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Hazing: What You Have to do to Be Accepted

“Every year or so brings another such death, another healthy young college man a victim of hazing at the hands of one of the nation’s storied social fraternities,” (Flanagan, *The Atlantic*). Numerous young men fall victim to hazing every year, and some of them even prove fatal. According to the Dean of Students at the University of Michigan, Hazing is defined as “any action or situation, with or without the consent of the participants, which recklessly, intentionally, or unintentionally endangers the mental, physical, or academic health or safety of a student,” (University of Michigan). One of the leading causes behind these many hazing deaths is overconsumption of alcohol, dying with having a Blood Alcohol Content that had way surpassed a 0.3. Take Timothy Piazza, a sophomore pledging Beta Theta Pi, for example. Piazza was involved in a hazing ritual event, called “The Gauntlet,” where the pledges were required to “drink from a bottle of vodka, drink a beer, and finally drink from a bag of wine,” (*Wikipedia*). While he was intoxicated, he ended up falling on basement stairs of the house and was knocked unconscious. During the rest of the night, Piazza had gained consciousness again and managed to roll of the couch he was placed on. To then which three brothers, who were shown on security footage, slammed him back onto the couch and then slapped him in the face and punched him in the stomach. This leads to then another leading cause: physical abuse. This leaves men unable to more or defend themselves. They are often found with head injuries, but even just an intense beating with a paddle can injure someone so badly, that their body just gives up. While fraternity men have been completing these “rituals” for 100s of years, the media has taken more of a stance to share these stories. News articles are producing more stories, which then leads authors to write books, which then prompt script writers to turn them into movies. Within the last five years, there have been two movies that were produced, that depicted the horrific events two unrelated groups of men endured in the pledging process of their fraternity. *GOAT* and *Burning Sands* showed what is actually happening among some fraternities all over the country. These movies show either true stories or depictions of similar stories, but the worst part is these “rituals” happen all the time but aren’t stopped at a school until someone dies. This however, doesn’t stop it from happening at other schools, they are just doing it quietly enough to not get caught. *GOAT* and *Burning Sands* are two movies that showcase real life hazing events; they were produced to show what actually can occur, not to sugarcoat and make fraternities look higher than all. These are events that happen, but people on the outside don’t know until made aware from the news. Men join these organizations for different reasons, but for many, they are “looking for that brotherhood and just another place that they belong,” (Reilly, *Time)*.

While hazing is an enormous issue in college life today, it is often not spoken about until there is a serious incident that happened. Hazing occurs more than people think, and it is kept secret by the members of the organization as they are told that it is a “ritual” and that “everyone else had to go through it,” but for what? So often times, these college kids just want a reason to belong, and to find a group of people they can call their own. As a freshman, or even a sophomore, you are like a small fish swimming around in a large ocean. You get asked to join an organization, complete their “rituals” to be accepted as a full member, and then grab other people to follow in your same footsteps. And year after year, these “rituals” start to become more intense and more issues start to arise. This is one of the bigger parts in *GOAT*, that the hazing was too easy, which led to a brother of the fraternity suggesting to do something that would be more challenging and not done before. In this scene, the older brothers told the new pledge class that they would each be having sex with a goat, then the group would kill the goat together, and then the fraternity brother would eat the goat together. The idea that hazing is just another aspect of being accepted into a group of people is demeaning, incompetent, and downright stupid. Personally, I feel like this is the argument that news producers and film screenwriters try to fight. By showing the horrible events that occur in one organization, it shows people what could actually be happening right behind closed doors. When using these different types of rhetorical strategies throughout the movies, it can help create and elaborate on the argument they are all fighting.

*GOAT* was a movie produced in 2016, based on Brad Land’s memoir that he wrote in 2004. The memoir was about his experience as a pledge of Kappa Sigma fraternity in the 1990s at Clemson University. In an interview with Men’s Journal right after the release of the movie, Brad Land shared his story as to why he wanted to join and his thoughts about the movie. A quick overview of the movie is shared at the beginning of the article, stating that after being “Brutally mugged over the summer, Brad (Ben Schnetzer) enrolls in school still reeling from the event. He never expected to rush a fraternity but is drawn to Kappa Sigma, where his brother Brett (Nick Jonas) is already a member. To join, Brad must endure a brutal pledge period, as his brother Brett watches,” (Syckle, *Men’s Journal*). In the movie and book, the pledges are referred to as goats, and are forced to act like farm animals on many occasions. The film even includes Land’s classmate that died during his pledge period under “suspicious circumstances,” (Syckle, *Men’s Journal*). The film’s more extreme scenes come from the last seven days before their initiation into the brotherhood, often known as “Hell Week.” In an article from *RollingStone* Magazine, a line that stands out is talking about the “elite leadership group” which is also refered to as the older brothers of the fraternity (Bramesco, *RollingStone*). This is a common idea behind many fraternities that complete these rituals, that the older brothers are the “elite” group, while the pledges are the weak and subordinate. The movie shows “half-naked, whimpering freshmen who are forced to drink toxic amounts of alcohol until they vomit (and then drink some more), are locked in cages, urinated upon, and at one point, are forced to repeatedly, violently slap each other,” (Bramesco, *RollingStone*). So why do these young men continue to go through this brutal torture? Ben Schnetzer answered in the interview with *RollingStone* Magazine about hazing, that in the aspect of frat culture, “it’s been kind of woven into the collegiate experience for a long, long time. It’s normalized, so you can’t always see the forest for the trees. It feels totally normal,” (Bramesco, *RollingStone*).

When *GOAT* was being written in 2016, David Gordon Green, Andrew Neel, and Mike Roberts all had the same intentions: they wanted to share the story of Brad Land and show the world just how horrible hazing could be. By sharing these raw events, it sparks with the audience and gets them to think about hazing deeper. The script writers worked with Brad Land to ensure that all the details throughout the movie were depicted just like they happened when he was pledging. By working directly with the source, the audience can tell that this is credible, addressing the ethos element of persuasion. The strategies that the writers use a lot in this film is pathos, making the audience feel a certain way or have certain emotions. It feels like every scene in this movie uses pathos, some are just more intense than others. One scene where this is used is when one of the pledges is locked in a cage, and the old brothers all urinate on him. Not only does this make the audience angry, but it makes them feel disgusted. Another scene that shows pathos is when the pledge class is forces to drink an entire keg of beer in an hour, and if they don’t finish it they are threatened with physical punishment. The events share a disturbing story, but everything that is happening in the production of the movie adds to it. For instance, every time there is about to be a hazing scene in the movie, the lighting gets darker and the older brothers start to have a deeper tone in their voices. It adds to effect of the movie. These scenes leave the audience in such shock, wondering why someone would put others through that kind of torture. But these scenes also show just how terrible hazing can be, which is what the argument is behind the movie.

Another movie that has recently been released about hazing practices is *Burning Sands*. The film was released in 2017 as a *Netflix* original film. Gerald McMurray, the writer and director of the film, knew that his movie would spark conversations as he shared the idea of what it was like to go through the underground process of pledging a black fraternity. These fraternities often function more like a service organization, instead of a social organization, so how come McMurray wrote a film that showed hazing in a black fraternity? In an interview with *Ebony*, he stated that “a lot of people don’t know about HBCUs, black fraternities, and what it’s liked to go to a black college, so I thought it was important to dial into that subject matter and explore themes of our history in this country, [and] what it’s like to be a black man in America,” (Danielle, *Ebony*). A brief summary of the film is shared in this article, sharing that Zurich, who is played by Trevor Jackson, is pledging a black fraternity, Lambda Lambda Phi at Frederick Douglass University. Along with Zurich, he has four others in his pledge class and all five of them endure big brother hazing and line ups at the fraternity house. To officially become a brother, the men will complete the pledging process or “cross the burning sands,” (Bowen, *Refinery 29*). This us when the members are placed into the organization and receive their badge of honor, signifying they have earned their spot in the organization. Many members of the Divine Nine organizations are hurt that this is how they are portrayed, and while yes, many of the organizations don’t haze, what about the ones that do? Bowen reports in the article that “a quick internet search will show that at least six of the Divine Nine organizations have been involved in hazing incidents that resulted in the death of a pledgee or an interested person,” (Bowen, *Refinery 29*). And to my discovery, this was a fact, that six of the nine has had someone die, even back into the 1990s. *Burning Sands* just argues in the favor that it isn’t just white fraternities that haze, but that hazing can come from all different Greek organizations.

*Burning Sands* starts with the rhetoric strategies from the opening scene of the movie, showing a “Big Brother” kicking Zurich’s rib cage multiple times in a row. Another scene later on the movie shows the five pledges lined up in all white, blindfolded, doing “wall sits.” These brutal and unnecessary acts of hazing show the audience what could be happening and persuade the audience to have different emotions rise. While watching this movie with a friend, I personally just have this questioning feeling, wondering why a group of people would put other people through torture for nothing. For my friend, it made her so angry that she had to step out of the room multiple times to clear her head. This movie can also set the tone among others that are in black fraternities. While most of their pledging process is secretive, it is demeaning to groups that follow rules. But this goes back to the idea that no one exactly knows what goes on behind closed doors.

To say that hazing does not exist is absolutely unreal, yet even with the proof and evidence to show it happening, many people still don’t believe it’s that big of an issue. Back to the article from *Men’s Journal*, Brad Land states, “if anyone says that that stuff doesn’t exist, they are woefully misinformed. This exists like air exists,” (Syckle, *Men’s Journal*). Another article shared that if you don’t understand how horrible these situations are, then more than likely, they are the issue behind the hazing. While hazing may not be as bad in all cases like it is shown in these movies, to say that this doesn’t happen at all is immature. There is solid evidence that students have died from either excessive drinking or beatings, yet many believe that “it was a freak accident” or “the pledge did it to themselves.” Some also argue that the movies were failures and don’t get out the correct message. In an article written on the *Observer*, Oliver Jones, the author, reminds the audience of a scene from the beginning of the movie *GOAT*, where Brad leaves his brother at a fraternity party when Cocaine was shown. After leaving the party, Brad is jumped by a couple of guys who beat him almost to death. Oliver’s argument is stated in his article that, “kids, you’re screwed either way,” (Oliver, *Observer*). There are also arguments behind *Burning Sands*, mainly revolving around the idea that black fraternities are mad that they are being portrayed in such a demeaning manner. In Sesaili Bowen’s article on *Refinery 29*, there are a couple of quotes that were added by coworkers anonymously. One coworker stated, “it's frustrating as a member of the Divine Nine to see our sister and brotherhoods portrayed in this manner. A film like this is such a gross mischaracterization of the D9 orgs, and it only perpetuates lies that continue to jeopardize our rich history and relevancy today,” (Bowen, *Refinery 29*). But after everything that has been posted and shared on the news or on social media, how can people honestly say that it isn’t an issue?

My biggest question behind the people that disagree with the movies is, why are we more worried about our social reputation and not worried about stopping it so more deaths don’t pop up in the news? In *GOAT*, we see the effects that extensive amounts of alcohol can do to a person, just like we can see from the death caused by alcohol in cases like Timothy Piazza from Penn State, or even Harrison Carter Cole from Hampden Sydney College. In *Burning Sands*, we see the emotional and physical pain that pledges can be put through, just like Chun Deng of Baruch College, who died after physical abuse. These two movies show disturbing scenes that make the audience feel uncomfortable. If it doesn’t make you uncomfortable, more than likely you’re the issue behind the hazing. While scenes may be a little intense at times, it shows what has actually happened to people, or what could happen to people, in real life. Hazing has been an issue for many decades, and maybe the best way to address it is to show how brutal it can be at times. I believe *GOAT* and *Burning Sands* show a side of hazing that not everyone thinks about until it’s too late. Getting educated in any way is the best way to stop it. Pledging can cost someone their life, and while it doesn’t happen every day, it still occurs intermittently.

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