
Peeling Back the Layers: A Cultural Analysis of Greek Life on Campus

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This research paper conducts a cultural analysis of sororities and fraternities (S/Fs) using Schein's Onion Model. Sororities and fraternities are institutional structures shrouded in mystery and intrigue that over many years have managed to play a significant role in the social and professional lives of thousands of college students. Greek life strives to instill academic excellence and produce model students through its emphasis on philanthropic events, wholesome values, and overall exposure to the past and present network of successful, usually upper-class members, also known as social capital. This paper uses Schein's Onion Model, a cultural approach that compares what an organization says about itself versus what an organization actually does, finding discrepancies between the two, that can cause conflict and complications for the organization and its members. When applied to S/Fs, Schein's Onion Model reveals that the perception of Greek life by society significantly deviates from the reality of Greek life, showing that S/Fs are complex cultural systems with multiple layers of values, norms, and assumptions that shape their identity and influence the behavior of their members.

Keywords: Greek life, sororities, fraternities, cultural approach, Schein's Onion Model, artifacts, cultural markers, values, assumptions

Sororities/Fraternities (S/Fs) are fascinating institutional structures that millions of people have taken part in during their time at college. The rich, enticing traditions, history, and people of Greek life has made them a pillar of social and professional existence for young men and women during college and long after they have graduated. So, what is it about these S/Fs that makes them so impactful on the social scene and the "essential step" for most young people to take when they enter college? I believe it is the allure of Greek life's many values along with the secrets and mystery that surrounds these values. Many people perceive S/Fs to encourage societal norms or values on their members such as binge drinking, social cliques, lack of diversity, and sexual misconduct between young people. On the other hand, Greek life has other values that may be overshadowed by their negative counterparts that are the very reason S/Fs were created in the first place. Greek life strives to instill academic excellence and produce model human beings/students through their emphasis on philanthropic events, wholesome values, and overall exposure to the past and present

network of successful, usually upper-class members also known as social capital (Kappa Kappa Gamma). I think it would be incredibly interesting to analyze S/Fs from the cultural approach of Schein's Onion Model; what an organization says about itself versus what an organization actually does. The values/social norms I highlighted above are all a part of S/Fs, but some of the norms/values are what Greek life is portrayed to the outside world as having, while others such as harsh gossip, and social cliques stray far away from Greek life's "perfect" image and Schein's Onion Model could be a great way to show that.

Schein's Onion Model

Schein's Onion Model is a metaphor derived from the organizational communications model of cultural approach. Cultural Approach looks at what makes an organization an organization, not by just looking at the literal aspects of an institution like its systems of organization, but by analyzing the artifacts, rituals, values, and traditions that create the glue or "webs of significance" that hold an organization together, making up its recog-

nizable, unique characteristics (Miller, 2015). Examples of these cultural factors are an organization's norms; inexplicit ways of behaving, its established ceremonies or group activities, and even an organization's mission statement can pave the way for its specific culture. In the 7th edition of *Organizational Communications*, chapter four states that Schein's Onion Model uses all these different aspects of an organization's culture to compare what an organization says about itself with what an organization does (Miller, 2015). The Onion Model has three different layers; the outermost layer being Artifacts/Cultural Markers, made up of very tangible, material representations of an organization's culture such as norms, rituals, and stories. The middle layer is comprised of Values which are the invisible key principles or attitudes organizational members hold that heavily influence their behaviors and decisions. The last and innermost layer is Assumptions which are also invisible and are so engrained or obvious to the organizational members that they don't need to be openly discussed, everyone just knows them and accepts them as the way things are (Miller, 2015). The outermost layer (Artifacts/Cultural Markers) is what an organization promotes to the world, it's how people that aren't in the organization would describe it. The other two layers represent what is below the surface, what actually goes on within the organization. The interesting part of this model is that what goes on below the surface usually doesn't match what is shown on the surface, causing conflict, unrest, and complications for an organization and its members. Greek life is a great example of how Schein's Onion Model can be applied with the attractive outer layer of S/Fs, promoting leadership skills, finding friends for life, and academic achievement. While the lower layers promote gossip and social cliques, values that don't seem to line up with the shiny outer layer.

Greek Life

Different values and traditions of Greek life both implicit and explicit represent different layers within Schein's Onion Model.

Conflicts and issues arise when the outer layer values don't match up with the inner layer values and S/Fs are great examples of the sometimes flawed values within many organizations. One of the widely accepted and established outer layer norms of Greek life that fits into the Artifacts/Cultural Markers part of Schein's Onion Model is the social capital gained through S/Fs. According to a literature review from the *Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*, "the most important positive effect of fraternity/sorority membership [is] social capital" (Perkins, 2011, p. 66). This means that one of the main selling points and appealing factors of joining a sorority during a student's time at college is the networking/connections of national or local alumni. This aligns with the outer layer of Schein's Onion model, Artifacts/Cultural Markers, because social capital is in a sense a material representation of Greek life, it's an attractive way of life or culture that people want and think they will gain by joining Greek life. S/Fs are sold as a way to be a part of high society, a way to open doors for young students that want to surround themselves with high achieving and typically wealthy individuals. Elliot Georgiadis, the author of "Organizational Culture Theory and Fraternal Organizations" said that "half of the top ten of Fortune 500 CEOs...and 44% of American Presidents... have been Greek" (2019, p. 15). This just goes to show that joining Greek life is widely seen as a way to be successful socially and academically both during and after college.

While the social capital aspect of Greek life is very attractive and can hold true for many members, just how Schein's Onion Model tends to predict, the innermost layers of Greek life don't perfectly match up with the shiny outer layer. The inner layers of Schein's Model, Values and Assumptions, represent the invisible inner workings of an organization, an organization's true colors. Greek life is seen as a way to be a high achiever, obtain social capital, as mentioned above, but is that truly the case once a student joins the system? Social capital is something that can be gained

through S/Fs, but it isn't necessarily easy to come by or equally available to everyone. A certain stereotype needs to be fulfilled in order to make the most of S/F opportunities. Typically, upper middle class/wealthy, outgoing, and conventionally pretty or handsome boys/girls gain that social capital. It isn't enough to just join a S/F, a student has to fit into the invisible values and assumptions of the organization. This can result in the creation of social cliques within the S/F, causing all the students that fit the organization's invisible value/assumptions to group together and typically be the face of the S/F, living up to that outermost layer of Schein's Onion Model. But what the inner layers reveal is those outside the stereotypes experience social segregation, drama, and gossip that tends to create a gap in those who gain the S/F benefits of social capital and those who don't (Georgiadis, 2019, p. 44). The journal article "Organizational Culture Theory and Fraternal Organizations" builds on this issue by highlighting that fact that "though sisterhood and the development of close, social relationships was seen by many as a positive it became clear that negative outcomes could result from these social interactions" (Georgiadis, 2019, p. 44). Not everyone can have the same "perfect" S/F experience, students think they will succeed in this social context just based upon what they see as Greek life's attractive outer layer, but in reality, the inner layers are a more accurate representation of the trials and tribulations that come with Greek life.

Conclusions

The organizational communications method of Cultural Approach using Schein's Onion Model is a great way to analyze the many aspects of Greek life. Schein's Onion Model splits an organization into three distinct layers that represent different cultural aspects, with the outermost layer not always matching up with the inner layer. This is where many conflicts can occur within an organization such as Greek life. The outer layer of S/F's promotes an amazing social experience that is available to all and will garner one great so-

cial capital in life. In reality, the inner layers of S/Fs reveal that there are cliques, gossip, and specific stereotypes that if not fulfilled will isolate students within the organization preventing them from gaining things such as the promised social capital. Schein's Onion Model proves that the "perfect" image of Greek life on college campuses doesn't always match up with what goes on under the surface.

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