Basic Bitches in the Workplace

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Abstract

Women are constantly under strict scrutiny in terms of how they conduct themselves in a professional atmosphere. Even though in recent years there has been a massive surge in feminist thought, there has also been a surge in negative female stereotypes and stigmatization. In this paper, I explain the cultural phenomenon of the Basic Bitch and how it fits into the swirling and conceptual idea of third-wave feminism and, more importantly, how the Basic Bitch fits into the professional sphere.

"Yes, I'll take a pumpkin spiced latte with extra whipped cream please." If I told you that the person who ordered that drink was my fifteen-year-old brother and not an eighteen-year-old white girl from Scottsdale, would you believe me? The stigma of the Basic Bitch goes beyond association of material items. Because of the connotation that accompanies the random items that are associated with being "basic," women and girls who want to escape being labeled as a stereotype must completely eliminate all association with any of the items deemed "basic." These items range from holiday drinks (the pumpkin spiced latte specifically) – well, pretty much anything pumpkin spice flavored – to yoga pants, to Ugg boots, and the list goes on. These stereotyped materials don't necessarily hold a bad connotation; they just hold a very specific female identity.

There are endless *Buzzfeed* lists and how-to blogs on being or becoming a Basic Bitch. The Basic Bitch is socially savvy. She loves to party and just can't wait for fall! She is fun, but she is not serious. But what happens when the so- called Basic Bitch wants to compete for a high-paying managerial position? In this scenario, the identification as a Basic Bitch may not only hold her back, it may hinder any professional progression, because who wants to hire someone who isn't serious? On the flipside, "bro," the equally materially-associated masculine stereotype holds none of the stigmatizing qualities of that of the Basic Bitch. According to Gene Demby's NPR analysis, "'bro' has evolved into a shorthand for a specific kind of fratty masculinity. Baseball cap with the frayed brim (possibly backward), sky-blue oxford shirt or sports team shirt, cargo shorts, maybe some mandals[1] or boat shoes" (Demby). In other words, "bro" is just an appearance-based term of endearment. In an article for *The Guardian*, Daisy Buchanan argues that the best thing to do is just embrace the stereotype – like the bro – as a way to combat the stigmatization (Buchanan). While this is all well and good, I argue that the label itself is part of the problem. It creates a divide and isolates specific groups of people – good or bad.

While the trendy label of the Basic Bitch is goofy and oh-so-relatable, it raises the bigger question of how our culture is handling gender stigmatization and stereotyping. In this paper I will explore why, in a budding surge of women's empowerment, women still have to constantly adapt the ways that they behave based on perceptions that stem from existing social stereotypes. I want to explore the hoops women must jump through in order to progress in the professional sphere, especially if they enjoy surfing the wedding section of Pinterest and grabbing a skinny vanilla latte before yoga class. I am not going to look at the racial aspect of the Basic Bitch stereotype, as that is an entirely different, albeit important, angle. I am going to be focusing on the stereotype as it applies to gender specifically. I argue that constructing social barriers that stigmatize very specific groups of people

and "things" actually detracts from the steps taken to achieve gender diversity in the professional landscape and even strengthens the ever-looming glass ceiling[2].

Contextualizing the Author

Before I begin, I want to clarify where I am coming from. I am a nineteen- year-old freshman in college. I was brought up in classic middle-class America. Both of my parents work: My mom is an occupational therapist and my dad is an engineer. They are, and have always been, very concerned with my success as a "working woman." I grew up surrounded by feminists (both of my grandmothers were active participants in the second-wave of feminism[3]). I was brought up under the assumption that I would go to college and enter the professional world as an adult. There was never any question as to what my future would be.

As a child, I never thought that the sheer fact that I was a woman would hinder my success, but as I got older, the evidence of gender disparity became clearer to me. I also had never really thought about the girlie stereotype as something that would hold me back, but I knew I didn't fit it.

I am most certainly a tomboy. I have developed my own alternative feminine style as I have gotten older, but as a young child, my wardrobe consisted of basketball shorts and t-shirts. I don't fit the stereotype that is now considered the "Basic Bitch" so I'm safe, right? Wrong. As I began to apply for jobs and go out in public alone, I became more and more aware of how I was presenting myself and what other people thought of me, even though I insisted that I was not affected by social pressures. Everyone is. I may not have submitted to the mainstream pressures, but the inevitable criticisms of my capabilities because I am a woman affect me.

This realization that there was nothing I could do about female stigmatization really hit me my junior year of high school. I had just wrapped up a production of *Legally Blonde The Musical* – which is, simply put, a show about a Basic Bitch becoming a successful lawyer in the face of adversity. I played the part of one of lead character Elle Woods's sorority sisters. At that time, my hair was very blonde and came down to the middle of my back. In this show, I wore it in a straight ponytail on top of my head. My costume was a pink mini-skirt and a tank top with sorority letters on it. I entertain a wardrobe of predominantly gray and beige, so this smattering of fluorescent colors and tight-fitting clothes was not consistent with my personal taste. Looking at myself in the mirror, however, I began to get a clear understanding of what the stigmatization of wardrobe items can do to self-perception. I looked dumb. Unintelligent. This intrusive thought startled me; there I was, judging myself based on my own appearance.

I spent hours in front of the mirror changing my clothes and redoing my hair before my first "real" job interview. I wanted to make sure that I looked professional – without looking like I was trying too hard, and original – without looking like a crazy person. I wanted to make sure my hair was put together – without looking like I was going to prom, and that I spoke with purpose – without sounding like a peppy cheerleader, or worse, a bossy bitch. I rehearsed over and over again the answers to possible questions about my resume – which I was still unsatisfied with.

What if on my resume, they think that where I worked at a daycare center, I was just a glorified babysitter? Sometimes I even tutored them! What if where I put that I was the secretary of my

student council, they think I was like a 1960s subordinate office secretary? I basically ran that council! How will they know I was serious about all of the positions I held? These were all questions that dominated my thoughts for days before my interview, not because I lacked confidence or didn't believe in myself, but because I was so worried that they would think I was just another silly blonde girl that I bordered on overcompensation.

The Basic Bitch

So what does that mean, the Basic Bitch? According to Maggie Lange's *New York Magazine* article, the Basic Bitch is "the opposite of the Bad Bitch, or the Dope Bitch" (Lange). Got it? No? In more academic terms, the "Basic Bitch" is an American colloquialism used as a derogatory term towards women who fall into certain social stereotypes. It is a term that has gained traction in the last five years to describe "unoriginal behaviors" of women.

Unlike me, the truly "Basic Bitch" is not afraid to own the hyper-feminine aesthetic. In a New York Magazine article, Noreen Malone writes that "[the Basic Bitch] expresses traditionally feminine desires, like wanting to get married or to have kids." Malone concludes that the Basic Bitch "likes what she likes and she doesn't care if it doesn't make her outwardly special" (Malone). I agree with this feminist take on the stereotype, but will add that the problem is not with the definition;; the problem is with the connotation. As Lange flatly puts it, "The Basic Bitch is inauthentic" (Lange). Malone adds, "it seems to me that while what [the Basic Bitch] pretends to criticize is unoriginality of thought and action, most of what *basic* actually seeks to dismiss is consumption patterns… without dismissing consumption itself" (Malone). So, simply put, the Basic Bitch is materialistic and always on the bandwagon.

This materialism isn't just a general love of shopping when referring to the Basic Bitch. In an article about the cult-culture around Starbucks Coffee, Visakan Veerasamy's theorizes that "the Starbucks experience becomes something to aspire towards, a sort of comforting indulgence. You drink coffee, but you treat yourself to a Starbucks. Celebrities drink Starbucks because it's a status symbol" (Veerasamy). I argue that this Starbucks culture can be extended to the more extensive list of materials associated with the Basic Bitch. There is a very specific collection of "things" that have been deemed "basic" and so carry with them a stigma. Malone details the nuances of what entails "basic" materialism:

Basic, according to the *BuzzFeed* quizzes and College Humor videos that wrested the term from the hip-hop world and brought it into the realm of white-girl-on-white-girl insults, means someone who owns things like Uggs and North Face and leggings. She likes yogurt and fears carbs (there is an exception for brunch), and loves her friends, unless and until she secretly hates them. She finds peplum flattering and long (or at least shoulder-grazing) hair reliably attractive. She exercises in various non-bulk-building ways, some of which have inspired her to purchase special socks for the experience. She bought the *Us Weekly* with Lauren Conrad's wedding on the cover. She Pins. She runs her gel-manicured hands up and down the spine of female- centric popular culture of the last 15 years, and is satisfied with what she feels. She doesn't, apparently, long for more (Malone).

Based on Malone's description, the Basic Bitch is satisfied with her social position, so why does it carry such a negative stigma?

The label of "Basic Bitch" holds significantly more weight than any other generic label would. It is a cultural phenomenon. Cathy Bakewell and Mitchell Vincent-Wayne touch on this phenomenon in their article on Generation Y consumerism. They expound that "generation Ys have been brought up in an era where shopping is not regarded as a simple act of purchasing. The proliferation of retail and product choice has resulted in a retail culture where acts of shopping have taken on new entertainment and/or experiential dimensions" (Bakewell). I feel what these new dimensions that Bakewell and Vincent-Wayne are referring to are the levels of social connotations that come with different consumerist habits.

The habits of the Basic Bitch are obvious and identifiable, but still somehow hold a demeaning quality. We use the term "basic" as an unwarranted, lazy insult. Malone observes: "*basic* rolls beautifully off the tongue. It's a useful insult… It derives its power from the knowledge that if you recognize someone or something as basic, you probably, yourself, aren't it" (Malone). One major flaw with Malone's observation is that even if I fit none of the major materialistic qualities of a Basic Bitch, I will still be presumed intellectually inferior if I go to class in yoga pants. The dictionary definition of the Basic Bitch is vague and relies on cultural evolution to carry that image. As Kraeysha[4] so eloquently concludes in Lange's article, "you can smell a basic bitch from a mile away. You can smell that bitch's perfume. A basic bitch is just someone who likes what's typical to like. The radio puts stuff on the radio that they think is typical and you should like it, and that's something a basic bitch would like. She likes those normal brands and wears them all the time because that's some basic shit" (Lange).

Basic Feminism: Getting To Know The Third Wave

Now that I have fleshed out the requirements of the stereotype, it is important to look at it in the context of modern feminism. The up-and-coming feminist movement has been controversially deemed the "third-wave" of feminism. The easiest way to explain Third-Wave Feminism is through Joan C. Williams's theory of "Difference Feminism." In her article entitled "Deconstructing Gender," Williams explains "the basic insight of 'difference' feminists: that gender exists, that men and women differ as groups" (Williams). Difference Feminism and Third-Wave Feminism relate in that they both focus on individuality of women as opposed to radicalization. In her article on the defense of feminist individuality, R. Claire Snyder gives this concept the name of Choice Feminism and defines it as "the idea that feminism should simply give women choices and not pass judgment on what they choose" (Snyder-Hall, 255). Simply put, Third-Wave Feminism, Choice Feminism, and Difference Feminism all take a nuanced look at feminism that basically dictates that all women should be able to act however they feel most comfortable without fear of judgment.

Third-Wave Feminism sparks controversy because it argues that women who are content living a domestic life for example, should not be judged or ridiculed for succumbing to the patriarchy[6]. This type of thinking would not fly with the more radical and, in William's words, "sameness"-oriented[6], Second- Wave Feminists. The third wave of feminism is an attempt to include all levels of femininity. According to another article by Snyder, more specifically on Third- Wave Feminism, "Third-Wave Feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political" (Snyder 176). In other words, third-wave feminism is more about women's freedom than women's domination.

The third-wave of feminists isn't a defined generation;; it is a subgroup of feminists who have emerged from the more generationally-defined second-wave. In her article, Amber E. Kinser does an excellent job of contextualizing the modern or "third-wave" feminist movement. She explains that feminism is "an ongoing process, ebbing and flowing, slowing and quickening its pace in succession" (131). She is explaining how feminism is ever-present but has moments of acceleration. Catherine M. Orr analyzes the most recent "flow" in her article entitled "Charting the Currents of the Third Wave." She explains that "the earliest mention of the term 'third wave' took place in the mid-eighties" (Orr). In other words, it is a fairly new term. Snyder expands on the nature of these feminists in her third-wave article by saying that "third-wavers claim to be less rigid and judgmental than their mothers' generation, which they often represent as antimale, antisex, anti-femininity, and antifun" (Snyder 179). She is saying that third-wave feminists more freely acknowledge that some women are just inherently feminine, but that doesn't make them weak. The idea of femininity being associated with weakness is a whole other issue that I could write an entire book on, but for the purposes of this paper, I am focusing specifically on the association of professionalism with masculinity.

This masculinity/power dynamic is what second-wave feminists are most concerned with – be the same as men in order to succeed. Third-wave feminists are more concerned with success as an individual. It is interesting to acknowledge the overlap of the second and third waves of feminism. Snyder expands that the young women of the 1980's and 1990's "are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of [their daily] lives" (Snyder 175). Third-wavers are the children of second-wavers. The concept of women's empowerment is ingrained in the minds and practices of these women. It is only because the first and second waves of feminism were so radical, that we are finally able to attempt a nuanced view of feminism.

If we follow this trend of free and individually empowering feminism, then why is the Basic Bitch constantly being ridiculed? Like I said before, third-wave feminism is not necessarily a generational thing; therefore, a large portion of the population is not even aware that hyper-feminine stay-at-home moms can be feminists at all. The housewives of the 1950s and 60s would never be considered a part of the second wave of feminism. Snyder explains that "third- wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity. Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave" (Snyder, 179). It is contested because, historically, "girlie" and "feminist" were never synonymous. The majority of the argument for the importance of inclusiveness in the third wave feminist movement is the acknowledgement that women are inherently different from men – but not inferior to them.

It is the aforementioned difference that I am going to be speaking to for the remainder of this paper. In her article on the dilemmas of the feminist academic, Sherry Sabbarwal frankly observes: "Feminism can be defined as the doctrine advancing the view that women are systematically disadvantaged and are advocating a collective or individual struggle for equality. Defined this way, feminism is a political position" (Sabbarwal 267, 268). Basically what she is saying is that feminism is so much more than women wanting to be taken seriously: it is a movement fighting for the fair and equal treatment of all humans.

Basic Professionals: Basic Bitches In The Workplace

Based on the context that I have provided in the first two sections, I argue that the stereotype of the Basic Bitch has caused a major roadblock in the third wave of feminism. Even without the added stigmatization of women who fit certain social constructs, women's achievement in the professional landscape has historically been a struggle. In his article, John Cassidy analyzes the nature of the glass ceiling. He explains that "despite the progress that has been made in promoting gender equality in the workplace, it sometimes seems like only superwomen break through the glass ceiling." He goes into great detail about how even though it is becoming easier for women to climb the ladder to elite professionalism, they don't stay there for long. He posits that "over the past thirty years, the holes in the glass ceiling have grown a lot bigger, and that many more women have clambered through them. Despite these improvements, though, the ceiling remains intact: women still make up less than a fifth of the economic élite" (Cassidy). To steal Cassidy's term, beyond the glass ceiling is a paper floor[7].

Now, if we add in the stigmatization of the Basic Bitch to a woman trying to advance professionally, we run into even more trouble. In her book *Wonder Woman: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection,* Debora Spar articulates the challenges that women face in some of the top-tier professions. She concludes that even though the women who achieve these heights are immensely successful, the women who "'had it all'… still had lives that were fundamentally different from and more difficult then men's. They were still, and almost always, in the minority. They were still dodging comments and innuendoes that took them aback" (Spar, 6). I am going to go ahead and say that the Basic Bitch would be a prime candidate for such innuendos, and for this, would be unfairly judged based upon her looks and interests.

Even though feminism is evolving to encompass all women and all of their interests, labels like the Basic Bitch are preventing the movement from truly making headway. John Colombotos's analysis of sex and professionalism breaks down common assumptions of women in the workplace. One assumption he cites is that "for the majority of women teachers, especially those who are married, their work roles are secondary to their family roles as sources of personal identity" (Colombotos). Now, if I take that assumption and compare it to what Malone described as traits of the Basic Bitch: "[the Basic Bitch] expresses traditionally feminine desires, like wanting to get married or to have kids," a startling pattern begins to form.

Let's say a woman fits all of the traits of "basicness." She loves her Starbucks, and just started this super rad new kale diet, but she also works full time at a successful insurance company, and is highly qualified to move up the executive ladder. Based on what Malone observed – that the Basic Bitch desires a traditional family – and how Colombotos explained that people assume that women who want families will not perform in a professional setting as well as those who are not interested in traditional gender roles, this woman automatically loses a significant portion of her credibility. All of this is based solely on the fact that she is labeled based on her appearance.

We learn as children to never judge a book by its cover. A study published in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* reveals that labeling creates subconscious biases toward or against those who fall within the defined barriers of a stereotype (Jussim). Stigmatizing stereotypes like the Basic Bitch are what hold the feminist movement back. The third-wave feminists are doing their best to acknowledge that the feminine aesthetic is something that women should be comfortable expressing if they so choose, but there is only so much they can do. Women should

not have to masculinize their wardrobes or censor their interests in order to succeed in the professional landscape. Buchanan resolves that "dismissing all cultural feminine signifiers might look like a feminist act, but it's rude" (Buchanan). I agree. To boil it all down, women should never have to choose between professionalism and femininity. Individuality is what makes the world interesting;; so let's capitalize on that instead of judging capability on arbitrary stereotypes.

Notes

[1] The *Urban Dictionary* defines the mandal (man-sandal) as "a men's summer shoe that consists of black or brown leather that covers more than 50% of the foot, buckles, and [has] a thick sole" (Urban Dictionary).

[2] Glass ceiling: the term used for the invisible barrier that prevents women and members of minority groups from achieving top-tier professional positions (Merriam-Webster).

[3] Amber E. Kinser gives a detailed account of the second wave of feminism in her book. She explains that "the 'Second-Wave Feminism' title was coined by Marsha Lear when women of the 1960s sought to connect their ideas to those as reasonable, and by then noncontroversial, as the right to vote… [It] gave activist women of the late '60s the double-rhetorical advantage of cultivating new ideas while simultaneously rooting them in older, more established ground [that the suffrage-oriented first wave developed]" (Kinser 129).

[4] "Kreayshawn" is the stage name for Natassia Zolot, a rapper and director from Oakland, California (Kreayshawn). In her song "Gucci Gucci," she references Basic Bitches with the lyrics: "Gucci Gucci, Louis Louis, Fendi Fendi, Prada. The basic bitches wear that shit, so I don't even bother."

[5] The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the patriarchy as a "social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly*: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power" (Merriam-Webster). I, however, am using the more colloquial reference that the *Urban Dictionary* defines as "a social organization that grants power to men and oppresses women through political, social and economic institutions. Harmful side effects include the gender binary, unequal wages and Rush Limbaugh" (Urban Dictionary).

[6] Williams defines "Sameness Feminists" as feminists who **"**focus on the similarities between individual men and individual women… [and] advocate 'gender-neutral' categories that do not rely on gender stereotypes to differentiate between men and women" (Williams 837).

[7] The "paper floor" refers to the "tendency for women who did very well [professionally] one year to fall off the next" (Cassidy).

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