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Branding Masculinity: Tracing the Cultural Foundations of Brand Meaning

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We propose that branding is best understood as linked to deep cultural meanings. In the present study, depth interviews are conducted with two regional groups of men (Northeast and Southeast) concerning the cultural concept of masculinity. We identify a set of 7 product categories that are culturally allied with masculinity.

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Branding Masculinity: Tracing the Cultural Foundations of Brand Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most significant task of contemporary marketers is to position and manage brand meaning. However, present practice dictates that this effort begin with a comparison of brands believed to share positioning in the minds of targeted consumers. We propose that a more appropriate procedure is to begin with culture and work upward toward the brand level of meaning. We illustrate the utility of this procedure using the cultural concept of masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

As Twitchell (2004) points out, most of the 3000 business books published each year are about branding. The great majority of these books, as well as academic branding studies, focus their attention on one or more brands and then work outward from the brand to examine its competitive positioning, image in the minds of consumers, perceived attributes and benefits, and market share trajectory (e.g., Holt 2004). But should not brand meaning come from the marketplace, itself? Is not culture a brand's ultimate – and necessary – foundation (McCracken 1988)? In the present study, we begin with a key cultural construct – masculinity – upon which several current brands claim to be based, and work our way forward to identify which brands actually are seen by consumers as being masculine. In the process, we outline a new procedure for creating brand meaning, one that is anchored firmly in consumer culture.

Masculinity in Cultural Context

Definitions and constructions of masculinity vary within popular culture and across the social sciences (see e.g., Kimmel, Mean and Connell, 2004). For example, Shaw and Watson (p.1, 2011) comment, “American popular culture in the new millennium exemplifies how varied, open, relative, contradictory and fluid masculinities can be.” This instability in a core cultural construct can make positioning a brand as representing masculinity a difficult and ongoing task. And yet, there are cultural constancies underlying masculinity, as well. For example, Connell (2005) identifies the structural constant of white, heterosexual, western masculinity as *hegemony*, which asserts male gender superiority in society. This position is maintained through male control over *dominant societal institutions*, such as the military, government, and corporate organizations. White, heterosexual masculinity tends to marginalize other cultural forms of masculinity, such as those designated by race or sexual orientation (Kimmel 2012).

Kimmel (2012), like Connell (2005), also proposes that there are discernible constancies in the American cultural notion of masculinity – especially that embraced by white, middle and working class heterosexual males. These men often seem to attach their sense of self to that set of continuously circulating masculine stereotypes which have endured over time: e.g., GI Joe, the jock, the macho man, the knight in shining armor, action-hero man, the Marlboro Man, the cowboy, the outlaw (e.g., Holt and Thompson 2004; Mark and Pearson 2001; Reeser 2010, p.15). This is significant for marketers, because it reinforces the practicality of utilizing such iconic linkages to help create brand meaning (Mark and Pearson 2001).

The Male Body. There is general agreement within both popular culture and the social science literatures that while gender roles of masculinity (and femininity) are inculcated from an early age, the physical body (i.e., male, female) which one inhabits also exerts a large impact on being masculine or being feminine (Watson and

Shaw 2011). But the mind is a cultural mind and the body is a cultural body. That is, these stereotypes of masculinity are shaped by culture and differ across times and cultures. They are shaped by stories, media, and brands and reinforced by parents, teachers, and society. And they are encoded and expressed in the products and brands we buy, the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, and the foods we eat.

The Branding of Masculinity

Social science and popular culture commentary might have remained comfortably beyond the direct interest of marketers, if it had not been for the sea change in the cultural expressions of masculinity which occurred during the 1990s. Several observers noted that it was in the decades of the 1990s and 2000s that masculinity became commoditized and marketed (Kimmel 2012). Enter masculine-branded products; with the traditional occupational anchors of masculinity eroded, the opportunity was ripe for masculinity to be packaged and promoted (Holt and Thompson 2005; Kimmel 2012), just as femininity had been for a longer period of time (de Grazia 1996; Forty 1986; Kirkham 1996; Sparke 1995). Marketers advertised that one now could *purchase* masculinity – in the form of their brand (Buerkle 2011). As Faludi (1999) noted early on, “men are surrounded by a culture that encourages them to play almost no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones...[Manhood] is now displayed, not demonstrated” (quoted in Boudreau, 2011. p. 37).

But what, exactly, is the cultural masculinity that brands are tying themselves to? It is not enough merely to state or claim that one's brand is masculine or to park it next to an archetypal cowboy; there must be a public perception of resonance and authenticity, if the brand-masculinity linkage is to be accepted as valid. Before male consumers seeking to “drape themselves in masculinity” will accept given brands as masculine, there must be cultural evidence that the linkage is genuine. Below we present the results of a research project designed to examine the cultural foundations of the masculinity concept as seen by individual men. Our focus is on white, heterosexual men in the 17 to 35 year old demographic – perhaps the most prominent target for marketers seeking to establish brand masculinity.

Using interviews with men in two regional areas, we introduce an inductive procedure that moves from the conceptual level to the brand level over a series of stages. By so doing, we are not only able to trace the beliefs consumers hold concerning masculinity, but also to follow these through sets of activities, objects, product categories and ultimately, brands, themselves. The result is a clarified sense of how important, or unimportant, specific brands are to men's sense of masculinity and the identification of the product categories in which these brands are located.

Tracing Cultural Masculinity: Regional Realities

Because cultural conceptions of masculinity vary in different regions of the United States (Friend 2009; Watts 2008), data were collected over a two year period across two geographic areas: the urban Northeast and the rural Southeast. An interview guide was prepared and pre-tested in both areas (see Exhibit 1). Potential interviewees were identified through contacts at nearby businesses and through the university at which the lead investigator worked. The interviews were conducted by the lead investigator and a graduate student assistant in each area of the study.

We used the *constant comparative method* advocated by Glaser (1978, 1992), Corbin and Strauss (1990, 2008) and others (see

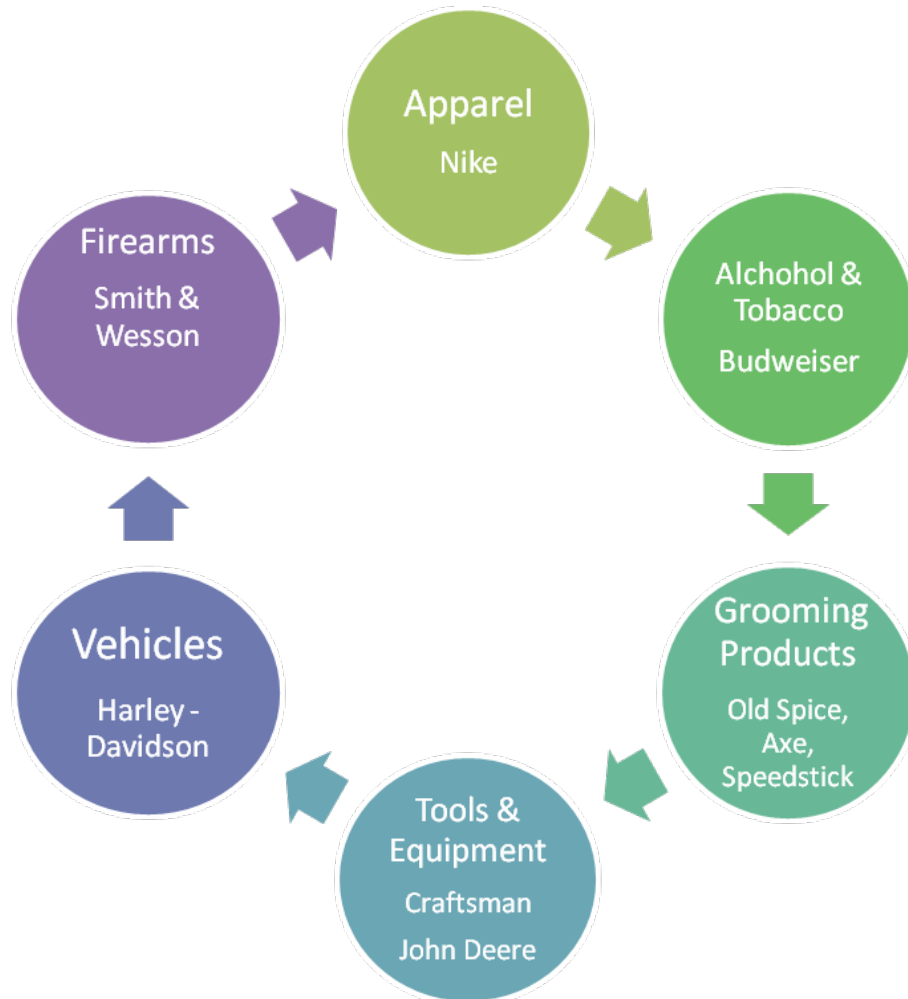
EXHIBIT 1

Interview Guide

1. What does masculinity mean to you?
2. What do you think masculinity means to your father?
3. What activities do you engage in that you think of as masculine?
4. What products do you think of as masculine?
5. What brands do you think of as masculine?

EXHIBIT 2

**Branding Masculinity
A Brand Constellation of Masculinity**



e.g., Birks and Mills 2011; Bowen 2008; Charmaz 2000; 2006). This meant that as interviews were conducted, each was read first as a unit and then compared to those already in-hand. This process continued until a stable set of concepts had emerged in response to each question. As initial concepts began to emerge, for example, moral characteristics such as ‘courage’ and ‘honor,’ these were then challenged using in-coming interviews and developed until a stable (i.e., saturated) set of meanings was arrived at. Conceptual structures were developed separately for the Northeast/Urban and Southeast/Rural

regions. In total, 36 interviews were conducted in the Southeast and 31 in the Northeast.

Interviews were either tape recorded and transcribed or recorded in field notes by the interviewer. While all respondents were promised anonymity, few actually requested it. The respondents were white, heterosexual males between the ages of 17 and 35 and ranged from high school students to professionals. In both regions, the socioeconomic status ranged from blue collar to professional; however the Northeast regional sample exhibited somewhat higher educational attainment and socioeconomic status, which is demo-

graphically characteristic of this region, generally (United States Census, 2010).

As can be seen from Exhibit 1, the interviews were designed to start with the concept of masculinity – as viewed by the participant – and then extend the discussion to the individual’s father, activities, and possessions until, finally, the respondent was asked to name brands he perceived to be masculine. By structuring the discussion in this way, we were able to generate material related to branding-as-embedded-within-masculinity, rather than beginning with a brand or brands and working outward toward masculinity. Additionally, by comparing two diverse geographic regions, we are able to obtain a much clearer picture of which brands are generally seen as masculine in American culture, versus those which represent this concept only on a regional basis.

Further, we were able to determine if the participant believed there had been a shift in what masculinity meant between the present generation and that of his father, an important piece of information for marketers who might wish to appeal to both the older and younger age cohorts in their advertising. Using this methodology, the brand-centric focus of prior marketing studies is avoided and a more accurate view of a given brand’s ability to represent the cultural concept – in this case, masculinity – is achieved.

When asked to talk about “What does masculinity mean to you?” the male respondents in the northeast/urban region placed emphasis on actions and their bodies to some extent, but placed *primary* emphasis on their mental and personality traits. This would seem consistent with social science research indicating that male success in corporate institutions requires mental traits of decision-making and rationality (see e.g., Kimmel 2012). The actions mentioned centered on athletics (e.g., good at sports), household repairs, and some manual labor (e.g., “good with hands”). The bulk of perceived masculinity for these northeastern urban men is seen to reside in one’s mind and demeanor. Notably, *no objects* and *no brands* were mentioned as representing masculinity within the northeastern interviewee set.

The structure of the southeast/rural respondents’ discussion was centered around the *traditional* conception of masculine action (e.g., Twitchell 2006). As can be seen from Exhibit 3, those interviewed in the southeastern/rural region emphasized being a breadwinner/good provider, and patriarchy (i.e., the subordination of women), which are traditional aspects of masculinity (Kimmel 2012). Other regional differences included a greater emphasis on being a risk-taker, having courage, territoriality, and individuality. This, we propose, is akin to Holt and Thompson’s Rebel model (2005) and consistent with the largely agricultural and manual labor economy of rural areas (Friend 2009).

The activities named also varied. While the Northeast and Southeast regions overlapped in citing *physical labor* as masculine, the Southeastern/rural respondents additionally named “eating meat”, “shooting guns”, “heterosexuality” and even impolite behaviors, e.g., farting, as representing masculinity. Further, the Southern men named objects -- raw steaks, cold beer, cars -- as representing masculinity and even named one brand: Grizzly tobacco (a chewing tobacco/dip). Note that this is the only brand to have emerged in this portion of our data.

Thus, from the data discussed so far, we can conclude that regional differences in the meaning of masculinity *are present* in contemporary American culture, and that specific brands are rarely used to anchor masculinity at the conceptual level.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

We next asked both regional groups of men what they believed masculinity meant to their fathers. Here we were interested in learning if the present generation of young men believed there were shifts in masculine ideology from the previous generation to their own. They did. Among the northeastern/urban respondents, the present generation believed their fathers were more emotionally restricted, dominant (and domineering) and more insistent at being “the head of the house” and the “breadwinner,” than they themselves are. One brand, a BMW automobile, was mentioned as representing masculinity for this older generation of men.

Southeastern/rural men saw their fathers as placing more emphasis on “keeping one’s word”, providing for their families and being physically strong, than did those from the northeast. And once again we see evidence of patriarchy and gender dominance as characterizing southern/rural masculinity (Friend 2009). As one respondent put it, to be masculine in his father’s generation was “to be a good father and husband, but not focus too much on the wife’s wants.”

The contrasting prior generational masculinities of these two regions are brought into clearer contrast by the two extended quotes below:

“From what I recall, my father would most likely define his masculinity by how many girlfriends he could maintain at one time, or what kind of BMW he drove. But most importantly, it was not what his family thought of him, but more so what his peers thought.” Northeast/urban (Michael, age 33).

“He was a football player in high school and began working in the coal mines when he was 17 years old. He’s close to 50 now and still works in those mines. My father was the hardest of workers; he worked hurt, sick, and tired...He instilled a sense of accountability in me. He emphasized being truthful...Winning was huge to him, almost as much as being tough...He taught me that crying...would emasculate me...I would be less of a man.” Southeast/rural (Robert, age 24).

The form of masculinity we found in the Northeast, even in the prior generation, seems to express a greater orientation toward the public display of success; while that in the Southeast is grounded more deeply in stoicism and self-denial.

WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE MASCULINE?

Here we find similarities across the two regions. For example, both groups saw “hanging out” (often at bars) with male friends as masculine activities; Kimmel (2012) terms this homo-sociality and views it as a cornerstone of American masculinity. Both groups also mention “pursuing women” as a masculine activity; this is also mentioned by researchers as a characteristic of American masculinity (Kimmel 2012). Participating in sports such as football, hockey, soccer, golfing, boxing/fighting/martial arts, weight-lifting/working out was seen as masculine by men in both groups.

However, there were some subtle, but telling, regional differences. For example, the northeast/urban men saw *watching* sports as masculine and engaging in “intellectual gaming”, such as fantasy football, as masculine, whereas these were not mentioned by men in the southeastern/rural region. In contrast, men in the rural South named car racing, bowling, wrestling and 4-wheeling as masculine pursuits. From a branding perspective, these regional variations in masculinity could be significant. Men in the southeast seem to view physically demanding *participation* as more indicative of masculin-

ity, whereas men in the northeast value *knowledge* about sporting activities.

The more “rugged” orientation of southeastern rural masculinity is also reflected in the many mentions of *hunting* as a masculine pursuit (an activity not present in any of the northeastern interviews). Southern men also appeared to more highly value mechanical/automotive/construction projects as indicators of masculinity. Further, two other important regional occupational variations are present. First, men in the southeast/rural area named criminal justice/police work and serving in the military as signifiers of masculinity, whereas those in the northeast/urban area did not. . Notably the Southeast is markedly higher in military enlistments as a percentage of the population than is the Northeast (Watts 2008). Second, “dipping” – the use of chewing tobacco products – was mentioned by several respondents as a masculine activity. Tobacco usage rates are higher in the Southeast than the Northeast, the region being the source of most US-grown tobacco (Watts 2008), and it is interesting to note that chewing tobacco use (as opposed to smoking cigarettes) is seen as uniquely masculine there.

These regional overlaps and variations suggest that branding efforts may need to be modulated regionally depending upon the product category. Also important is the fact that *no specific brands* were mentioned as signifiers of masculinity by either regional group in the context of activities.

PRODUCTS BELIEVED TO BE MASCULINE

When respondents were asked to discuss “products you think of as masculine”, the results yielded several brand names, some of which were common to both regions, while others were unique to one region. This is managerially important because, ideally, a national brand seeking to position itself as “masculine” would want this image to be spread across all regions. Further, regional masculine brands should be of interest to marketers because they likely are linked to key behaviors or attitudes indigenous to the area. Marketers seeking to enter such a regional market could benefit from researching these brands and gaining an understanding of their appeal.

Notably, there were some significant variations across the northeast/urban and southeast/rural regions in the product categories deemed to be masculine. For example, both groups of men named “beer” as masculine (and, indeed, virtually all beer advertising targets men); however, southeastern men also named “dip” (chewing tobacco) as masculine, indicating that both product categories were seen as ways to display one’s manliness.

Vehicles viewed as masculine also varied by region. The northeastern/urban men saw “cars”, especially sports cars and SUVs, as representing masculinity. Jeeps, Corvettes, and Mustangs were frequently mentioned. But the southeastern/rural men preferred pickup trucks as masculine vehicles, naming the Chevy Tahoe, specifically, and also the Mustang sports car (as did the northeastern men).

Both groups of men saw consumer electronics as being masculine; for example, the X-box was cited in both regions. However, the southeastern/rural respondents named a greater variety of electronics, ranging from laptop computers to GPS equipment. It is possible that this group’s *general mechanical orientation* may play a larger role in their masculinity and that they are more attuned to electronic gadgetry (Friend 2009)

Within both groups of men, *Old Spice* deodorant was spontaneously mentioned as a masculine grooming product. This suggests that the *Old Spice* marketing communications campaign, “Smell like a man, man”, has been successful in creating a cross-regional positioning as masculine. Of interest is the fact that Tim McGraw cologne was named by an interviewee in the northeast as representing

masculinity. McGraw is a country-western singer from the southeastern region who typically wears cowboy apparel when performing. The cowboy, of course, is one of the “circulating icons of cultural masculinity” (Cawelti 1984) we mentioned earlier.

The most powerful variation between the two regions was the very large emphasis placed on *weapons* – especially guns – by the men in the southeastern/rural region. As can be seen in Exhibit Nine, southeastern men “skewed” toward hunting activities, not only in mentioning rifles and shotguns, but also by describing “coon stretchers” and “de-fleshers,” both instruments used to field-dress animals, as masculine tools. They also were generally more oriented toward outdoor and wilderness pursuits, which is logical, given their rural environment (and see also Watts 2008).

MASCULINE BRANDS

Toward the end of each interview, participants were asked what *brands* they thought of as being masculine. This was the first point at which the interviewer explicitly mentioned the term “brand,” although as we have in seen earlier discussion, some men spontaneously brought specific brand names into the conversation. What is compelling about the responses to this query is not only the brand names that were mentioned, but also the *product categories* into which they fell. Across both regional groups of men, brands in the categories of *weapons, vehicles, tools, media, grooming, apparel, alcohol* and *tobacco* were named. This provides support for the “masculinity-as-consumption” thesis (e.g., Faludi 1999; Kimmel 2012) mentioned earlier. Men believe that what they wear, what they drink, what they drive and what they watch are indicative of their masculinity. In essence, these product categories form the marketplace sources for the purchase and display of one’s masculinity. Each category, and its brand anchors, are discussed below:

Weapons. Weapons, especially guns and rifles, have long been considered a masculine arena of consumption (e.g., Souter 2012). Notably, men in both the northeast/urban and southeast/rural regions named *Smith & Wesson* as a brand of gun representing masculinity. This is likely linked to the several *Dirty Harry* motion pictures starring Clint Eastwood which popularized the Smith & Wesson handgun (see Souter 2012). A comparison of Exhibits 10 and 11 shows that several gun brands were mentioned by men in the southeast as masculine, e.g., *Barretta, Winchester*. Weaponry seems to play a larger role in defining masculinity in this rural region.

Vehicles. Perhaps no motor vehicle is more strongly associated with masculinity in the United States than the *Harley Davidson* brand of motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Notably, although none of the respondents actually owned a motorcycle, several cited this brand as representing masculinity. A mountain bike brand, *Trek*, was mentioned in the northeastern/urban sample; however among the southeastern men, the pick-up truck, especially *Ford* and *Dodge* brands, and “muscle” cars, for example, *Mustang* and *Camaro*, were more commonly mentioned.

Tools and Equipment. The *Sears* brand of *Craftsman* tools was named as representing masculinity by both regional groups of men. This suggests that Sears has been effective in anchoring this brand in American men’s cultural conceptions of manliness. Similarly, *John Deere* was also prominent as a perceived masculine brand for both groups. Possessing these brands therefore is believed to ‘signal’ one’s masculinity to both the self and others (Belk 1988).

Apparel. Among the apparel brands named spontaneously during the interviews, only *Nike* was present in both the northeast/urban and southeastern/rural regional cultures as symbolizing masculinity. This is a strong testimony to Nike’s advertising and other marketing efforts. Even though they have aggressively targeted

women as well, Nike has succeeded in becoming an *anchor brand* for the concept of masculinity. Notably, specific apparel brands seem to hold a larger place in the consciousness of southeastern/rural men as signifying masculinity. Only four apparel brands were named in the northeastern sample, while the southeastern sample named sixteen discrete brands. Apparently, in the southeastern U.S., clothing really does “make the man.”

Grooming Products Three brands of men’s deodorant – *Old Spice*, *Axe*, and (Gillette) *Speed Stick* – were named in discussion by men in both regions. The current Old Spice advertising theme of “Smell like a Man, Man” was even cited by some respondents. What is notable about this is that these three brands, though promoting what could be considered a convenience product, have succeeded in placing themselves as anchoring points for the American cultural conception of masculinity. This suggests that marketing does have potency in shaping social belief systems. There was a time when smelling natural or sweaty would have been perceived as masculine.

Alcohol and Tobacco. Masculinity has long been associated with the consumption of liquor and beer (Kimmel 2012), as well as tobacco (Kimmel 2012) in the US. Across our regional informants, however, only the *Budweiser* brand was seen as a consistent symbol of masculinity. Northeastern/urban men considered *Marlboro* to be a ‘manly’ brand of tobacco, whereas in the Southeast, *Copenhagen* tobacco – a chewing tobacco brand – was named. There is clearly a strong, pervasive linkage in the southeast between “being a man” and using chewing tobacco products; one that likely is cause for public health concern. Notably the southeastern/rural sample also viewed two soft drinks as signifying masculinity: *Gatorade* and *Mountain Dew*. Although Holt (2004) notes the success of Pepsi in representing Mountain Dew as a national youth culture beverage, in the southeastern region (its place of origin), the brand remains seen as masculine.

Media and Professional Sports

Professional sports associations, such as the National Hockey League and “major league baseball,” were named as masculine brands by the men in the northeastern/urban sample, but not by those in the southeast/rural region. This is significant, because it suggests men in the latter region may be less attuned to organized, ‘professional’ spectacles of masculinity, and more oriented toward localized, on-the-ground sources of masculinity. Supporting this thesis is the absence of mentions of NASCAR by the southern men, despite the fact that the Southeast is the origin point for stockcar racing (Hirschman 2003) and men in this region display a strong affinity with motor vehicles, as already noted. Male-oriented television channels, such as ESPN and Spike-TV, were spontaneously named by our samples, but none were common to both samples. Thus, men in these two regions do not seem to be drawing a strong sense of masculinity from television programming, despite the earlier quote from Kimmel (2012).

Masculinity: The Brand Constellation

In Exhibit 2, we show the six product categories which consistently were drawn-upon by our respondents to construct their sense of being masculine, together with the specific brands believed to convey masculinity to the user. To our knowledge this is the first marketing study to work from a cultural concept to the brand level of consumer consciousness. In so doing, we have avoided the common error of brand-centrism, whereby a brand or set of brands is used to anchor the inquiry, and consumer input is developed from the brands outward (Holt 2004). The brand-centric research approach does not – and cannot – elicit cultural level meanings that are the keystone to successful

brand management. By instead working from a core cultural concept toward brands that represent the concept in consumers’ perceptions, we gain direct access to the larger structure of meaning in which brands are embedded.

In the present case, what have we learned about masculinity and branding? First, we have learned that men (at least in the urban northeast and rural southeast regions) draw meaning from six product categories to construct a sense of masculinity; these are Firearms, Tools & Equipment, Vehicles, Alcohol, Tobacco, Apparel and Grooming Products. These product categories may therefore be said to compose the consumption constellation from which masculinity is constructed. These brands are the objects supplied by the marketplace that enable men to present themselves *as men*.

That each product category has at least one brand exemplar as its “anchor” is also of great importance to marketing managers and researchers. It means that at least one company in each product category has positioned and communicated its brand to the marketplace with such potency that the brand has come to represent culturally the original concept upon which it was marketed. In essence, these brands have become metaphors for masculinity. Future research would be well-directed toward examining the marketing history of the nine brands found to instantiate the masculinity prototype. Brand repositioning across gender lines can, however, take place, as seen with Marlboro cigarettes and Right Guard deodorant, for example.

Limitations. The present study is limited both by its sample and method. The sample included only men from urban northeastern areas and rural southeastern areas of the United States. While these areas are the most typical for their regions, it is possible that rural northeastern men and urban southeastern men may deviate from the present findings. The Midwest, Southwest and Northwestern regions were not examined and, hence, additional research is required to see if the same brand constellation composing masculinity is found in these regions.

Further, the method employed, depth interviews, does not provide a quantified data set. It is possible that nationwide sampling could result in metric weights for the relative importance of each of the product category components found to compose the branded level of masculinity. Yet as desirable as this may seem to some, such an approach would shift the research focus away from the concept, itself, and toward a set of metrics. In our view, this might hamper the most valuable lesson to be learned from the present study and its method: masculinity, ultimately, does not dwell in a brand, a set of brands, or product categories, but rather in the culture and minds of men. Marketing managers and theorists, we believe, would do well to respect the concept, first and foremost.

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