial issues still effect the South. To understand racial discrimination and segregation in the South, we need to look at race in relation to class.

### **4.3 Classism: The elite nature of the sororities**

Classism within sororities is embedded in their history of elitism. Sororities are exclusive in relation to class both in the form of economy and social norms. Examining the economic dimension of class within the context of sororities, reveals the significance of financial means. UA sororities are very expensive with an average yearly fee of \$7,243.04 USD, excluding housing, dues etc. (UA OFSL, n.d.). Considering other costs associated with sororities, and the duration of paying these fees (approx. 4 years), the total quickly adds up. With a full schedule of school and sorority duties, there is not a lot of time left for a part time job, and a part time job would probably not cover the fees. Therefore, many women rely on their parents to fund their sorority membership.

Sororities are associated with classism, elitism and exclusivity, but to understand classism within sororities, it is important to understand how classism starts outside the sororities.

Yearly tuition alone at UA is \$11,100 USD for in-state students and \$32,400 USD for out-of-

state students (UA, n.d.). Considering that University of Alabama is a public school, these prices reveal how education in America itself is made for those more affluent.

Examining the social dimension of class within the context of sororities, it reveals the significance of identity, reputation, lifestyle and culture. Looking at identity and reputation, sororities are very careful of who they let become members of their sorority due to reputation. Therefore, women who have bad reputations prior to Rush, will face difficulty receiving a bid from a sorority (Fleit, 2023). Women with family ties to an alumni sorority member are considered a legacy for that sorority and has therefore very great chances of getting a bid (McCabe, 2022). This way, some sororities are inherited which ensures that the identity and reputation of the sorority stays intact. Looking at the lifestyle and culture within sororities, they are based off the elite. The luxury lifestyle of sororities at UA include living in mansions with private chefs, grand stairs, academic support, there is no end to the lifestyle that follows sorority life. As some sorority women explained, because the women are elite themselves, they can relate more to others that are from the elite and therefore they choose those women to join their sorority (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013).

The exclusive nature of the sororities is to the school's advantage as it gives the rich kids an elite experience of university, and these kids are likely to become donors as alumni after graduating (Gamar, 2021).

#### **4.4 Intersectionality: Reproducing inequality**

The barrier of gender, race or class is alone enough to exclude many people from Greek life at University of Alabama, but collectively they make it almost impossible to become a member of a sorority. Looking at who are the most vulnerable to fall under these categories all together, it is Black American women and other minorities. Focusing on Black women, they are vulnerable to not meet the hegemonic gender role in sororities, as the role is built on the Southern Belle. The Southern Belle is a narrow stereotype of women which is based on Southern White elite women. It includes a hegemonic gender role of women as feminine and is based on conservative values inspired by the Antebellum era. Black women have the disadvantage of race, as these sororities often only accept White women, but Black women are also especially vulnerable to racism as the racial issues in the South are primarily against Black people with a deeply rooted history of racism and segregation against Afro Americans. Black women are also vulnerable to not fulfil the class criteria, as Black people (especially

women) are more likely to be poor compared to White people, which can be related to Souths historical issues of racial discrimination. It is important to see how the categories of gender, race and class intersects, because removing one barrier won't make sororities more inclusive for Black women as they are vulnerable to have all three categories working against them.

Looking at the history of racism, sexism and classism in the South, it gives a clearer picture of why discrimination is such a big part of sororities and how Black women are vulnerable to them. The South has such a significant relation to race and systematic racism, making it difficult for Black people in society. In the South, Black people has a history of slavery, making them at the bottom of classes which was a product of racism. Black women would face sexism on top of racism and classism, adding the gender perspective into this mix. The history of the South reveals how the American society is challenging especially for Black women who are vulnerable to facing intersecting disadvantage of gender, race and class.

Using Black women as an example, they are more likely to be from a lower class, meaning attending a poorer high school, making it more difficult getting good grades to get into university. People grown up in lower classes are more likely to not get the same help at home as people from higher classes because of workload on parents, parents lack of education and cultural reasons. If they overcome these obstacles and get into university, they are vulnerable to not having the funds to attend university. If they overcome this obstacle, they still face disadvantage when enrolled in university as e.g. sororities are based on White elite women, where also those who are legacy have greater chances of attending a sorority, therefore they miss out on the opportunities associated with sororities such as networking which is crucial after university to get a job. This example shows how power structures in society continually privileges certain groups of people, and Black women is not one of them.

Most of the articles I found on sororities only focused on either sexism, racism or classism, but not how they overlap. It is easy to disregard a lot of the discrimination in sororities as racism, but that is incomplete. E.g. the cultural aspects of sororities are based of the elite culture, but it is easy to disregard it as "White culture". This is because the elite itself is segregated where the most common race is White people. But the elite culture also discriminate White people. Recognising the inequalities in themselves, as well as how they intersect, makes it easier to do something with discrimination in relation to sororities. Because intersecting inequalities are so present in society, it can be difficult to peace them apart and

see how they function alone and together. A lot of the literature about the UA sororities was also new, because UA recently gained attention with TikTok. Maybe there will be more focus on intersectionality in the future.

Despite the idea of the American dream, American society is structured in a way where people are very likely to reproduce their parent's class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Money equals to power. Institutions that are supposed to be the great equalisers such as school, rather reproduces inequalities. Institutions that are supposed to be neutral, where gender, race and class shouldn't matter, are not neutral. Even in the legal system, those who have more money will have the funds to afford better lawyers and can therefore get e.g. less time for the same crime.

#### **4.5 Analysis of power: Reproducing privilege**

Sororities gain power by complying to hegemonic femininity roles that was made under a patriarchal system. In other words, many of the hegemonic gender roles are based off what men desire from women. What the fraternity men thinks of the sorority women, shaping their beauty standards and friend groups as well as shaping the sorority rank, value of its members and power in the Greek system as an Alumni (Cottom, 2023; Fleit, 2023). But the power these sororities and women get by complying to the system doesn't stop at university. By gaining a good relationship the fraternity men and other sorority women that has a network with the fraternity men, the women can gain power on a state and national level (Cottom, 2023).

According to Konnikova (2014), who sites from the Centre for the Study of College Fraternity, former fraternity men make up 85% of U.S. Supreme Court justices since 1910. 63% of all U.S. presidential cabinet members since 1900. Historically, 76 % of U.S. Senators. 69% (18) of U.S. presidents since 1877. 24% (129) of Forbes 500 CEOs from the 2003 list, including 1/3 (10) of the top 30. 38% (38/100) of the 113th Congress alone, Senate members come from fraternity (and now, sorority) backgrounds, as does a full ¼ of the House. These are just some of the numbers that shows the power that fraternity men have, and will have, in society. When sexism dissolves maybe more sorority women will be included in these statistics. It also shows the broader effects of Greek life.

These numbers reveal how fraternity and sorority life does not only affect the people that participate in Greek life, or other students for that matter. Sororities and fraternities are

stepping stones (practice/playground) out into the adult world of national politics as well as other power position jobs. These statistics show the power Greek life has beyond university. These statistics reveal the power of alumni members, and future power of sorority and fraternity members.

Sororities and fraternities are one of the structures in American society which help discriminate certain groups of people and privilege others. These structures first of all allow for people to view certain groups as more valuable than others and creates a place of acceptance for this. Having this structure in school is especially dangerous as these people are the ones that becomes societies lawyers, politicians and so on. At the age of 18-22 which is considered typical ages for undergraduate students, people are very much developing and finding themselves. Being introduced to sexist, racists, classist and generally discriminating environments can't be good for developing open-minded young adults concerned with equality.

I think the reason why #BamaRush gained such a huge media attention on TikTok, is because of how peculiar the sororities seems. There are so many elements with the sororities that are fascinating, the exclusivity, secrecy, all the conspiracies and so on. Then you have #BamaRush which showcases the huge sorority mansions unlike anything you have ever seen, all women in matching cute vibrant outfits, the synchronised dances and elaborate preparations. There are so many elements with sororities that are eye-catching and can be difficult for the outside world to understand. At the same time, it is fascinating to see how the women strive to be "perfect" women. The hair, make-up, elaborate preparations and outfits. I think this is something many people can relate to in one way or the other. It is important to remember that at the end of the day, all the women in the University of Alabama sororities are just normal young adults trying to find their place in the world. And I think some of the reason why #BamaRush is so fascinating to so many people, is how these women have to fight every day to prove themselves. And at the end of the day, what all these young adults really want to do is to just fit in, and that is something I think resonates with us all.

## 5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has examined the complicated web of inequalities within sororities at the University of Alabama, using intersectionality as a guiding framework. Sororities serve as an extreme example, reflecting broader societal structures designed to maintain and reinforce inequality/oppressions and privileges. The thesis started with an theoretical overview of the concepts relevant to intersectionality, such as theories of gender, feminist theory, race and class. Then the thesis introduced the case of sororities at University of Alabama, giving a background on Greek life and the dark sides associated with it. The thesis then elaborated the case in the discussion and analysis where it looked at sexism, racism and classism in relation to sororities, and how these oppressions can intersect. Focusing on Black women, the thesis then looked at how social categories intersects and how inequality is reproduced in society. Ending with examining how privilege is reproduced in society, and the broader implications of sororities and Greek life.

This thesis looked at the question: What does intersectionality show us about the case of sororities at University of Alabama, and why do these findings matter? Overall, this thesis argues that sororities do more than just maintain and reinforce inequality and discrimination. They also reflect the way American society is structured, favouring some people with power and wealth while leaving others at a disadvantage. Sororities, in particular, demonstrate how a specific idea of femininity, known as hegemonic femininity, is acted out and dominant. This idea is based on traditional Southern values, like those of the Southern Belle. Additionally, sororities highlight the deep-rooted history of racism in the South and how it's embedded into the structures of society. They also play a part in reproducing classes. Moreover, sororities show that gender, race, and class are all connected, putting Black women at a particular disadvantage across these categories. Finally, sororities contribute to supporting the elite, who then go on to hold powerful positions in society, creating a cycle of power that repeats itself.

It's crucial to recognize that in situations where power is unevenly distributed, there are often losses for everyone involved. This includes the sorority women conforming to established structures and those excluded from them, leading to conflicts between these groups. By highlighting the difficulties within these exclusive social clubs, the thesis underscores the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how various inequalities and discriminations intersect and the structures that support them.

To grasp the structures, inequalities, and discrimination in the USA, it's essential to take a close look at its history. This involves examining the specific inequalities, understanding how they interact with one another, and identifying who is affected and in what manner.

Understanding the roots of these issues is key to unravelling the complexities of the present-day society landscape.

In essence, this thesis serves as a call to action, urging society to confront and address the systemic issues that manifest within sororities and, by extension, in the broader society context. Only through a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics can meaningful steps be taken toward dismantling the structures that maintain inequality and fostering a more inclusive and just society.



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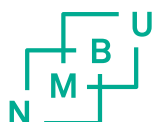
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