

# Constructing Lumbersexuality: Marketing an Emergent Masculine Taste Regime

Journal of Communication Inquiry

2019, Vol. 43(1) 25–46

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DOI: 10.1177/0196859918796169

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## Abstract

This article examines the online retailer Huckberry.com as a singular, centralized authority responsible for marketing “lumbersexuality” as an emergent, gender-normative taste regime. As an evolution of the devalued hipster marketplace myth, analysis reveals Huckberry promotes an adaptable taste regime to its young, educated, urban, White male clientele that unites goods, meanings, and practices across multiple fields of consumption that reconnect indie consumption and taste with a fantasy of “authentic” masculinity. We argue that Huckberry offers men semi-otic resources that merge the urban with the outdoors in a way that enables the enactment of a fraught though seemingly durable masculine identity project that weaves the extraordinary and mythological into the quotidian. Implications of this gendered taste regime are discussed in relationship to the ways in which lumbersexuality is mobilized as a more authentically masculine alternative to the ironic stance of hipsterism and the supposed phoniness of mass culture.

## Keywords

masculinity, lumbersexual, taste regime, gender, identity

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He looks like a hardened outdoorsman but his flannel feels soft to the touch. He will open your beer with an omni-present Buck knife. He is a master of the retro Instagram filter. His flannel is coated with a waterproof DWR coating. His laid back [sic] style has been honed with more effort than he would like you to know. (Puzak, 2014, para. 12)

The lumbersexual has emerged as “the next big thing” in masculinity since first appearing on urban streets in the early 2000s, coexisting and, at times, overshadowing previous archetypes such as the metrosexual and hipster as the focus of media coverage. Interest in lumbersexuals, for instance, has generated numerous think pieces (e.g., Brown, 2014; Compton & Bridges, 2015; Nicks, 2014), flippant “listicles” like “13 Reasons You Should Be Dating a Lumbersexual Right Now” (Treacher, 2015), and online dating sites that exist solely to connect lumbersexuals with the women attracted to them (e.g., Lumbermatch.com, Bearddate.com, Bristlr.com). Yet, media coverage of this emergent masculinity is not just a curiosity; it introduces and disseminates the lumbersexual taste regime to a mass audience. As such, lumbersexuality circulates as a taste regime—“a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption” (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 900)—that provides men with the semiotic resources they require to perform this emergent gendered identity project.

We conceptualize the rise of the lumbersexual as a gendered evolution of the iconic hipster archetype, which itself has been co-opted and repackaged by the marketplace as a “trivializing stereotype that threatens the value of [consumers’] identity investments in the indie field of consumption” (Arsel & Thompson, 2011, p. 798). In its ideal form, hipsters represent an antiestablishment consumer persona that is “formed around the oppositional consumption practices” (McCracken, 2010, p. 4). For instance, ideal hipsters favor consumption of “authentic product constellations and experiences distributed through small-scale and often localized channels” (Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2014, p. 7), such as independent (indie) and vintage goods as a mode of cultural resistance (Goulding & Saren, 2009). However, as Arsel and Thompson (2011) document, whenever a lifestyle is trivialized by a devalued marketplace myth, members of the lifestyle may engage in demythologization practices to protect their field-dependent cultural capital and identities. Rather than discarding the hipster identity outright, we take the position that lumbersexuality emerges as a response to the devalued marketplace myth, resulting in a more nuanced and gendered enactment of the hipster lifestyle that seeks to reground consumption in practices that signify genuine independence from mass culture (Meamber, 2015).

Unlike the more gender-neutral hipster, lumbersexuality represents an explicitly gendered identity project (Compton & Bridges, 2015). Embraced by a group of mostly White, young, middle- to upper-middle-class, urban-dwelling men, we suggest that lumbersexuals subscribe to a gender-normative taste regime

that harkens back to the trappings of the stereotypical lumberjack of cultural imagination—men who fled the effete and overcivilized nature of urban life at the turn of the 19th century in search of the “authenticity” of the physical labor, daily hardships, violence, and risk that came with life in the wilds of the American frontier (Brown, 2014)—as a means to reclaim an authentic masculinity in an era of demasculization (Jeffords, 1989, 1994). While research abounds that explores masculine identity projects (Belk & Costa, 1998; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013; Hirschman, 2003, 2016; Hirschman & Belk, 2014; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kimmel, 2011, 2013), extant taste regime scholarship has yet to explore gender-specific taste regimes (but see Modrak, 2015). We propose that such taste regimes not only exist but are increasingly important during periods in which masculinity becomes untethered from its hegemonic form and becomes more fluid, adaptable, and bound to the sociohistoric moment (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2010). The rise of the lumbersexual within this cultural moment provides an opportunity to connect a masculine taste regime to the tendency of some men to seek forms of masculine recuperation as a result of a culture of White male injury (Robinson, 2000) and the emergence of a new economic imperative (Carroll, 2008).

Our context for this examination is Huckberry.com, a popular online retailer dedicated to outfitting men for life in and out of the city. While numerous brands sell the outdoor lifestyle to its consumers (e.g., REI, Patagonia), we argue Huckberry represents one potential source men can turn to learn about and purchase goods reflective of lumbersexuality. While not the only source educating men about lumbersexuality, we argue Huckberry constructs a taste regime for its customers that “propagates a shared understanding of aesthetic order that shapes the ways people use objects and deploy the meanings associated with the material” (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 900). Specifically, we argue that Huckberry promotes consumption practices and personal aesthetics that signify nostalgia for the outdoors and the authenticity of preindustrial modes of craft labor. Indeed, as we intend to show, Huckberry capitalizes on a putative crisis of authenticity that is particularly acute with a segment of male consumers and integrates this crisis throughout its narrative as a tool in the construction of its distinct version of the lumbersexual taste regime. In this way, we argue Huckberry constructs and promotes a taste regime that enables the alienated or disenfranchised men of mass culture to live, or at the very least look the part of, a seemingly more authentic lifestyle outside of mass culture (Meamber, 2015). The irony, however, is that Huckberry strategically appropriates archetypical representations of masculine authenticity as a trope that ultimately ensnares its consumers into subtle webs of mass consumption. Ultimately, we contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding the evolution of masculinities by documenting the emergent lumbersexual taste regime articulated by Huckberry

and how it provides one potential means of ameliorating men's underlying anxiety about the contemporary crisis of masculinity.

Prior to presenting our analysis of the Huckberry taste regime, we begin by addressing extant research on taste regimes, masculinity, and consumption. We then further contextualize the rise of the lumbersexual, connecting it to the hipster aesthetic, masculinity, and men's use of consumption as a tool to explore consumer fantasies. This is followed by a discussion of our research site, methodology, and findings. We specifically argue that the lumbersexual taste regime unifies goods, meanings, and practices across numerous fields of consumption in a way that provides men with the symbolic resources necessary to enact this gendered identity project.

### **Taste Regimes and Masculinity**

Introduced by Arsel and Bean (2013), taste regimes are conceptualized as “a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption” (p. 900). Related, yet distinct, from extant theories of taste and its role in social distinction (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998), taste regimes “extend the notion of taste from a boundary-making process to a practice that is discursively constituted and continually performed” within the context of daily life (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 912). Specifically, Arsel and Bean illustrate that taste regimes document both how taste is practiced in subtle forms within social classes and the processes used to construct coherent patterns of consumption via the interrelationship between objects, doings, and meanings (p. 912). Recently, scholars have applied Arsel and Bean's concepts to illuminate the hipster taste regime and document how magazines and e-retailers curate, package, and distribute a de facto hipster taste regime, which, in turn, contributes to its evolution into a clichéd aesthetic reproduced across various social contexts to upwardly mobile urbanites (Bean, Khorramian, & O'Donnell, 2017; Gothie, 2015; Modrak, 2015).

Beyond its evolution into a clichéd aesthetic, we suggest that due to hipsters' ubiquity and relative gender neutrality, urban men have turned to the lumbersexual taste regime as a means of reconnecting consumption and taste with authentic masculinity. In contrast to hipster men's attraction to rural “others” and appreciation of kitsch (Gothie, 2015), lumbersexuals are more akin to the men targeted by Best Made Co. via “the appropriation of cultural identities and symbols to construct skewed versions of history that strip actual ‘work’ of meanings and value and that often perpetuate imperialistic and exaggerated masculine stereotypes” (Modrak, 2015, p. 556). That is, these men wrestle with the contemporary crisis of masculinity and have turned to media and the

marketplace to negotiate masculinity in a world of fluid and, often, contradictory masculinities (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2010).

Despite its fluid nature, gender remains central to the “entire realm of consumer behavior” (Schroeder, 2003, p. 1). Yet, current taste regime scholarship (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Bean et al., 2017) appears to only tangentially address gender, although Gothie’s (2015) analysis employs postfeminist theory and Modrak’s (2015) parodic project critiques lumbersexual masculinity. Hence, to better understand the ways in which a masculine taste regime is discursively constructed, we examine the emergence of Huckberry’s lumbersexual masculinity as constructed by the narrative linkages of objects, doings, and meanings across the multiple fields of consumption documented by the website.

### **From Hipster to Lumber**

The sudden ubiquity of the lumbersexual represents the particular evolution of hipsterism’s irreverent “community of consumption” that sees itself as in opposition to mainstream consumer sensibilities (Goulding & Saren, 2009, p. 27). We argue that the lumbersexual is an adaptation of the contemporary hipster, a stylized consumer identity formed to counteract market tastes and mass culture norms. Against the much-maligned hipster, lumbersexuality offers a new durable consumer identity that extends into the quotidian experience of the ideal consumer. While typically associated with American youth culture, hipsterism transcends demographics and national borders to constitute a recognizable global consumer community. The contemporary hipster shares a common lineage to Bohemianism, a 19th century countercultural movement that rejected mass society and the culture industry in favor of transgressive lifestyles and avant-garde art, particularly that which irreverently idealized the aesthetics of poverty. As McCracken (2010) explains, the hipster embraces this irreverence, constructing itself as an antiestablishment consumer persona that is “formed around the oppositional consumption practices” (p. 4). Arsel and Thompson (2011) and Geczy and Karaminas (2017) suggest that the hipster is also an extension of the post-War Beat Generation who romanticized personal self-actualization and rejected consumer-driven lifestyles. Hipsters, therefore, like other alternative communities of consumption (Goulding & Saren, 2009), view mass consumption as a site of contestation and favor independent, off-grid vintage and authentic goods and experiences “distributed through small-scale and often localized channels” (Cronin et al., 2014, p. 7; see also Arsel & Thompson, 2011).

Although the hipster community often idealizes the so-called authenticity of independent consumption, Cronin et al. (2014) explain that some increasingly favor ironic appropriation of mass-market trends. While they view the

emergence of ironic consumption as a counter to the individual seclusion of alternative consumption, Hill (2015) suggests that ironic detachment is a strategy of disavowal that enables the “postpostmodern” (p. 45) hipster to remain a part of the consumption community while distinguishing themselves from the increasingly pejorative label. Arsel and Thompson (2011) argue that hipsters tend to eschew the “hipster marketplace myth” (p. 792) because it caricatures their aesthetic tastes and devalues the field-dependent capital engendered through indie consumption. Even for those whose consumption patterns and self-fashioning fit the label, a stance of ironic detachment enables “hipster” to become a floating signifier that always refers to someone else; a pretentious fraud or an inauthentic faker. Hence, new iterations of hipsterism seek to reground consumption practices in that which signifies genuine independence from mass culture.

Indeed, Huckberry capitalizes on a putative crisis of authenticity that is particularly acute with male hipsters. Implicit in this crisis is the assumption that both the salaried office worker and the Bohemian rebel alike have become feminized by mass culture. First, both types of men live an urban existence separated from the core American cultural value of “rugged individualism” (Hirschman, 2003), replete with both the masculine ruggedness and self-reliance of life in the wilderness. Second, both are consumers rather than producers of goods. Robinson (2011) argues that urbanization, corporate culture, and consumerism are often associated with phoniness and feminine passivity. By contrast, the lumbersexual represents a recovery of the masculine individual from mass psychology and consumer culture. His signature beard, beveled axes, utility work clothes, boots, and itinerate lifestyle consummate a fantasy of return. Companies such as Huckberry, therefore, craft a taste regime that enables the alienated men of mass culture the illusion of an escape hatch from the emasculating forces of mass culture (Meamber, 2015).

As this study demonstrates, the Huckberry lumbersexual taste regime is distinguished by its social durability across an entire field of quotidian and extraordinary consumption. According to Belk and Costa (1998), mountain men mythology has inspired the creation of consumption enclaves and rendezvous where consumers exchange their modern everyday lives for the “living condition, possessions, and personalities of men who trapped beaver in the Rocky Mountains of the American West between 1825 and 1840” (p. 218). As forms of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982), these rendezvous offer an escape from contemporary life but within the confines of consumer culture underwritten by nostalgia for a fantastical life of a frontiersman. While Belk and Costa identified a similar consumer identity project to lumbersexuality, they emphasize the importance of liminality and escape from the consumer’s everyday experience. By contrast, the Huckberry taste regime does not oscillate between the catharsis of carnivalesque and the drudgery of quotidian experience. In short, Huckberry offers the semiotic resources, packaged as a taste regime, for men to enact a

durable identity project that transforms the quotidian by merging the urban with the wilderness as opposed to offering a momentary pause within a liminal consumer enclave.

## Methodology

This study fits in to current work in consumer culture theory exploring mass-mediated marketplace ideologies in which researchers investigate media entities to document and illuminate the normative messages about consumption embedded within (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the spirit of Arsel and Bean (2013), we conducted an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of a single website, Huckberry.com, that we identified as contributing to the construction and dissemination of the lumbersexual taste regime. As we are interested in expanding the application of the theory of taste regimes, a single-case study represents a highly useful tool (Yin, 2014). The selection of Huckberry for this single-case study also fulfills Stake's (1995) requirement that instrumental case studies address a single focal issue and identify a bounded case to illustrate it. While other cases exist that contribute to the larger dissemination of lumbersexuality, Huckberry was selected due to its clear boundaries as a singular website that provides access to multiple forms of data to sample from to illustrate the case (Yin, 2014), including evocative product descriptions, goods from numerous product categories, colorful visuals, and descriptive blog entries describing various lifestyle practices.

Data collection and initial analysis were conducted in a purposeful and iterative fashion between January 2017 and October 2017, with both authors visiting the site frequently, engaging with the content, and discussing emergent insights and theoretical implications. While Huckberry represents a complex case, data collection and analysis focused on content that best illustrates the case (Stake, 1995). Special care was taken to collect data from all types of sources found within the bounds of the case (Yin, 2014) so as to provide a holistic description of the varied objects, doings, and meanings documented by these sources. Data analysis followed the tenets of grounded theory. Originally developed as a "general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273), the method can also be described as an iterative, comparative, interactive, and abductive method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Consequently, the method dictated that we iteratively tack back and forth between data collection and analysis, between inductive and deductive inquiry, and between emergent and extant theory in an attempt to build on existing theoretical propositions. In the following, we provide a detailed description of Huckberry, with a focus on emergent themes that illustrate the ways in which the site constructs its taste regime, distinguishes lumbersexuality from its hipster origins, and



promotes the integration of “lumber” consumption practices and personal aesthetics into quotidian urban life.

### The Huckberry Origin Story

Huckberry is an online retailer that promotes flash sales across digital media channels (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, the brand’s website) targeted to “25-year-old guys who lived in the city but *lived* for the outdoors” (Forch & Greiner, 2016, para. 3, emphasis in original). Founded in 2011 by two San Francisco ex-investment bankers and longtime friends, Andy Forch and Richard Greiner, the site aggregates a wide array of goods, including clothing, footwear, bags, personal accessories, home-goods, and outdoor gear and equipment, creating a curated collection of goods associated with its lumbersexual taste regime. Rather than produce the goods it sells, Huckberry partners with manufacturers directly, offering goods at sale prices for a limited time, processing the orders, and, only then, purchasing the goods from the manufacturer and shipping them to consumers. At its core, then, Huckberry is a business intent on generating profit. As a taste regime, however, we argue Huckberry also links objects, meanings, and practices in a way that educates consumers on how lumbersexuality is practiced in everyday life, a key function of any taste regime (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 912).

Huckberry begins this education in its origin story “Bootstrapped, Profitable, & Proud” (Forch & Greiner, 2016). Within this narrative, the founders, two White, educated, and financially successful men, espouse their core values and, by extension, those of Huckberry’s lumbersexual taste regime. Specifically, analysis reveals Huckberry’s origin story expresses a disdain for the monotony of office labor and celebrates risk-taking via the pursuit and monetization of one’s passions. For example, Forch and Greiner’s narrative positions their choice to leave their “safe, lucrative jobs” as investment bankers “cranking out spreadsheets for 90 hours each week for the rest of our lives” (para. 2) in heroic fashion: Instead of wasting away in an office cubical, the two “*go for it*” (para. 1) and pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions. This framing reflects a contemporary manifestation of Holt and Thompson’s (2004) “man-of-action hero” masculinity—men who take risks yet contribute to the larger functioning of the social order—in that Forch and Greiner reject monotony and security and embrace the risks associated with the pursuit of a more authentic and potentially lucrative business endeavor. By merging their self-professed business acumen and passion for the outdoors, Forch and Greiner signal that risk-taking becomes a necessary prerequisite for realizing personally and financially rewarding outcomes.

Such risk-taking, however, takes courage—courage for Forch and Greiner to leave their jobs, to invest their own money, and to trust that they were capable of building a successful business “on our own terms” (para. 7). Risk pervades



Huckberry's origin story. The company ignored traditional venture capital investors, preferring to "bootstrap" the company relying on the founders' investment of "\$10,000 each from our savings to form Huckberry LLC, and set out to scratch our own itch" (para. 4). In addition, the pair took risks and eschewed traditional office culture in favor of a team of employees built from friends who shared their passion for the outdoors; they scorned rapid growth—and immediate profits—in favor of sustainable growth; they hired a friend's younger brother rather than a professional to design the original Huckberry site. Risk became fully integrated into Huckberry's business model and, in turn, the Huckberry taste regime. For Forch and Greiner, risk-taking was not only part of building their company; it was part of the adventure. As Forch writes, "I think Rich [Greiner] and I now realize that when we decided to go for *it* that day at Squaw [Valley], that *it* was an adventure. That for us, the action is, and always will be, the juice" (para. 17, emphasis in original).

Ultimately, the inclusion of a highly abstract and emotional retelling of Huckberry's origin story serves two functions within the taste regime. First, it positions Forch and Greiner's within the Huckberry taste regime as lumbersexuals who take risks in pursuit of their two passions: business and the outdoors. Second, it democratizes Forch's and Greiner's unique experience and educates consumers about how to enact lumbersexuality as entrepreneurs. Consequently, the narrative establishes the underlying meaning behind the brand: Huckberry positions itself as being about rejecting convention, pursuing passions, and taking risks in pursuit of financial success and personal life satisfaction. And if someone is unable to "go for *it*" in quite the same way, Huckberry exists as a proxy mode of lifestyle attainment. That is, through frequent interaction with and purchase from the site—a site described as "equal parts store, magazine, and inspiration to help men suck the marrow out of life" (para. 3)—Huckberry offers lumbersexuality to every man, for a price.

## Goods, Meanings, and Huckberry

Taste regimes link goods with particular meanings (Arsel & Bean, 2013), and analysis reveals Huckberry connects lumbersexuality to culturally accepted masculine ideals by transferring culturally relevant meanings into the goods it offers (McCracken, 1988) via evocative product descriptions. This process begins by simply offering goods that American men consider masculine: specifically, apparel, tools and equipment, grooming products, weapons (in the form of axes and knives), and, to a lesser extent, alcohol and tobacco, and vehicles (Hirschman & Belk, 2014). To establish the taste regime as distinctive from mainstream masculinity, Huckberry positions itself as an alternative to mainstream offerings. That is, product descriptions connect the goods on Huckberry with idealized masculine traits such as participation in physical labor, a willingness to subject themselves to danger as embodied by iconic masculine

professions (e.g., construction), and perform exceptionally well in both mundane and extreme urban and outdoor environments.

Huckberry's description of its work boots illustrates one manifestation of this strategy. Within the taste regime, boots become a desirable alternative to more mainstream footwear due to their ruggedness and versatility:

From the North Pole to South Jersey, Vail to Yale, when there's snow to be shoveled, muck to be raked or frozen mountains to climb, we reach for our boots. Worn by everyone from foot soldiers to generals, lumberjacks to ironworkers, boots are a timeless staple of a man's wardrobe for good reason – they're tough, stylish, and they get the job done. . . .So pull on a pair that'll last you a lifetime, and ensure “neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet, nor hail” can stop you from getting out there.

The implicit comparison between boots and mainstream footwear within this description states that while athletic and dress shoes may be acceptable in some instances, when men need “tough, stylish” footwear that enables them to “get the job done” in a wide variety of weather conditions, boots represent the only viable option. In addition, the reference to both wilderness (North Pole, Vail) and urban (South Jersey, Yale) locales invites men to read these “timeless staple[s]” as durable, versatile, and inherently masculine irrespective of the fact that many men will primarily wear them within the context of their urban daily lives, for example, trudging to and from their home and office, where work boots possess minimal utility.

The description of Huckberry's “Everyday Carry” (EDC) shop, which sells “pocket-sized equipment you can use every day” such as wallets, pens, survival goods, and knives, communicates similar themes:

They're not random. You don't just toss them in your pocket. Oh no, your Everyday Carry (EDC) items are the deliberate result of concentrated streamlining and maximization of portability and preparedness. . . .Just as your carry is a reflection of your personal approach to preparedness, our EDC shop is a reflection of our emphasis on useful, quality products that are reliable in every situation. . . . It's enough to get you through your routine and a zombie apocalypse. Prepare with the best, because when you use it, you don't want second rate.

Within this description, Huckberry invites men to take the time to prepare by purchasing and, when necessary, using its “useful, quality” EDC items. By doing so, Huckberry claims lumbersexuals demonstrate their preparedness and self-reliance. The assertion is that lumbersexuals must be prepared for every situation, whether it's a routine situation or an extreme situation like a “zombie apocalypse.” EDC goods become essential tools for addressing the unpredictability of the contemporary world regardless of whether it is experienced in the

daily context of office life or while out in the wilderness. Regardless of the context, those who are unprepared for this unpredictability, those, according to Huckberry, who carry mundane, “second rate” versions of EDC items, or, worse, those who carry no EDC items at all, fail to live up to the masculine ideal embedded in lumbersexuality.

Product descriptions also emphasize the refined characteristics and durability of craft labor as a means of differentiating goods reflective of lumbersexuality from brands reflective of mainstream masculinity like Sears’ Craftsman, John Deere, and Nike (Hirschman & Belk, 2014). Within the taste regime, masculine brands are those produced by small-scale, American-sourced manufacturers crafted in a way that illustrates a commitment to creating aesthetically appealing and durable goods. For example, the Original Chippewa brand is described thusly:

The “Original Chippewa” collection reflects the authenticity and heritage of American craftsmanship, while creating timeless silhouettes for a modern American style.

Built with American pride and handmade state-side with premium components, these boots have classic styling for everyday wear with features like Vibram out-soles, full leather welts and comfort insert insoles.

Descriptions of niche brands across a variety of product categories such as The James Brand, Taylor Stitch, Relwen, and Myles Apparel emphasize similar themes. While relatively unknown to the majority of American men, within Huckberry’s lumbersexuality brands committed to “the authenticity and heritage of American craftsmanship” are presented as desirable alternatives to trendy, mass-produced, and aggressively marketed mainstream signifiers of masculinity.

Additional distinctions are made within Huckberry between the durability of American craftsmanship and the disposability of mainstream brands. Denim may represent ubiquitous and ordinary product in American life despite its iconic status (Miller, 2015), but Huckberry’s descriptions emphasize the superior construction, durability, toughness, and classic good looks that result from the authenticity of its denim offerings. The Saint brand, for instance (retail price \$350), is described as being produced via craft labor and, therefore, as durable and authentic, but in a way that connects these attributes with the rebelliousness of bikers and gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson:

Saint designs clothes for those of us who know the feeling Hunter S. Thompson was writing about when he penned the words “. . . the fear becomes exhilaration and vibrates along your arms.” The Unbreakable Slim Jean is one of the toughest, if not *the* toughest, pairs of jeans in the world. Made of Saint’s ultra-durable and

unrippable Unbreakable Denim, the Unbreakable Slim Jeans will last you a lifetime and then some.

Within the Huckberry taste regime, Saint's branding, in partnership with similar descriptions of other brands, establishes and reinforces linkages between durability, authenticity, rebelliousness, and lumbersexuality. Hence, men who wear Saint denim embody "that rebellious, unbreakable spirit" in their masculine identity performances. Moreover, reference to Thompson establishes a link between the possession of refined cultural capital and lumbersexuality. In other words, while Huckberry invites anyone with the requisite economic capital to purchase the jeans, it invites those with the requisite cultural capital to read deeper into the cultural meaning embedded in the denim as a means of creating and enacting class-based distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984) that further distinguishes lumbersexuality from mainstream masculinity.

When considering how Huckberry connects goods to particular meanings reflective of its version of masculinity, analysis reveals Huckberry builds upon the generalized, mainstream masculine consumption constellation identified by Hirschman and Belk (2014) and tailors it to meet the demands of its consumers. Analysis further reveals that Huckberry promotes American-made niche brands as superior by engaging in explicit references to masculine attributes such as ruggedness, utility, and craft labor and implicit references to the deficiencies of trendy, mass-produced, and mass-marketed mainstream goods. Yet, while access to economic capital represents one barrier to embodying Huckberry's lumbersexuality, another is access to the requisite levels of cultural capital needed to interpret the connections between objects and refined cultural meanings the site promotes, for example, the rebelliousness of Hunter S. Thompson. Men capable of making this connection, we argue, represent Huckberry's ideal lumbersexual: men capable of mobilizing the symbolic meanings embedded in niche goods to express an authentic, durable, and refined masculinity that differs in meaningful ways from competing masculinities circulating within society (e.g., hipster, mainstream masculinity).

### **Lumbersexuality as Multifaceted Practice**

In addition to linking goods and meanings, taste regimes also integrate practices into a coherent expression of the regime (Arsel & Bean, 2013). While current taste regime research has explored the promotion of products geared to the urban woodsman through lifestyle branding (e.g., Meamber, 2015; Modrak, 2015), the following analysis attempts to add to this important work by illustrating how Huckberry's Journal posts create coherent linkages between goods, doings, and meanings across diverse environments (e.g., urban, outdoor) and consumption fields (e.g., fashion, food, home décor, popular culture, outdoor adventuring). Analysis reveals that within the Journal, adventuring is employed

as a multifaceted interpretive strategy for expressing linkages between the goods, doings, and meanings reflective of Huckberry's lumbersexuality.

Similar to how Huckberry constructs lumbersexual goods in relationship to mainstream masculine goods, lumbersexual practices are compared relationally to masculine ideals such as an adventurous spirit, risk-taking, displays of physical prowess, and personal autonomy (Holt & Thompson, 2004, p. 426; Hirschman 2003, 2016). As seen in repeated Journal posts, Huckberry celebrates adventuring practices that require men to exhibit such masculine ideals while encountering the challenges of the wild outdoors. As a post written by Anna Ehr Gott (2016) illustrates, for instance, surfing the Kamchatka Peninsula of Siberia represents a complete break from the confines of urban life, providing opportunities to explore exotic environs, camp alongside rebellious nonconformists like "a large group of salmon caviar poachers who were armed with shotguns, a pack of unfriendly 'bear dogs', and a fleet of zodiacs" (para. 9) and, consequently, test themselves physically. As Ehr Gott explains,

It was really taxing out there. Trying to surf while feeling unsafe and physically drained from lack of food, warmth, sun, and all other luxuries we get spoiled within California. You feel invincible once you get through something like that, but in the moment you're questioning everything about why on earth you'd put yourself in a situation like that. I've never felt so vulnerable in my life. (para. 11)

While the post is written by a woman and includes pictures of Ehr Gott surfing and camping, the narrative itself is written in a gender-neutral tone, allowing Huckberry's male readers to read themselves into the text. As a whole, the themes expressed in the Journal clearly celebrate risk-taking in extreme outdoor environs that tax men physically and mentally in the pursuit of personal passions and self-defining experiences and position these practices as representative of an iconic lumbersexuality. Yet, even mundane elements of Ehr Gott's surf trip are framed using the adventuring lens: "My nerves were on edge as we flew over the new landscape. I'd never been to Asia, so everything looked unfamiliar" (para. 4). Since Huckberry targets "men who live in the city but *live* for the outdoors," we read Journal entries like this as communicating both an aspirational masculine fantasy unavailable to the majority of Huckberry readers and instructions for interpreting quotidian practices as opportunities for enacting lumbersexual ideals.

The Journal applies adventuring's more quotidian usage when it profiles men who, like Forch and Grenier, abandon what they describe as unfulfilling yet financially lucrative white-collar careers to pursue their true passions. Typically, profiles highlight men embarking on labor-intensive careers full of self-reliance and personal fulfillment, such as filmmaker and photographer Thomas Woodson whose decision to go on an artistic journey across the country with his girlfriend and dog in a 2015 Dodge Ram Promaster van (Hiemstra, 2016)

marks him as “a rare breed, the type that can see the larger picture in life much easier than the rest of us” (para. 1). In other instances, the Journal celebrates men engaged in more urban and less extreme pursuits, such as baker Kyle Kuehner (Huckberry Staff, 2016) who rejected a life as a “desk jockey” to become an “artisan baker” because “I fell in love with the process and the craft. Wanted to work with my hands” (para. 3). Similar to Woodson’s narrative, the post describes Kuehner’s transition as a repudiation of the constraints of office labor and the realization of a long-time dream, which, as Huckberry declares, makes him “a man after our own hearts” (para. 1). These profiles and the numerous others like them in the Journal demonstrate the synergies between outdoor adventures and entrepreneurial practices (e.g., overcoming deficiencies in knowledge or experience, enduring physical hardships) when viewed through the adventuring lens. In the end, the flexible use of adventuring found in the Journal creates parallels between the concept as it applies to both extreme outdoor adventures and more mundane entrepreneurial practices that justify each as an equally valid expression of lumbersexuality.

Huckberry recognizes that not all men are able to realize the personal autonomy and other benefits of engaging in ideal lumbersexual practices, whether due to the demands of daily life, such as family obligations, or limited vacation days. Rather than alienate these potential consumers, Huckberry employs the adventuring lens to cultivate an inclusive taste regime that promotes practices for “weekend warriors”—men who, as posts such as “Choose Your Own Adventure(Mobile)” (Morton, 2016) acknowledge, “can’t spend every waking moment on the open road,” experiencing the “promise of freedom, independence, and excitement” road trips and other lumbersexual practices offer—as legitimate articulations of lumbersexuality. These practices are often less time and labor intensive and can be completed without straying far from the city. For example, “Escape from New York” (Oaks, 2016) acknowledges:

Now, to be fair, for many the daily grind of life on the merciless and fast-paced island of Manhattan is adventuresome enough. Dodging potholes, pedestrians, and sprinting from one subway to the next with hot coffee in hand is equally as strenuous as summiting Mt. Whitney or climbing El Capitan. Not to mention getting a table – any table – on a Sunday morning for brunch.

When you really think about it, no one could blame you for wanting to indulge in boozy brunches and artisan doughnuts over the weekend. But what if we told you there was some truly spectacular natural beauty and adventure just beyond the city limits? And no, I know what you’re thinking, it’s not just New Jersey . . . but that’s definitely a good place to start. (para. 3-4)

By constructing parallels between the perils of urban living and those experienced in the wilderness, this post depicts the mental tests and physical challenges

of urban life as “adventuresome enough” to make an authentic claim to lumbersexuality. Despite its ultimate endorsement of engaging with nature (if only in New Jersey), posts like this invite men unable to live the idealized practices of extreme adventurers and entrepreneurs to identify with lumbersexuality within the confines of their quotidian urban lives.

The inclusive nature of Huckberry’s lumbersexuality is furthered by the Journal’s application of the adventuring lens to cultural practices that are often associated with nonwilderness environs, such as food preparation, mixology, architecture, and home décor. Journal posts, for instance, explore baking traditional Australian crusty bread (Hawken, 2016), restoring Elvis Presley’s classic BMW 507 (Geiger, 2017), and consulting with a florist on a floral bouquet for Valentine’s Day (Wilder, 2016). A post documenting the history and evolution of a Chilean libation, the Pisco Sour can Rica Rica (Trimble, 2016), for example, illustrates how eating and drinking represent a form of cultural exploration: “Traveling and eating go hand in hand, as exploring new cultures often means exploring new foods, spices, and drinks” (para. 1). As the post continues, it explores the drink’s connection to Chilean culture, its people, and the labor-intensive process of sourcing and mixing the ingredients, providing consumers with easily digestible cultural instructions and knowledge about how to enact lumbersexuality irrespective of their first-hand experiences with global travel, cuisine, or libations.

As a taste regime, Huckberry presents a valuable resource that instructs and empowers men to acquire and mobilize lumbersexual masculinity within the context of their daily lives without the investment in the more time- and resource-dependent ideal embodied by professional adventurers and entrepreneurs. Huckberry’s ongoing utilization of the adventuring lens effectively integrates a wide array of consumption practices into a coherent lumbersexuality that appeals to men identifying with its wild and urban, rugged and refined manifestations. In aggregate, the breadth of the Huckberry taste regime spans across the masculine and feminine, and high-, middle-, and lowbrow to articulate a coherent linkage across a wide array of goods, doings, and meanings. But instead of bestowing status solely upon men who embody the ideal lumbersexual archetype, Huckberry depicts and legitimates various lumbersexualities including the extreme adventurer, the urban entrepreneur, and the weekend warrior in a way that creates a democratized taste regime distinctly tailored to the varied needs of the (White) urban men it has been constructed for.

## Conclusion

In this article we highlight an emergent gendered taste regime that constructs and promotes lumbersexuality. Whether men live lives as extreme adventurers or weekend warriors, Huckberry’s taste regime provides them with the goods, doings, and meanings to express their independence from the supposed



phoniness and femininity of mass culture. Specifically, we argue that Huckberry provides men with cultural instructions on how to mobilize a contemporary version of the idealized masculinities found in early 19th-century archetypes like the lumberjack, cowboy, and mountain man across multiple fields of consumption and cultural contexts. Consequently, we propose that Huckberry represents a multifaceted marketplace resource tailored to the needs of (mostly White) middle- to upper-middle-class urban men who are seeking emergent masculinities attuned to their perceived economic vulnerability and the ennui of the mass culture subject.

Further analysis suggests Huckberry offers a salve for both the intensification of economic precarity and the so-called feminization of men in a primarily service economy by inviting them to vicariously incorporate the experiences and identities of others into their own consumption practices. That is, Huckberry promotes lumbersexuality as a conduit to the authenticity and virility of the lumberjack/adventurer, for whom labor, in its myriad forms (e.g., work, leisure, consumption), is quintessentially masculine. In this way, as Compton and Bridges (2015) suggest, lumbersexuality represents a hybrid masculinity that allows men to negotiate, compensate, and attempt to control the meanings attached to their masculine identity projects, distance themselves from any potential “stigma of privilege” (para. 4) and construct a more meaningful masculinity. Analysis reveals three interrelated strategies used to achieve this association. First, Huckberry positions its founders’ journey from office workers to successful outdoor-lifestyle entrepreneurs as reflective of the dominant mode of American masculinity, heroic masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004). That is, by taking risks while building a successful e-commerce business, Forch and Grenier become man-of-action heroes who successfully merge the socially desirable aspects of rebel and breadwinner masculinity while avoiding the negative associations with each. Second, Huckberry positions itself as inherently masculine by co-opting a consumption constellation reflective of mainstream masculinity (Hirschman, 2016; Hirschman & Belk, 2014) and tweaking it to promote niche brands produced by craft labor. This tweak positions the Huckberry regime as more masculine, authentic, and durable than the mainstream, disposable, mass-produced alternatives. Third, Huckberry’s inclusion of multiple product categories and consumption practices spanning urban and outdoor environs creates an adaptable masculinity that empowers men to employ the adventuring lens, replete with its guarantees of freedom, authentic experience, and mental and physical challenges, to interpret both quotidian and extraordinary experiences. Lumbersexuals, therefore, stand in contrast to modern mountain men and other masculinities that exist within liminal spaces of fantastical consumer escape. Huckberry proposes lumbersexuality can be found squarely within and outside of modern society. Rather than providing symbolic resources necessary to construct an identity of “men who don’t fit in,” Huckberry provides

men with the symbolic resources necessary to construct themselves as superior to the emasculated men they encounter in the course of daily life.

In aggregate, Huckberry's taste regime invites men to engage in "active and continuous participation in the taste regime as a form of leisure entertainment while furnishing its participants with the knowledge and doings needed to practice taste" (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 913) across disparate fields of consumption and cultural contexts. Hence, it serves as a resource through which men gain cultural capital and status through marketplace interaction (Arsel & Bean, 2013). And as Schroeder and Zwick (2004) also note, Huckberry, like many other marketplace resources, represents a gendered space in which "advertising imagery helps provide consumer solutions to gender tensions and struggles over representing idealized masculine consumers, in particular the crisis of masculinity" (p. 23). Through this process, Huckberry not only promotes goods, doings, and practices emblematic of lumbersexuality but also legitimates the market as a central tool in men's attempts to accommodate their life under late capitalism. Similar to Nerlich's (1988) ideology of adventuring, Huckberry extends adventuring, including the systematic glorification and superiority of the adventurer, to less heroic and risky practices that allows entrepreneurs and weekend warriors, including emasculated office workers, to be celebrated and endowed with the same characteristics as extreme adventurers. While this is not to imply lumbersexuality represents compensatory consumption per se, we do argue that the Huckberry regime successfully nurtures a dependence on consumption, a self-serving, privileged act not necessarily authentic or adventurous, as an outlet to construct their gendered identity projects and address feelings of alienation and disempowerment that might otherwise drive men to rethink capitalism altogether.

Our analysis also raises some interesting parallels between the decline of hipsterism and the rise of lumbersexuality. We argue Huckberry represents a potential solution for men seeking to distance themselves from the devalued hipster marketplace myth (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). Although we recognize that lumbersexuality can be viewed in a similar negative light, it differentiates itself from hipsterism and conformity through its romanticizing the past and distancing itself from the modern. Unlike the hipster whose ironic consumption serves as a critique of mass culture (Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014), Huckberry instructs lumbersexuals to consume craft goods with earnestness, linking toughness and durability as oppositional to the disposability of mass production. Huckberry's taste regime, therefore, instructs men to express a masculinity signified by the authentic tools of unalienated male labor. Yet, rather than simply viewing this mode of consumption as reflective of "ornamental culture," where male utility is replaced by male aesthetics (Faludi, 2000, p. 34), our analysis suggests Huckberry's linkage of goods, doings, and meanings represents a fusion of ornamental culture with older versions of utility-based manhood. Within Huckberry's taste regime, goods must be both aesthetically pleasing and

useful, allowing men to display both their refined cultural capital and masculine productivity. In addition, Huckberry's lumbersexuality differentiates itself from the gender-neutral hipster taste regime through its gendered articulation. Women, in fact, are conspicuously absent from Huckberry. Although they make appearances as company employees and authors of Journal posts, products remain exclusively targeted to men with the exception of seasonal gifts. In fact, one of Huckberry's founders has even acknowledged that "in the long term, I believe a Huckberry for women will be amazing, but we have no immediate plans to do anything" targeting women (Kaplan, 2017, para. 19). Evacuated of both the presence of women and the feminine phoniness of mass consumerism, the site presents the world as a playground for the upwardly mobile man-of-action.

Although beyond the scope of the current study, it is appropriate to acknowledge that successful enactment of lumbersexuality, however, requires copious amounts of economic and cultural capital in contrast to the reality of turn of the century lumberjacks, who had little of either. While capital is typically reproduced across generations (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), new forms of cultural capital emerge in response to social change and upend existing hierarchies of status (Chaney, 2002). Despite Huckberry's ability to democratize lumbersexuality through its dissemination and legitimation of goods, doings, and meanings, there exists an internal hierarchy of lumbersexuals. Status may be disproportionately assigned to extreme adventurers, for example, rather than to weekend warriors. Although our textual analysis cannot capture the distinct strategies consumers utilize to interpret Huckberry's content (e.g., Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Scott, 1994), we acknowledge that men's ability to choose among a variety of hybrid masculinities is disproportionately available to the most privileged men, both economically and culturally. This reality, however, is blurred within Huckberry's democratized lumbersexual taste regime. Through its effort to promote a universal and accessible lumbersexuality, Huckberry obscures the very economic and cultural conditions of inequality that account for the underlying desire to escape the present that draws men to the lifestyle.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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