

## "Get Excited People!": Gendered Acts of Literacy in a Social Sorority

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### ABSTRACT

Using the methodology of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, this article studies how one undergraduate writer, "Polly," brings about her gendered identity as a leader of a social sorority through writing emails to motivate members to attend events. I offer a six-item taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses to articulate the shared values of the sorority; excite members about events; and craft a unique, interesting, and relatable peer persona for herself. I connect each of Polly's rhetorical strategies to research on gendered communication to understand how she uses the strategies to navigate her audience's expectations of her gender and her leadership. A quantitative, temporal analysis of Polly's use of all six strategies over the course of a year suggests that sororities (and other student organizations that offer leadership roles to students) present time and space for participants to try out a range of intellectual tools for different leadership personas, which can transfer to future rhetorical situations. This opportunity for rhetorical experimentation allows students to play and experiment with their public selves and group affinities.

### KEYWORDS

sororities; literacy; leadership; e-mail; third-wave feminism

**T**hird-wave feminism is a cultural movement and form of feminist activism that began in the early 1990s, including a broad range of political action as well as scholarly work. Influenced by postmodernism and particularly the work of Judith Butler, third-wave feminist scholarship theorizes gender not as an internal characteristic, but as an ongoing performance: "acts, repetitions, and citational practices that continually mark a persona as gendered" (Almjeld 73). For literacy and language studies, third-wave feminism has meant an increased focus on the way language is also a gendered performance. Third-wave feminist linguistic analysis studies individuals in social contexts "in relation to social groups who judge their linguistic behaviour and also in relation to hypothesised gendered stereotypes"

(Mills 115). For example, instead of making a generalization about certain uses of language being sexist (as second-wave feminism may have done), third-wave feminist analysis of language would look at how a single word might become sexist in a specific context because of a vocal inflection (Mills 119).

Previous research in literacy studies has focused attention on the interplay between gender and literacy practices but has called for more research that views gender as “a complex and diverse category rather than as a fixed and essential characteristic we each possess” (Jones 161). Because literacy is tied to social conventions, available discourses, and situated identities, researching how young people learn literacy can provide insight into how young people learn to perform gender (Peterson and Parr). In line with the methodology of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, this article studies how one writer, “Polly,” brings about her gendered identity as a leader of a social sorority through writing e-mails to motivate members to attend sorority events. In the position of both a peer and a leader, Polly balances the authority of her position (i.e. the need to tell members what to do) with gendered expectations to be likable and friendly. I first review the literature on gendered performances in sororities and women’s leadership to situate Polly’s rhetorical task. I then offer a six-item taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses over the course of the year. The first three rhetorical strategies—flattery, silly humor, and incentive—help her maintain a relatable, peer persona within the sorority. The fourth rhetorical strategy, excitement, is part of the emotional labor required in Polly’s position: getting her audience excited about something regardless of how she personally feels about it. The last two strategies—nudge of encouragement and strategic humor—emerge from Polly’s desire to be a peer rather than an authority figure, mitigating authoritarian commands, and deflating some of the tension she feels around her leadership role. I connect each of Polly’s rhetorical strategies to research on gendered communication to understand how the strategies help her navigate her audience’s expectations concerning gender and leadership.

Though I classify and explain Polly’s rhetorical strategies, I also acknowledge that written texts are not objects that can be pinned down at a specific moment in time; rather literacy is “a constantly shifting set of unstable, internally various, fluid and heterogeneous practices” (Horner 2). To capture this instability and flux, literacy research must understand how people “continuously rework, and thereby renew, literacy, texts, practices, and contexts” (Horner 6). A quantitative, temporal analysis of Polly’s use of all six strategies over the course of a year suggests that sororities (and other student organizations that offer leadership roles to students) present time and space for participants to try out a range of intellectual tools for different leadership personas, which can transfer to future rhetorical situations. This opportunity for rhetorical experimentation allows students to play and experiment with their public selves and group affinities.

## GENDERED PERFORMANCES AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL SORORITIES

The recovery of women’s rhetoric, Carol Mattingly notes, tends to seek out the rhetoric of groups that “most resemble academic feminists” ideologically regardless of the actual scope of their

influence (101). For example, feminist scholars "praise" the leaders of the National Woman Suffrage Association because of its liberal values over the more conservative Women's Christian Temperance Union, although the latter had a significantly greater membership (Mattingly 102). In their 2012 survey of the field of feminist rhetorical criticism, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch stress the importance of a broader, deeper, and more inclusive view of women's rhetoric, recommending a focus on "places at which we have not looked seriously or methodically before" in the hopes that such analysis will help feminist rhetorical scholars "think again about what women's patterns of action seem to suggest about rhetoric, writing, leadership, activism, and rhetorical expertise" (72). Janine Solberg, for example, explains how women's stenography work in the early twentieth-century office that appears entirely clerical actually draws on significant domain knowledge and contextual knowledge. Solberg's work demonstrates the importance of "digging up" contemporary women's rhetorical leadership in research sites that may seem insubstantial in terms of literacy, even to the most astute feminist observer. Solberg writes, "as historiography in composition and rhetoric continues to broaden and mature, we must continue to ask whose literacy experiences are being left out" (17).

With over 300,000 members on over 600 campuses in the United States and Canada (National Panhellenic Conference), social sororities are one of the most powerful communities to which many female college students might belong in their college years. Historian Diana Turk's research on sorority life suggests that the first sororities in the 1870s created opportunities for women to perform the role of "college student" previously only available to men. These sororities supported women intellectually and socially amidst hostility from male students who believed that women in higher education disrupted the "natural order" of society (Turk 3). In sorority chapter meetings, women practiced speeches for each other and pressured each other to do well in school to represent their sorority and campus women as a whole in a positive light. To counteract common arguments that attending college was "unwomanly," sororities broadened the definition of proper "womanhood" to encompass both social skills and intellectual capacities (Turk 40). Sororities made no distinction between married and unmarried women and supported women who chose to enter the workforce rather than have children. Graduates could use their sorority connections after college to enter "previously closed or difficult-to-enter fields" (Turk 153). In short, sororities from the 1870s through the 1900s enabled gendered performances along a spectrum of feminism.

In the 1920s, when the presence of women became a more normal part of college life, sororities "jettisoned their academic and literary work in favor of social activities" and became more of the social clubs they are today (Turk 47). Possibly as a result of this social focus, contemporary investigations into sorority life suggest that they actually validate rigid and traditional gendered behaviors. In *Inside Greek U.: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power, and Prestige* Alan D. DeSantis finds that "fraternities and sororities fiercely reproduce *many* of the most traditional and harmful ideas about gender through their scripted performances" because "the rigidity of the Greek institution produces a subculture where deviant performances—performances that are potentially liberating because of their ability to expand brothers' and sisters' gendered repertoire—are prohibited" (27). Specific studies of sorority life suggest that sorority culture propagates traditional gender roles,

leading to the stigmatization of sorority involvement. Lisa Handler's study of sororities as "gender strategy" demonstrates that though women use sororities as a means of exploring ideas about womanhood, they remain "marked by the inequalities that characterize gender relations in the wider society" (252). In a similar vein, Barbara J. Risman also finds that sororities encourage behaviors that socialize women into marriage and staying at home with children. Risman writes that her findings are "not to suggest that none of these women will become surgeons, lawyers, or executives; only that the selves they have nurtured while in college will need considerable reorganization if and when they enter demanding occupational social worlds" (138). So while historical sororities worked to carve out a place for university women institutionally, contemporary practices of sororities and fraternities suggest that they do not support a range of gendered identities.

Though sororities have been studied as sites of women's acclimation to both college and the social world beyond, what remains intriguing and un-studied about sororities is how they offer women a chance to be leaders. Sororities and fraternities value leadership, planning leadership retreats for members, requiring leadership conferences for executive members, and marketing their organizations for their leadership opportunities (Hevel, Martin, and Pascarella 268). In my own yearlong ethnography of a social sorority, both alumnae and current members said that leadership was one of the most important things they learned in their time at the sorority and one of the key reasons they joined in the first place. Leadership also resonates with the sorority's practices: alumnae who travel to visit chapters to help with projects are called "leadership consultants," the national organization sponsors a "leadership institute" every summer, and elected and appointed roles are referred to as "leadership positions." The discourse of the sorority frames the women as leaders, and the emphasis on leadership re-frames the sorority as less of a social club and more of a pre-professional organization.

Because writing is one way young people learn and enact gender roles (Peterson and Parr), studying women's writing in a sorority can suggest how college-age women learn to "perform" gender at this stage in their lives, particularly how they wield and experiment with forms of power and leadership in their writing. Despite the advances of feminism, women of the millennial generation still express hesitation about being leaders. Surveys show that while millennial women believe they are as ambitious and charismatic as men, "they are slightly less likely to see themselves as leaders, visionaries, self-confident, or willing to take risks" (Bentley University 17). A 2008 study of millennial girls by the Girl Scout Research Institute found that girls said they did not want to be leaders because they were afraid of "being laughed at, making people mad at them, coming across as bossy, or not being liked by people" (Schoenberg 19). The Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership at Princeton University reported that while undergraduate women did much of the strategic planning for student groups, they were less likely to take on visible leadership positions or play up their credentials and experience (Steering Committee).

Moreso than undergraduate men, undergraduate women fear the criticism that may come with a highly visible persona (Steering Committee). Research bears out these fears, demonstrating the penalties women face for taking on leadership positions, particularly in male-dominated fields. A psychological study by Madeline Heilman and Tyler Okimoto found that people tended to view

successful women as being too individualistic and lacking in compassion (81). In particular, women perceived as successful managers were also perceived as selfish, deceitful, and cold (81). People held these perceptions of female managers regardless of whether or not the female managers performed nurturing and community-oriented behaviors in the workplace. As Heilman and Okimoto conclude, "It thus appears to take little more than the knowledge that a woman is successful at male sex-typed work [such as being a boss or manager] to instigate interpersonally negative reactions to her" (82). And although the all-female audience of a sorority may alleviate some of these pressures because women are less likely to encounter resistance in an area that is understood as a "feminine context" (Ridgeway 648), the traditional gender performances scripted in the sorority mean that women may continue to encounter resistance to their leadership.

In conducting a yearlong ethnography of a social sorority using the tools of third-wave feminist linguistic analysis, I was interested in how acts of literacy were also gendered acts of leadership. In particular, I wanted to know how the women's writing in leadership positions navigated complex expectations about gender and leadership. I chose to analyze a set of twenty-seven e-mails written by the sorority's Director of Administration, "Polly," to convince sorority members to attend the group's events. Many of the sorority's literacy practices functioned to organize and manage the group, but many were also copied or only slightly altered from model texts. These e-mails, however, were mostly Polly's own creation. They were even more of Polly's own creation because this particular chapter of the sorority had opened on campus only a year before Polly took her position, meaning that only one other person had ever done her job. Polly thus had a fair amount of freedom in composing the e-mails.

The e-mails were sent only to members and so did not bear the burden of explaining the sorority to outsiders or developing the sorority's external image. They did, however, bear the burden of motivating women to attend multiple activities every week, a situation complicated by the sorority's positioning in the university. Because this research took place at a small, residential university, many students on campus were involved and held leadership positions in pre-professional clubs, social clubs, residence hall councils, community service organizations, and faith-based groups. Students' calendars were full of all-campus events like speakers, sporting events, receptions, and other celebrations. The sorority participated in the Panhellenic council, the campus' umbrella organization for sorority life, which planned events that challenged sororities to compete against each other; a large part of "winning" these events was having the most members attend. The national organization of the sorority also set forth practices, standards, and guidelines for the functioning of individual chapters, which meant further obligations for the women in terms of the kinds of events they had to hold and the expectations for attendance at these events. All of these institutionalized pressures meant that sorority members had significant obligations to attend events, so the sorority leadership developed systematic literacy practices like the weekly e-mail to motivate them to do so.

Polly's formidable challenge was to inspire 110 over-committed, academically driven women to attend anywhere from five to ten events per week. Polly told me that that attendance at events was a problem:

Faith: What kinds of things do you have to work hard to motivate people to do?

Polly: I think the things that aren't mandatory, anything like that. Sisterhood events, other people's philanthropy events, if we don't make a big deal out of it, don't tell them to sign up for it, no one wants to go.

Faith: They signed up for the sorority; I assume they knew what it involved. So why are there problems with getting people to participate?

Polly: That is a big thing. People don't go to things and we've always had that question and tried to answer it and I think that they feel like there's so much going on. A lot of members were like, "We're too over-programmed!" But we are the leadership team and we go to everything and we still do homework. People just get in the mindset that they don't have to go and they have better things to do.

The e-mails had to be a thoughtful, audience-driven, and strategic communication inspired to get people to decide that they do not "have better things to do" but that the sorority's events are the *best* things to do every week. Polly also faces gendered expectations about how women should act, which are amplified by the traditional gender roles of a sorority. Sorority members may stereotype her as "bossy" or may dislike her if she is too commanding or domineering. She has to maintain a relatively professional persona so that people will take her and her organization seriously, similar to the challenge faced by student writers working in adult-driven professional organizations (see for example Deans; Ketter and Hunter). But Polly also wants to be relatable and friendly, inserting her personality and voice into her writing, a task more similar to that faced by students in extracurricular writing situations (see for example Roozen; Comstock; Haas et al.). In each e-mail, Polly has to write with an audience in mind to capture the interests of the membership, negotiate her role as both a peer and a leader to maintain friendships, and represent herself and the group in a positive light.

## DATA AND METHODS

Between September 2012 and May 2013, my graduate assistant, Anne M. Dimond, and I interviewed thirty total members of the sorority: ten members of the chapter's leadership team, fifteen women in peripheral involvement positions, four new members who joined the chapter after the recruitment process in January 2013, and one woman who went through the recruitment process but joined another sorority. In our interviews, we asked the women to narrate their paths of participation in to the sorority, describing and explaining their motivations for participation. To triangulate my analyses of their experiences, I interviewed twelve sorority alumnae and seven campus staff members involved in fraternity/sorority life both about their own fraternity/sorority experience and about their theories of student learning and participation in fraternity/sorority life. I attended fifty-two total events, including weekly chapter meetings, leadership team meetings, and fundraising events. I collected written artifacts as well, including newsletters, minutes, officer position applications, PowerPoint presentations, forms, and handbooks.

I interviewed Polly near the end of her one-year term to understand her writing process. I worked with an undergraduate researcher, Carolyn German,<sup>1</sup> who was also a member of a campus sorority,

to develop questions for a discourse-based interview (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington). Discourse-based interviews are a means of understanding "non-classroom, tacit writing knowledges" that a writer derives "through repeated experience" (223). In this method, the interviewer collects a body of writing and interviews the writer about alterations the writer made at different points. A typical question would ask, for example, why the writer uses a formal greeting in one e-mail and a humorous greeting in another e-mail. This methodology is useful for identifying sub-conscious and taken-for-granted writing practices that writers do not articulate on a daily basis (228).

Carolyn and I compared and contrasted all of the e-mails to develop a list of interview questions for Polly about her various rhetorical choices. I was concerned that I would make too much of Polly's choices, and I did not want her to feel like she had to make up a reason for any choice. As a member of a campus sorority who had held a leadership position, Carolyn helped me to identify rhetorical strategies that were likely more intentional on Polly's part. For example, I wanted to classify every use of an exclamation point as a rhetorical strategy, but Carolyn noted that sorority women often used exclamation points offhandedly. Carolyn identified the more intentional exclamation points: those that served the purpose of getting the readers excited about doing something that they otherwise might not be excited to do. For example: "Be sure to know when your tabling time is and be there promptly when your scheduled shift starts so others who have class can get to it!" As Polly confirmed for us in her interview, the exclamation point here makes an otherwise demanding sentence sound exciting and conversational. I believe that, for the most part, we were able to highlight the rhetorical strategies that held meaning for Polly.

Polly said in the interview that she wrote her e-mails in short, easily digestible paragraphs so that members could use the e-mails as a reference for the whole week. Carolyn and I segmented each e-mail into separate paragraphs, because we wanted each segment to reflect Polly's view of the composing process of the e-mail (usually, each paragraph had a heading and was in a different color). We only diverged from this process of segmenting at a handful of instances where we noticed a distinct tonal shift, such as an instance where the first few sentences of the paragraph were informational and the last sentence was humorous.

Once the data were separated into segments, our next step was to create a coding scheme to identify and classify Polly's rhetorical strategies. Polly told me that during the chapter's weekly meeting (typically occurring on a weeknight at 9 PM), she takes notes in a notebook. Though the meetings often have a PowerPoint presentation, Polly told me she crafts the weekly e-mail mostly from memory and her notes. These notes, however, are only a skeleton of what actually appears in the e-mail. Polly allowed me to take a photo of the handwritten notes she took for one of the weekly e-mails, part of which I have transcribed below along with the corresponding line from the final version of the e-mail to make her additions apparent (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Polly's Handwritten Notes and Her Final Written E-mail.

| Polly's Handwritten Notes   | The Final E-mail   |
|---|--|
| Next week is formal chapter with elections<br>--Pins                                    | Next week's chapter is formal, and elections will be held during this time. Make sure you are dressed all fancy like and wear yo pins, bring yo hankies to congratulate girls, and look all classy. <sup>2</sup> |
| Polish on Sunday 1-5<br>--Wear Philanthropy Day Outfit<br>--Black/white w accent of red | Polish on Sunday from 1-5. Make sure to wear your philanthropy day clothes so we can catch and make sure y'all are lookin' fiiiine as eva. Philanthropy day remember is black, white, and a red accent.          |
| 7-10 Room 310 Day Chairs Meeting  | Day chairs: Your meeting is tomorrow from 7-10 in Room 310! Holla  |

Based on the comparison between her handwritten notes and the final e-mail, Carolyn and I identified a "rhetorical strategy" as anything beyond the basic factual information of the sorority's activities that week. We coded basic factual information, such as a declarative sentence stating the time and date of an event, as "null."

Carolyn created the first draft of the coding scheme using grounded theory (Charmaz), an analytical method that creates theories that are "grounded" in the data, leading to a theoretical understanding of participants' experiences. I tested out Carolyn's coding scheme on the first two e-mails, and we revised the coding scheme together so that we could both use the coding scheme consistently. To apply the codes to the rest of the data, we used a method Peter Smagorinsky calls "collaborative coding," developed from and greatly influenced by Vygotsky's work on the social construction of language (401). Smagorinsky works with a doctoral student to "discuss each data segment before agreeing on how to bracket and code it," reaching agreement "through collaborative discussion" (401). To mitigate issues of power, Smagorinsky works with students with areas of expertise "complementary" to his own (401). Carolyn's membership in a campus sorority and her expertise in undergraduate slang complemented my expertise in the sorority from my ethnographic research. Carolyn and I independently assigned codes to the segments in five of the twenty-seven e-mails and then met to discuss areas of disagreement and revise the coding scheme. She and I coded the rest of the interviews on our own, after which we met again to discuss areas of disagreement and come to consensus, again revising the coding scheme.

We ended up with 402 total segments of data coded into seven different categories: flattery, incentive, excitement, nudge of encouragement, silly humor, strategic humor, and null. Below, I explain each strategy as a gendered act of literacy, focusing on the way the strategies respond to a specific social context.



## MAINTAINING LIKABILITY: FLATTERY, SILLY HUMOR, AND INCENTIVE

Polly opens most e-mails with flattery, grabbing the reader's attention via a compliment that typically refers to the physical appearance of her audience ("Hello pretty ladyss"). Linguist Janie Rees-Miller argues that these kinds of compliments, disconnected from a specific task, function as "phatic communication," meaning "a kind of small talk that can establish and maintain social relationships through increasing a sense of solidarity and intimacy through shared values" (2682). Polly's use of compliments in the opening suggests that she is trying to build a relationship with her audience through their shared valuation of physical appearance. Later on, in the body of the e-mail, Polly uses flattery to motivate the women to take pictures of themselves or "selfies" at sorority-sanctioned events and text them to Polly to receive points for attendance. Polly often uses compliments to remind the women to take selfies: "Remember, take pretty pics: Group pics, selfies, I love them all and send them to the Gmail address that I keep posting. You will never get the points if I don't know your pretty face was there!" The selfie-as-participation rewards physical presence as a form of participation. Polly draws on the shared value of attractive, physical appearance to establish commonality with her audience and to speak to them as a group of friends.

Polly's use of compliments situates her as a peer to her audience. To strengthen this identity, and to remain likable and relatable to her audience, Polly uses her trademark "silly" sense of humor. In these instances, Polly uses humor in a way disconnected from a message she needs to convey to her audience. She alters the spelling of a word so that the audience will read it in a certain tone (perhaps in relation to an image or a joke that stands separate from the purpose of the message), inserts pictures or jokes that feel random from the central messages of the text ("AAAAAAAND in honor of our snow day, I have attached a picture of a Corgi doing a happy dance"), or uses humor as an intro or outro to the central message of the text ("Peace, Love, and Unicorns, Polly").

Humor presents a means for Polly to assert her identity in a way that does not threaten or subvert the organization. Diane M. Martin finds that for women in middle management:

humor as lightness and play allows for relief from stress without the potential damage to important organizational relationships that may come from other kinds of outlets. Moreover, when women assert their ideas and will with executives, humor can play a softening, risk-reducing role in their resistance. (165)

The silly, almost child-like nature of Polly's sense of humor establishes her identity within the group in a way that is nonthreatening to both the membership and the organization, allowing her to play around with the seriousness of her leadership role.

Polly said that she felt more comfortable with the e-mails as the year went along, mostly because people got to know her. She told me that this familiarity with the audience was a result of her physical presence at events:

Faith: Do you feel over the course of the past year like the girls have gotten to know you better?

Polly: I think so. Just by being present at things. They always see me. I'm always doing stuff.

I'm always being weird. So then if I'm always there, they always see that.

In this way, Polly's "weird" sense of humor in the e-mails correlates with the weirdness of her sense of humor in face-to-face interactions within the group ("I'm always being weird"). Polly also noted that the e-mails contain a callback to her physical presence ("being present at things"), creating a synergy between her physical presence and her e-mails.

Polly also maintains her likability by offering an incentive—usually something free like food, T-shirts, or other prizes—to push the reader in the direction of selecting the sorority's events over all other possible commitments. For example: "Chi Omega is having a fundraiser next Tuesday at Red Mango from 6-9pm, go support a fellow Greek organization and eat some yummy fro-yo." Polly noted in our interview, "Anytime we don't have to pay for something, people go crazy!" The incentives help the women decide among opportunities for involvement but also establish the benevolence of Polly and the rest of the sorority leadership. By playing up the incentive, she shows that she is not demanding that people do something because she says so. Additionally, her emphasis on the incentives for participation frames her (and the sorority leadership) as "nice," asking for participation and offering something in return.

## LEADING BY EMOTION: EXCITEMENT

In addition to leading by organizing events, sorority leaders are expected to be leaders by demonstrating for other people how to feel at those events. In the segments Carolyn and I coded "excitement," Polly expresses excitement over an event or task in an effort to spread positivity and encourage her audience to participate ("Our pretty newsletter went out today and our sweatshirts will be coming in soon! Yay for new things!"). She also highlights or amplifies her excitement about the event or task in an attempt to transfer that excitement to the audience ("Our fall philanthropy is already beginning to be planned for next Fall so GET EXCITED!!!").

In this way, "emotional labor" was a central part of Polly's job. Emotional labor connotes the emotional performances (typically disingenuous) required in certain jobs, such as a flight attendant being patient or a security guard looking stern (Miller 572). These emotions are intended to meet organizational goals and are often mandated by management (Miller 572). In these situations, emotions become "organizational commodities" to be put on display for the benefit of the organization and often result in a "mind-body" split for the worker (Miller 572). Polly told me that she tried to inject energy and excitement into each event to build up anticipation:

Polly: If it's something that really needs to be hyped up like our social events this semester, usually I write that it's going to be awesome, everybody's going to be there and make it seem like it's going to be this great thing even if it's not.

Faith: How do you feel about that? Does it create a weird disconnect like, "I gotta be excited about stuff!"

Polly: I guess kind of. It kind of sucks. But all of us on the leadership team know that we're just expected to be at everything and have a good attitude so yeah, if we don't, no one else will.

The emotional rules for different jobs vary, but women tend to be expected to “suppress feelings of anger and to convey happiness, warmth, and friendliness” (Erickson and Ritter 147). The constant management and suppression of feelings often leads to feelings of “burnout and inauthenticity,” especially for women managers (Erickson and Ritter 146). It also leads to a kind of mind-body split, where the worker acts out emotions that he or she does not actually feel (which, as Polly states, “kind of sucks”). Polly, however, attempts to re-integrate her body into her e-mails by referencing in-person experiences of sorority meetings in the e-mails. For example, the leadership team found that women were not very excited about an upcoming party, which was going to be themed after a James Bond movie. To reveal the theme to the chapter in an exciting way, they dressed up as characters from James Bond movies, played the James Bond theme song, and entered the chapter meeting as spies and villains. It was silly and fun, and Polly did a somersault down the center aisle of the chapter meeting as part of her performance. Polly references this performance in that week’s e-mail, regarding a specific section of information on an upcoming campus event: “I apologize this section will not be as in depth as the other one: because I was outside mentally preparing myself to look like a fool rolling on the ground in front of you all.” By referencing an inside joke from the chapter meeting, Polly connects her disembodied e-mail voice to the energy and humor of the women’s embodied experience in the chapter meeting.

***“In addition to funneling the excitement of the meeting into the e-mail, the reminder of Polly’s body—and the bodies of the other members of the leadership team—demonstrates to the sorority members that their leadership does not consist of disembodied voices commanding them to do things, but that their leaders are human beings alongside them.”***

For Polly, I suspect this move serves to re-integrate her body into the e-mails as a means of mending some of the mind-body split she feels about having to feign excitement for events. Amanda Sinclair notes that successful leaders are often portrayed as being able to “defy their bodies in what they do” and being “beyond bodies” (389). A feminist approach to leadership, however, allows for the “integration of bodily sensations” into leadership, using bodies as a means of learning and leading (Christensen 266). In addition to funneling the excitement of the meeting into the e-mail, the reminder of Polly’s body—and the bodies of the other members of the leadership team—demonstrates to the sorority members that their leadership does not consist of disembodied voices commanding them to do things, but that their leaders are human beings alongside them.

## NAVIGATING AUTHORITY: NUDGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC HUMOR

Polly and the other members of the leadership team were concerned about being disliked for exercising their authority. Sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway writes that people hold “status beliefs” about what people should do and how people should act based on factors such as race, class, gender, or occupation (637). When people act outside of these status beliefs—such as a woman leader being

assertive or resistant—they are assumed to be incompetent (637). The sorority leadership was concerned about asserting their authority in ways that would be perceived as socially inappropriate. Earlier in the year, one member had sternly lectured the women about not drinking at the sorority's events. Polly felt that this lecture unnecessarily scared the women, many of whom decided not to attend the next event at all for fear of getting in trouble:

Angela went up and just kind of scared the crap out of everybody, like, "You cannot under any circumstances drink, this is really bad, you cannot have one sip of alcohol!" She just made it this very big thing. So I think if you [do that], you come off as this scary person who's just trying to get a point across, instead of making it something that's relatable.

To negate some of the "scariness" of a commanding statement, Polly uses a rhetorical strategy Carolyn and I termed the "nudge of encouragement." Carolyn and I recognized the "nudge of encouragement" by associating it with the physical gesture of gently elbowing another person to spur them to do something. In the nudge of encouragement, Polly offers help, assistance, or a gentle reminder to "make sure" to do something ("Also, make sure you are going to study hours. If problems arise, contact Annabelle and she will help you! :)"). Segments labeled "nudge of encouragement" often employ an emoticon smiley face at the end of the segment (a colon followed by a right parenthesis). The smiley face at the end inflects a cheerful tone to the writing, calling to mind the body of the writer, mimicking a face-to-face conversation where the writer smiles at the end of the sentence to lighten the mood of an otherwise stern statement. To distinguish meaningful smiley faces from the smiley faces that regularly crop up in everyday writing, we decided that the smiley face must shift the tone of the sentence, changing the way the reader experiences it. For example: "This e-mail contains a lot of important information and dates, so make sure to read through it all :)" The smiley face softens some of the impact of an otherwise commanding statement.

The smiley face mitigates some of the anxiety Polly feels about telling people what to do, but—as a form of emotional labor—it also hides some of Polly's frustrations. For example, in one e-mail in April, she writes in bold:

**Fun little reminder: a funny thing happens. When you read these e-mails, you have less questions. So perhaps before posting on Facebook, ask yourself, "did I read that e-mail Polly sent out?" :) :) :) :**

I asked Polly specifically about the tone of this particular sentence and why she wrote the four smiley faces at the end:

I [was] super frustrated that time, when I did four [smiley faces] and I did realize that it was a little bit sassy and a little bit sarcastic and I was like, "I'll just put four so that it's happy" . . . It's kind of like, I was very frustrated that so many people were asking questions. I had to find out a way to get their attention but I didn't want them to be like, "Oh my gosh, that was super mean." So just having all those smiley faces was like, "I'm angry at you but I still love you." I was frustrated but I tried to make it so that I wasn't being a big asshole.

For Polly, the "asshole" is a leader who simply tells people what to do. The leadership persona Polly wants to create is much more friendly ("I still love you"). The smiley faces are a means of repairing whatever damage Polly suspects she has done with the tone earlier in the e-mail, nudging the

group as if to say, "You still like me, right?" Resisting an authoritarian role, Polly uses the nudge of encouragement to construct the role of a cheerful friend sending a gentle reminder to attend an event.

Polly also uses humor strategically to lighten more serious subject matter in an effort to relate to, motivate, and/or appease her audience. She draws up comic scenarios in the context of discussing rules or other important information in a relatable, funny way:

Do not under any circumstances bring food or drink on the bus. Don't be that person. That person is not cool. If your date says "Hey, I'm bringing this on the bus" say "Hey, don't be that person."

She also makes jokes and quips to lighten the seriousness of certain information, or to evoke laughs to motivate her audience to take action:

Alpha Nu Fish Fry: Also This Friday! Tickets are \$10 and you get food. And who doesn't love food? But Polly, I do not have a ticket yet . . . They sell them at the door too. Problem Solved.

Polly's sarcasm and humor emerge in moments when she anticipates being perceived as "bossy" or "sassy," leading Carolyn and I to term this humor "strategic" because the humor was connected to the central message of the e-mail. In our interview, however, Polly talked about the jokes as "coming out" in high-stakes moments rather than as an intentional decision:

Faith: Why did you use a joke there?

Polly: Because if you continue to make everything funny then people are going to be like, "There's going to be funny little jokes in there, I should read it." And a lot of times I think the jokes come out when something is very important, like "This needs to happen." A joke came out.

Polly faces a tension between stressing the importance of the event while not appearing overbearing; in the midst of this tension, "a joke comes out." Martin's study of women in middle management finds that women use "spontaneous, individually authored humor" as a means of navigating gender "in ways that simultaneously affirms and subverts the gendered order of work" (166). For Polly, the playful use of humor says something like, "Isn't it ridiculous that I'm in charge?" which downplays her authority role but (presumably) endears her to the group as a peer. Polly noted in our interview that she uses sarcasm specifically as a form of humor that allows her to grapple with some of her own authority:

Faith: Do you feel uncomfortable telling people that they have to do things?

Polly: Yeah. Like here [pointing to the bolded "Fun Little Reminder" quoted above] I was frustrated but I tried to make it so that I wasn't being a big asshole . . . I just try to make it sarcastic. Instead of being like, "Hey, you need to read this e-mail!" I wrote, "Hey, a funny thing happens . . ."

Martin finds that women use humor to "delve into ironic commentary on the workings of the organization" (163). Though it would be a stretch to call Polly's humor *subversive* to the workings of the organization, I believe that the humor is a kind of *resistance* to being pigeonholed as an "asshole" authority figure by constructing her own identity via writing ("the one with the weird sense of

humor”). While this identity may not be particularly subversive to the status quo of the organization, it does help her identify with the membership.

## TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In the inaugural issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies*, Bruce Horner notes that literacy research must focus on “the temporal dimension of literacy” to capture its “always emergent character” (4). Because Polly had the ability to change and revise her rhetorical strategies as the year went along, I wanted to capture some of the dynamism of her learning her role over time. I divided the twenty-seven total e-mails into four quarters to identify changes in the strategies that Polly selected over time (see Figure 1). The number inside the bar represents our count of the number of times the strategy was used in that quarter, but the space of the bar is converted to percentages to show how *often* each strategy was being used in that segment of time. For example, although excitement was used 17 times in both the first and second quarter, it made up 15.6% of the segments in the first quarter, and 13.4% of the segments in the second quarter.

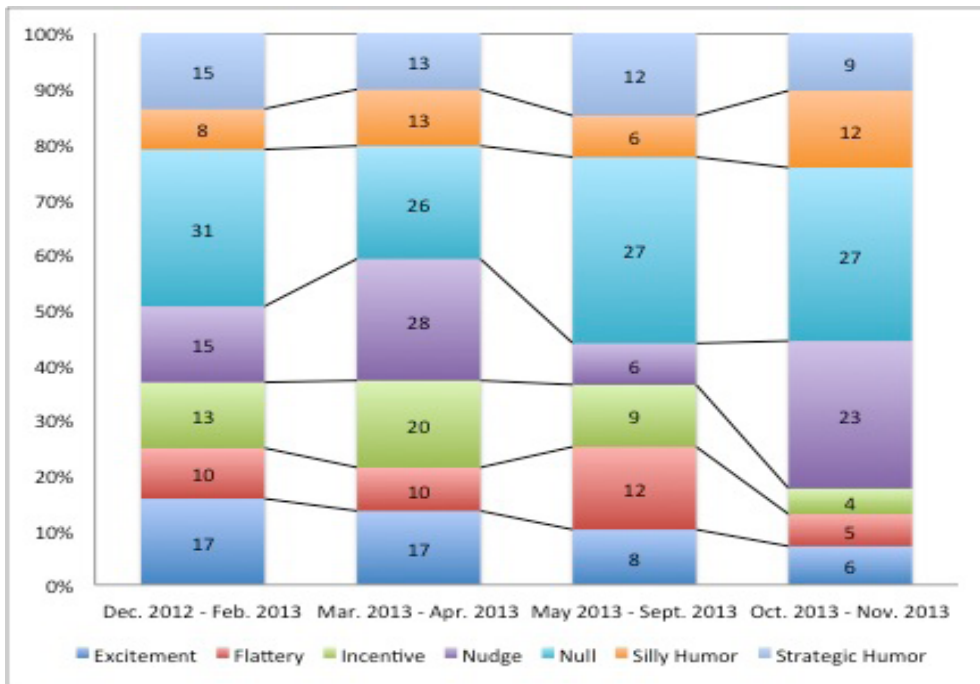


Fig. 1. Polly's Use of Strategies During One Year.

Sorority members hold positions for one year, from November to November. The first quarter represents e-mails written from December to February, when Polly was first getting used to the position. This quarter displays the most even distribution of rhetorical strategies as she tries out a variety of tactics. The second quarter represents e-mails written in March and April, when most of the sorority's work occurs. The nudge of encouragement, which masks some of Polly's frustration at

members who forget important information, increases here, presumably as a result of the increased workload and stress of sorority life at this point in the year. The nudge of encouragement increases as the year goes along, hitting a peak in the fourth quarter, suggesting the increase of Polly's frustration with members not paying attention to announcements and her determination to maintain a positive face in the e-mails.

Excitement decreases gradually across the year, likely because Polly grows tired of being excited all the time. The third quarter represents the summer months (May, June, July, and August) as well as the first full month of school, September. Without the physical presence of meetings to generate embodied excitement and without as many events going on to get excited about, Polly tends to rely more on the basic facts of the e-mails, likely accounting for the large portion of "null" segments in this quarter.

The final fourth quarter represents October and November, finishing out Polly's term. She's almost out of excitement at this point, likely due to the exhaustion of having to be excited all of the time, and again uses the "nudge" more to hide some of her frustration with the women. Incentive and flattery also drop in the fourth quarter, suggesting Polly's gradual detachment from the emotional labor of the position. She does not have to worry as much about getting the women to like her at this point. Having seen her around at sorority events and reading her e-mails over the past year, Polly's audience has developed a sense of her funny and weird constructed rhetorical persona, which allows her to work less at creating that persona. Instead, she can work on playing it up through her use of silly humor, which increases slightly in the last quarter.

## STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AS SPACES OF RHETORICAL EXPERIMENTATION

Third-wave feminist linguistics has focused on how women use certain rhetorical strategies in different situations and to what ends. For example, rather than saying that "women are polite," this method studies how and why a woman speaker might perform politeness as a pragmatic rhetorical strategy, influenced by her audience's preconceived notions about women's speech (Mills 121). I have parsed out some of the rhetorical strategies Polly uses, drawing from sociological research on women's communication strategies to demonstrate how Polly maintains her likability within the group, leads by emotion, and navigates her anxieties about authority. Now, I want to put these strategies back together and take a step back to see a more holistic picture of the gendered identity Polly has constructed for herself and its purpose.

In "situations that are closely linked with women"—such as childrearing or domestic tasks—women are viewed as authority figures and allowed to assert authority with less resistance (Ridgeway 648). Because a sorority is a women's organization, it is possible that Polly's audience may have been receptive to a more assertive leadership style. Polly's consistent use of rhetorical strategies that mitigate



her authority suggests that perhaps she views the sorority more as a mixed-gender audience. It is also possible that even low-stakes leadership induces anxiety for leaders-in-training like Polly. Her rhetorical strategies suggest that she thinks she will encounter views about what women's leadership should look like—nice, energetic, friendly, and silly—and she often plays into these expectations. Many of her strategies deflate the seriousness of her leadership position—telling jokes, offering a gentle “nudge” at the end of a command—in accordance with the gendered expectation that she appear friendly and community-oriented.

It would be a stretch to argue that Polly experiments with a *variety* of leadership styles, as she seems to adopt the sort of persona we might expect from a college-age woman in a sorority: a friendly, approachable, appearance-oriented, goofy friend. It would be fair to argue, however, that Polly is able to *experiment* with tactics for meeting the gendered expectations of leadership while retaining a sense of self. She told me in the interview that she liked being “weird” and funny, and that one of her proudest moments in writing the e-mails was when she was able to inject her own personality into the formality of the e-mail:

Polly: Last night I was just sitting there with Lacey and I was like, “What can I put in there to make this funny?” And I was going to write “I love you all” but I thought no, I can make this funnier: “I love you all with the passion”[pause] of what? Hedgehogs came to mind. What do hedgehogs like? Why, they like running through toilet paper tubes. “I love you all with the passion of a thousand baby hedgehogs running through toilet paper tubes.” . . . I told Lacey last night after I sent it that this was the most proud I’ve ever been of myself.

Faith: Because you felt like what?

Polly: I was proud of my random comment! I was really proud that I came up with the baby hedgehogs. Because who would think of that? But now that it’s in your head it’s awesome! You look up hedgehogs on YouTube and there’s always a toilet paper tube. They love toilet paper tubes.

Polly is proud of both her ability to engage her audience and her ability to do it in a unique way (“who would think of that?”). She is able to take on an organizational persona while retaining her unique sense of self, and the sorority gives her opportunities to do so. In the sorority, Polly can experiment with different rhetorical strategies for addressing gendered leadership expectations, which will likely offer her greater flexibility in future rhetorical situations. In her study of writing transfer, Rebecca Nowacek writes that the transfer of writing skills depends on more than just students recognizing two similar rhetorical contexts and applying the skills learned in one situation to the other situation. Instead, Nowacek argues, transfer “recognizes multiple avenues of connection among contexts, including knowledge, ways of knowing, identities, and goals” (20). One avenue that facilitates transfer is identity, or “an individual’s understanding of his or her role, capacities, affiliations, and work in a given social context—as well as that individual’s perception of other people’s evaluations of his or her role, capacities, affiliation, and worth” (24). So if a student is allowed to try on different kinds of writerly identities within a student organization, she will be able to recognize opportunities for adopting these writerly identities in future rhetorical situations.

The larger question, however, is why Polly bothers. Why is she willing to perform these gendered



literacy practices, faithfully constructing the e-mail every week, even when her writing doesn't always match up with how she feels, even when people don't always pay attention to the e-mails, even when she's frustrated or annoyed?

I believe that Polly is drawn to the sorority because of the opportunity for play and experimentation with the tropes of sorority life. I interviewed her just a few months after she joined the sorority, and she told me she was attracted to its newness:

Interviewer: What was the first semester in [the sorority] like?

Polly: I had a lot of fun getting everything started and putting ideas together. Originally I thought that being new and having to start everything from scratch would be a bad thing but I actually prefer that. I'm glad I picked that over anything else. I think it's neat that we get to start all the traditions on a specific campus instead of having them picked for you already.

For Polly, leadership is not the crushing responsibility of upholding standards set by someone else, but is a "fun" opportunity to get things started and put ideas together. Anthropologist Anita Harris, a scholar who studies the phenomenon of third-wave feminism in young women's peer communities, suggests that young women have grown disenfranchised with "conventional citizen subject positions" and so seek to create peer-centered communities as a means of trying out a public persona and group identity (482). For example, young women don't see themselves represented in politics: the 2012-2013 congress was over 80% male with an average age of fifty-seven for the House and sixty-two for the Senate (Manning). The opportunities young women do have for political engagement might be in institutionalized, adult-driven forums ("run for student council!"), or through consumerism ("buy organic!"). As a result, Harris finds that young women turn to "alternative

***"Not content to settle on a single leadership style, and certainly not content to settle on dominant cultural views of disembodied, authoritarian leadership, she uses rhetorical strategies to test the kind of leader she wants to be: a peer, a goofball, a friend, and a sister."***

ways to express a public self through participation in a peer-constructed community where they can attempt to stake a claim for themselves on their own terms" (485). Sororities and the leadership opportunities they offer are one means for young women to try out this public self and a group identity. Institutionalized as sororities may be, the women perceive them as something they can shape, grow, and craft to suit their own personalities and tastes.

Polly's strategies taken together (especially the silly and strategic humor) suggest her playful attitude about

her leadership position. Her experimentation with different rhetorical strategies suggests that she is playing with the idea of herself as a leader of a sorority. Not content to settle on a single leadership style, and certainly not content to settle on dominant cultural views of disembodied, authoritarian leadership, she uses rhetorical strategies to test the kind of leader she wants to be: a peer, a goofball, a friend, and a sister. Polly's playful and dynamic approach to leadership may be just the kind of leadership necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a 2012 article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Marcus Buckingham notes that corporate leadership training tends to reduce leadership to a

set of characteristics or qualities that can be applied to any situation. Buckingham argues, however, that leaders need to be able to identify, understand, and adapt to a variety of fluid and shifting leadership situations, carefully attuned to the rhetorical needs of the moment. Just as composition teaches students to adapt to their audiences, writing in student organizations can present rhetorical challenges students may not find in the classroom, and their ability to shift and change to face those strategies may be essential for them in the future. In sharing Polly's e-mails with others, I have been surprised at how often a variety of readers—students, academics, professionals—identify with Polly in regard to the challenge of composing documents that balance a tension between the personal and the organizational. As Kathryn Flannery notes, "Composition cannot by itself insure that students will have the time and space to try out a range of intellectual tools," meaning that "it is all the more important—in a Gramscian sense—to insure that all students have access to a range of literacies that they can take up and redeploy in ways beyond their own or our own imaginings" (36-37). Students will need to be able to try on a variety of leadership styles and personalities to understand how each might be appropriate in a different rhetorical situation, and student organizations like sororities offer an exciting space to do so.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>In an interesting intersection of global and local literacies, the women of the sorority (who were predominantly white) often appropriated this kind of African-American Vernacular English (e.g. "yo" instead of "your"). I did not ask Polly about this choice specifically, but Carolyn noted that this was a means of adding a "voice" to one's writing.

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