



2015

# “I’m Here to Do Business. I’m Not Here to Play Games.” Work, Consumption, and Masculinity in *Storage Wars*

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## Recommended Citation

Rademacher, Mark A. and Kelly, Casey R., "“I’m Here to Do Business. I’m Not Here to Play Games.” Work, Consumption, and Masculinity in *Storage Wars*" (2015). *Scholarship and Professional Work - Communication*. 91.  
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Article

# “I’m Here to Do Business. I’m Not Here to Play Games.” Work, Consumption, and Masculinity in *Storage Wars*

Journal of Communication Inquiry  
0(0) 1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/0196859915580349

jci.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

This essay examines the first season of *Storage Wars* and suggests the program helps mediate the putative crisis in American masculinity by suggesting that traditional male skills are still essential where knowledge supplants manual labor. We read representations of “men at work” in traditionally “feminine” consumer markets, as a form of masculine recuperation situated within the culture of White male injury. Specifically, *Storage Wars* appropriates omnivorous consumption, thrift, and collaboration to fit within the masculine repertoire of self-reliance, individualism, and competition. Thus, the program adapts hegemonic masculinity by showcasing male auction bidders adeptly performing feminine consumer practices. Whether the feminine is assimilated into the male body or represented as its Other, we contend that the expressions of masculinity in *Storage Wars* render women obsolete and subjugated in the marketplaces of the 21st-century economy and contribute to the mediation of the contemporary crisis in masculinity.

## Keywords

masculinity, consumption, reality television, gender and media

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“I see a foot pedal for a B3, I see a bench for a B3, I see the Leslie speakers that usually go with a B3. But I do not see the physical organ. So now I’m gambling that it’s in there.” (Dave Hester, Ep. 1)

And with that declaration, Dave Hester goes to work. His job: to identify a wide range of consumer goods, ranging from tools to household goods to collectibles, by sight alone; utilize accumulated commodity price knowledge; assess the relative value of the goods; and resell the goods at a profit. His office: the gritty, industrial storage facilities that dot Southern California. It is a cutthroat and hyper-competitive industry, where auction bidders take significant financial risks in an attempt to outbid one another and “win” the most desirable units and the hidden treasures within. The current treasure is a unit that may contain a Hammond B3 organ, possibly worth \$7,000. Dave ultimately wins the unit with an \$800 bid. During his postpurchase inspection, he realizes, “[Bleep] Oh, man. I don’t think that’s a Hammond B3. [Bleep] That’s not good. That’s not what we were hoping for” (Ep. 1). In that instance, Dave’s potential \$6,200 profit evaporates. Yet, in a fortuitous turn of events, the unit also contains a vintage baseball card collection estimated at a thousand dollars: “This gives me excitement and energy to go out there tomorrow and find another score. This is what it’s about!” (Ep. 1).

It is this quest for hidden valuable treasures and unexpected outcomes that are at the core of *Storage Wars*, A&E Network’s popular reality TV (RTV) program. The program documents four working-class auction bidders—Darrell Sheets, Dave Hester, Jarrod Schulz and his partner Brandi Passante, and Barry Weiss—who attempt to make a living buying and selling used goods. Each episode follows a formulaic structure, capturing the relatively repetitive day-to-day activities of bidders’ chosen profession. Much like working-class laborers in more traditional manufacturing jobs, the show documents bidders arriving at the storage facilities (the job site), milling around as they wait for the auction to begin (the start of their shift), attempting to perform at a superior level (assessing value, winning units), assessing their performance (evaluating the outcome of the bidding, the value of goods in the unit), and clocking out when the shift is over (leaving the auction site). Episodes conclude with bidders taking items of interest for experts’ appraisals and the narrator’s accounting of bidders’ total profits or losses. This formula is clearly attractive to television audiences; *Storage Wars* was A&E’s top-rated nonfiction show in its premier season, 2010, averaging 2.4 million viewers (Della Cava, 2011), has grown into a network staple currently airing its fifth season (with a sixth season in the works), and has resulted in four spin-off series—*Storage Wars: Texas*, *Storage Wars: New York*, *Barry’d Treasure*, and *Brandi & Jarrod: Married to the Job*. It continues to deliver strong ratings even despite a lawsuit by Dave Hester implying producers placed valuable goods in units to increase the drama in the program (Johnson, 2013).

The emergence of *Storage Wars* coincides with a general shift in American society away from a manufacturing to a service and knowledge economy. RTV programming serves as one tool through which audiences are acclimated to the rules and imperatives of this new economy (Corner, 2002; Kelly, 2012; Ouellette & Hay, 2008) and how everyday people continue to adapt to new circumstances (Hendershot, 2009). As such, programs like *Storage Wars* contribute to the definition of contemporary American masculinity, particularly as it pertains to the gendered division of labor. Recent trends in RTV have expanded its repertoire from personal and professional make over programming, competitive game shows, and celebrity documentaries to shows that both valorize traditional male working-class labor (*American Chopper*, *Ax Men*, *Breaking Boston*, *Deadliest Catch*, *Dirty Jobs*, *Gold Rush*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Pimp My Ride*, and *Prospectors*) and introduce spectators to the new realities of a consumer economy (*American Pickers*, *Auction Kings*, *Barter Kings Extreme Couponing*, *Final Offer*, *Market Warriors*, *Oddities*, *Pawnstars*, *Storage Wars*). While the former positively portray the kind of blue-collar labor that has been steadily on the decline in the United States, the latter adapts a masculine conception of work to markets in which knowledge, consumption, and service are economic necessities. RTV, consequently, now documents various archetypes of sustainable manhood adapted to the American service and knowledge economies, which represent a tentative resolution to the market conditions and social forces used to sustain the myth of male displacement.

In this essay, we examine the first season of *Storage Wars* and suggest the program, specifically, and RTV, generally, helps mediate the putative crisis in American masculinity by suggesting that traditional male skills are still essential where knowledge supplants manual labor. We read representations of “men at work” in traditionally “feminine” consumer markets (thrift stores, yard sales, grocery markets), as a form of masculine recuperation situated within the culture of White male injury (Robinson, 2000). RTV is a particularly insightful medium for this analysis because it brings audiences into spaces of labor and introduces them to the ways men get by in the new economy (Carroll, 2008). While the resolution to masculinity in crisis can take the form of remasculinization (Jeffords, 1989, 1994), it does not necessarily have to be expressed in a nostalgic appeal to an older version of masculinity (Bederman, 1995; Robinson, 2000). One response has been to appropriate and incorporate the feminine into the male experience to contain the threat of female power (Modleski, 1991). Specifically, *Storage Wars* appropriates values within new labor markets like omnivorous consumption knowledge, thrift, and collaboration to fit within the masculine repertoire of self-reliance, rugged individualism, and competition. Thus, the program adapts hegemonic masculinity to the auction context and showcases men publicly performing their knowledge and adeptness at the practices of a feminine consumer culture. Whether the feminine is assimilated into the male body or represented as its Other, we contend that the expressions of

masculinity in *Storage Wars* render women obsolete and subjugated in the marketplaces of the 21st-century economy and contribute to the mediation of the contemporary crisis in masculinity associated with the decline in traditional male labor.

## Masculinity and Consumption

In critical analyses of masculinity on television, RTV in particular, many scholars have approached consumptive practices as predominantly leisure-based activities that express men's individual lifestyles (Carroll, 2008; Clarkson, 2005; Moisiu, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013). Yet, the emergence of thrift-based reality programming depicts male consumption as a form of wage-earning labor in an individualized professional context (Rademacher, in press). To attend to this changing dynamic, we analyze how representations of consumption as work augment conceptions of hegemonic masculinity through valorized portrayals of men's labor in the postmanufacturing knowledge and service economy. Our purpose is to bring together literature on how RTV has sustained hegemonic masculinity throughout its putative decline with research on how discourses of consumption and work acclimate audiences with the imperatives of a so-called feminized consumer-based economy.

To begin, hegemonic masculinity is traditionally conceptualized as involving characteristics such as courageousness, risk-taking, rugged individualism, and the ability to withstand or inflict pain (e.g., Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 2005; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kimmel, 1996). These characteristics manifest via behaviors and social practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), especially those involving the gendered divisions between the masculine public sphere of paid work and the feminine private sphere of unpaid domestic work. Despite the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity, multiple fluid and adapting masculinities exist in any given social-historic moment (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005) and are relationally structured in a hierarchy of masculinities ranging from the hegemonic masculine ideal to multiple subordinated masculinities (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This hierarchy is constantly in flux as masculinities struggle for legitimacy via the constant negotiation in contradistinction from other masculinities and, inevitably, various models of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848).

Within the current sociohistoric context, traditional hegemonic masculinity appears increasingly antiquated and less meaningful for contemporary men. Emergent masculinities that allow men to navigate between the historically separate spheres of paid work and domestic work (Sayer, 2005) and embrace consumption are increasingly viewed as more attainable and fulfilling options for contemporary men (Belk & Costa, 1998; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). For instance, the "man-of-action hero" model of masculinity, which merges desirable aspects of "breadwinner" and "rebel" models of

masculinity, has recently emerged as a powerful contemporary masculine archetype (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Likewise, men are forming domestic masculinities based on consumption activities within the home (Moisio et al., 2013) and on traditional feminine behaviors such as child rearing (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). While it is possible to read the role of consumption within these emergent masculinities as compensatory in nature, a means to cope with men's increased alienation from the sphere of production (Belk, 1995; Thébaud, 2010), such a reading misrepresents the ways in which masculinities operate in everyday life (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Moisio et al., 2013). Masculinity and consumption are inherently linked within a consumer culture and pervade all aspects of contemporary life; with consumption practices and products—including subcultural, dramatic, and everyday consumption—representing the “semiotic raw ingredients” men utilize to construct their identities (Holt & Thompson, 2004, p. 427). Despite the integral role of consumption within identity construction, hegemonic masculinity remains a cultural reference, with certain consumption practices and products associated with specific genders. Shopping, for instance, remains an activity coded as feminine (Fiske, 1989; Miller, 1998) that men strive to avoid, except for specific male realms such as automotive, alcohol, and do-it-yourself (DIY) (Miller, 1998) or “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1982; see also Belk, 1995). Emergent masculinities based on such female-coded activities, however, struggle for legitimacy within the dominant masculine hierarchy (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013).

This brief review illustrates that masculinity does, indeed, represent a fluid, sociocultural construct that is expressed in multiple dramatic and creative ways in a consumer culture. While a stereotypical hegemonic masculinity may exist, contemporary men are cultivating and expressing hybridized masculinities that span binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, public/private, and work/leisure and are reliant on subcultural, fantastical, and everyday consumption practices across a wide range of social spheres. Yet, these multiple masculinities exist within a social hierarchy that continues to reflect hegemonic masculinity as the ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We agree, however, with Moisio et al. (2013) that despite the contributions of extant literature, a need exists for research that extends these theoretical foundations to examinations of popular culture representations of contemporary masculinities. Such research does exist (e.g., Clarkson, 2005; Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009); however, we suggest extant literature neglects consumption contexts in which consumption represents a profession rather than a leisure activity. That is, contexts in which consumption represents the primary way men earn a living. We posit that *Storage Wars* represents a popular culture representation of such a context. As such, we examine *Storage Wars* to gain insight into the ways RTV may mediate the contemporary crisis in masculinity associated with the decline in traditional male labor.

We focus on RTV programming because it offers a documentary mode of representation that purports to depict everyday life as it happens (Corner, 2002;

Kelly, 2012). Although it is intensely mediated, framed, and edited to produce the narrative coherence of scripted television, RTV invites audiences to view the real-life circumstances of the new economy and show how everyday people are continuing to adapt to new circumstances (Hendershot, 2009). Ouellette and Hay (2008) contend that RTV also instructs audiences about the rules of postwelfare citizenship throughout the decline of civil society and the ascendance of neoliberal economics. Not coincidentally, the behaviors that succeed in an era of small government (self-reliance, industriousness, individualism, laissez-faire competition, private initiative) are the same ones valorized in most RTV programming. Thus, RTV offers putatively practical but fundamentally ideologically advice for negotiating new social and economic circumstances. Specifically, we suggest as RTV turns to representations of service labor and knowledge economies, it also reaffirms that masculine skills retain their value as knowledge supplants manual labor. This analysis contributes to RTV studies by showing how the values that accompany governing at a distance adapt the kind of personal initiative and industriousness of blue-collar labor to what are coded as feminine labor markets.

### **Constructing Consumption as Work**

Men often avoid consumptive acts, with the exception of male-dominated realms (Miller, 1998; Moisiso et al., 2013) or forms of “serious leisure” that involve a work-like component (Stebbins, 1982; see also Belk, 1995). As such, a primary goal of *Storage Wars* is to construct auction bidding as a legitimate form of working-class male labor rather than as a frivolous female activity. To do so, the program relies on challenging existing binary oppositions associated with consumption, beginning with the juxtaposition of the industrial setting of storage auctions with the clean, modern, and stylized cathedrals of consumption (Ritzer, 2010). *Storage Wars*’ primary setting is the bleak, industrial concrete, and cinder block environment of the urban and suburban storage facilities that populate Southern California. This setting mirrors the familiar but increasingly rare American industrial and manufacturing facilities where men engaged in manual labor and, as such, is presented as the antithesis to sites of nonproductive consumption such as big box stores and shopping malls. While bidders are also shown frequenting retail sites in the course of their work, for instance when they seek appraisals of purchased goods, such depictions represent a minor percentage of a given episode. Even depictions of bidders working within their own thrift stores—stocking shelves, selling goods—are rare. Even more rare are depictions of bidders at home, the epitome of the private, domestic sphere of leisure. Through this juxtaposition, *Storage Wars* constructs storage auctions as a place where bidders work removed from any potential connection to leisure and domestic activities.

This juxtaposition is further reinforced by the program’s focus on four White male bidders and their stereotypical working-class appearance and behaviors.



Darrell, Dave, and Jarrod best illustrate this ideal archetype. Darrell and Jarrod are relatively muscular men with facial hair and tattoos who wear jeans or shorts, t-shirts, and baseball hats. Dave's dress is a bit more evocative of traditional working-class laborers' uniforms—a black button down shirt, shorts, and baseball hat emblazoned with the name of his retail outlet, Newport Consignment Gallery. Beyond their appearances, all bidders are often shown driving pick-up trucks, speaking colloquially (using words such as “gonna”), dropping profanities with relative frequency, and in some instances losing their tempers and threatening physical violence (e.g., Ep. 10 and 18). They are also shown joking with one another and simply goofing off. For instance, after leaving an auction empty handed, Barry comments that he plans to spend the rest of the day at a bridge game hosted by some senior citizens in the area, adding “And you know bridge, it's a lot like sex, if you don't have a great partner you better have a good hand” (Ep. 7). Finally, bidders are frequently shown engaging in physical labor, often adding descriptive comments such as “We're going in there and get our hands dirty” (Jarrod, Ep. 3) and “I'm moving refrigerators and hair salon stations and it's not easy [laughs]. This is dangerous work” (Barry, Ep. 4). In aggregate, the bidders' appearance and behaviors reflect the American ideal of the untamed rebel who refuses to conform to the rules and regulations associated with (feminine) office work.

*Storage Wars* also explicitly juxtaposes auction bidding with forms of leisure through bidders' constant references to their activities as “work” and as a “business.” As Darrell mentions, he takes his bidding seriously: “I'm here to do business. I'm not here to play games” (Ep. 2). Dave expresses a similar sentiment, declaring, “Lazy people don't get far in this business. You gotta be active, you gotta get up early, you gotta do your homework” (Ep. 12). Embedded in these statements is a complex contrast between bidding and the associations between games and childish, frivolous leisure. Unlike games and other leisure activities, bidding is work because it requires mental and physical energy and generates bidders' primary income. As Stebbins (1982, pp. 254–255) suggests, the ability to generate one's primary income from an activity is one characteristic that distinguishes work from leisure. Bidders, in fact, make specific references to how bidding is different from collecting, a specific form of serious leisure (Belk, 1995). Dave comments, “A lot of people are collectors. They like to hoard the best stuff. That's not me. The only thing I like to collect is Benjamins” (Ep. 1). While bidders do admit they get a thrill from auction bidding—Darrell describes it as his “addiction” (Ep. 1), Jarrod enjoys “the excitement of the gamble” (Ep. 14)—their focus on profits does not tarnish their activities, such as it might for collectors (Belk, 1995, pp. 94–95). In fact, profits represent their primary motive for bidding: It is essential for their economic survival. The bidder/collector distinction also constructed through bidders' limited attachment to the items they find in units. As Darrell comments during a tour of his family's home, the only time in Season 1 where a bidder is shown at home, “If you see something you



like, I'll make you a price on it" (Ep. 1). Bidders value goods for their potential monetary value alone, unlike collectors who often value them for their meaning or identity-related benefits (Belk, 1995). By emphasizing the seriousness and profit-generating ability of auction bidding, *Storage Wars* distinguishes this activity from forms of leisure, further establishing it as a legitimate form of working-class male labor rather than a leisure activity conducted outside the sphere of work.

## **Masculinizing the Feminine**

It is within this context that Darrell, Dave, Jarrod, and Barry embrace the underlying mantra of "the man-of-action hero;" "with vision, guts, and a can-do spirit," anything is possible (Holt & Thompson, 2004, pp. 428–429). Through auction bidding, bidders embody this contemporary masculine archetype and avoid the constraints of other forms of labor within a service and knowledge economy. Specifically, bidding serves as a display of bidders' respective abilities to balance individual autonomy with collective duty, success with conformity, adventure with responsibility—but in a fashion unique to their consumption-based workplace. This unique working-class, consumption-based version of man-of-action hero masculinity requires that bidders retain various attributes of hegemonic masculinity—competitiveness, risk-taking, domination—while integrating skills, knowledge, and attitudes traditionally coded as feminine—household management skills, commodity price knowledge, and an ability to assess the relative value of consumer packaged goods (Fiske, 1989). Within *Storage Wars*, bidders are knowledgeable and competent consumers, exhibiting a specific form of sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1996) tailored to their unique profession.

Bidders' knowledge extends well beyond traditional male realms of consumption, spanning numerous cultural boundaries: masculine and feminine, high- and low-class, utilitarian and aesthetic. Barry and Darrell, for example, quickly identify the potential value of a unit containing what they describe as "fragile" goods including antiques, china, and "grandma's jewelry" (Ep. 6). The diversity of goods bidders purchase, appraise, and resell is truly staggering and demands bidders possess an encyclopedic knowledge of goods and their value. Bidders' ability to identify and value goods does not, however, indicate they possess high levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998) or cultural omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). Rather, it indicates their ability to develop the subcultural capital necessary to perform their job. In practical terms, robust consumption knowledge delivers a competitive advantage at auction, preventing bidders from making what Darrell describes as "rookie mistakes" (Ep. 7) such as overbidding on units, discarding valuable items unknowingly, or selling them below market value.

The importance of acquiring this subcultural capital becomes apparent by examining the challenges Jarrod faces as a result of his "newbie" status. Jarrod

has only been bidding full-time for two years—in contrast, Darrell and Dave have been bidding for close to 30 years—and his previous career in the mortgage industry did little to develop auction-relevant skills. And because skills are acquired through informal means, Jarrod must learn through trial and error. During the first season, Jarrod appears most comfortable bidding on units containing industrial tools, sporting goods, or automotive goods. These items are reflective of his working-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and traditional male-oriented consumption domains (Moisio et al., 2013). He is less confident bidding on more feminine or more refined goods such as household goods, fashion, jewelry, and collectibles. Consequently, he has a tendency to gamble—“You know I’m a gambling man. I gotta take a gamble whenever I can” (Ep. 2)—and often makes rookie mistakes when bidding on these units. For example, he admits, “I don’t know [bleep] about” a midcentury dining set, possibly designed by Charles and Ray Eames (Ep. 1). Despite his deficiencies, he is shown refining his skills, such as when he recognizes the value of a pile of vintage denim overlooked by the others (Ep. 11). In this way, Jarrod embodies the neoliberal ideology embedded in the program—while his current lack of subcultural capital may put him at risk of losing potential profits, he can overcome it through a combination of autodidactic learning through experience and risk-taking. All bidders possess their respective areas of expertise and weakness, but the most experienced bidders exhibit a more developed level of subcultural capital expressed as working-class omnivorousness (Rademacher, in press) that creates yet another competitive advantage in this marketplace.

*Storage Wars* may highlight bidders’ investment in omnivorous consumption knowledge, but it tempers this investment in a marginalized feminine realm of knowledge by highlighting the highly aggressive and competitive nature of auction bidding as well. All of the bidders are aggressive and competitive at auction, but Dave exemplifies the hyper-masculine auction buyer through his loud and aggressive bidding style. Dave does not just strive to win units but to intimidate other bidders in the process. His all-black uniform, the \$10,000 bankroll he brings to most auctions, and his signature “YUUUP!” auction call all reflect this goal. His bidding mantra is “Nobody outbids me, takes something I want. Period” (Ep. 4). To facilitate this goal, he often bids up units well beyond their true market value so as to drive down competitors’ potential profits. As he admits, “Once we get through those gates there is no friends, there is no professional courtesy. It’s every man for him self. Let the best man win” (Ep. 1). Consequently, Dave emerges as the villain in the program. Dave redeems himself, however, by acknowledging a need to temper his rebellious aggression and desire to win against the obligations of covering what he describes as the “massive overhead” associated with his business (Ep. 5). Successful bidders, therefore, are aggressive and competitive and take risks, but they do so in a strategic, calculated fashion that allows them to fulfill their obligations to their families and their businesses.

Strategic, calculated bidding requires bidders to embrace the dual benefits of thrift. As Miller (1998) argues, thrift is capable of generating both economic and hedonic benefits. While not a masculine or feminine disposition per se, research suggests women often pursue thrift as a means of constituting relationships, benefiting the household, or representing an act of devotional love (Miller, 1998). *Storage Wars* often ignores the benefits associated with the family and the domestic sphere. Instead, the program depicts thrift as primarily delivering economic benefits such as profits or monetary savings, which are traditionally ascribed to the masculine world of business. Even when the program acknowledges hedonic benefits of thrift, such as when it highlights Darrell's fixation on the "wow factor" (Ep. 1), unexpected valuable goods found in units, the benefits lack the relational aspects Miller (1998) identifies. Rather than stimulating thoughts about family or relationships, Darrell experiences a rush of excitement as a result of the thrill of the hunt, an inherently individual hedonic experience. His excitement is further amplified by the realization that these valuable goods have increased the profits earned on the unit, an inherently economic benefit.

The emphasis on the potential economic benefits of thrift rather than the hedonic benefits, particularly the relational benefits, pervades the program as a whole. The program is clear that an ability to buy units at bargain prices is a prerequisite to being a successful auction bidder. Moreover, those monetary savings contribute to bidders' ability to purchase additional units and, consequently, earn even greater profits. Auction bidding is therefore constructed as a market in which bidders must spend money to earn money in the long-term pursuit of profits. The spend-earn-spend cycle reflects another aspect of thrift—that thrift can drive consumers to spend more money than they save (Miller, 1998, p. 137). Yet, *Storage Wars* valorizes spending in the pursuit of profits as long as one does not overbid. Even the newest bidder, Barry, recognizes this rule despite his tendency to often break it. After another newbie purchased a unit for \$2,600, Barry critiques the bidder, saying, "Buying units like this for that kind of money? He'll be out of business sooner than he knows" (Ep. 17). Likewise, Jarrod notes after seeing Dave and Darrell engaged in a bit of competitive banter prior to an auction:

Whenever I see these guys show up and they're waving their money around like this, I can already tell they're a little rambunctious this morning. That's great for me. I mean, that's a sign of their weakness. They're gonna overspend, hopefully I can sneak right in and steal a couple of units. (Ep. 4)

By emphasizing the economic benefits (i.e., masculine) of bidders' quest for thrift rather than the hedonic and relational benefits (i.e., feminine), *Storage Wars* suggests auction bidding allows for the ritual transformation of spending—a frivolous and wasteful act—into a productive act (Miller, 1998). Further, this

emphasis removes the relational elements of thrift and shopping, sanitizing spending and positioning it clearly as an economic act.

*Storage Wars'* depiction of the lone mixed-gender bidding team, Jarrod and Brandi, further illustrates its tendency to highlight the economic and individual hedonic benefits of thrift while ignoring its relational benefits. Because the couple possesses the most limited experience, omnivorous knowledge, and economic capital of any of the bidders, each purchased unit must generate profits. According to Brandi, "We have bills to pay and we have to make some actual money" (Ep. 6). Jarrod recognizes this reality but discusses his motivations for bidding in individualistic terms: "Whenever we buy a storage unit, I get the excitement of the gamble. Brandi doesn't care. All she wants to know is, 'when are we gonna sell it, and when do I get my money?'" (Ep. 14). As this statement suggests, Jarrod acknowledges his need to earn a profit but is primarily motivated by "the excitement of the gamble." Jarrod's pursuit of individual hedonic benefits both removes thrift from its relational underpinnings and reinforces Jarrod's desire to enact a rebel masculinity. Brandi's overemphasis on thrift, in contrast, represents the antithesis to Jarrod's expression of masculine risk-taking and rebelliousness. She represents an outlier concerned first and foremost with meeting the financial obligations required by her family and business rather than pursuing individualistic hedonic benefits. As she readily admits, "I'm all for taking chances, but . . . wait, no I'm not" (Ep. 9). While Brandi's emphasis on profits may follow the tenets of traditional breadwinner masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004), her unwillingness to take risks is depicted as a negative trait within this context, as it imposes rules and limitations on Jarrod's ability to act autonomously in pursuit of economic and individualistic hedonic benefits. This tension pervades the couple's interactions, such as the following exchange illustrates:

Brandi: "JM can you come here please?"

Jarrod (walking into Brandi's office): "What's up?"

Brandi: "You spent all that money yesterday – \$1,000?"

Jarrod: "I, I know I went over budget. But you know, I saw a couple of good units.

You know, I can't let them go by. When I see the ones I think that'll make us the money, I got to get them."

Brandi: "Out of what you got, we're not making our money back." (Ep. 1)

Essentially, Brandi serves as Jarrod's conscience, reminding him to rein in his competitiveness and risk-taking in favor of his obligation to provide financially for their family and business. Within the eyes of the other bidders, however, Brandi's constant reminders emasculate Jarrod. Barry comments after watching Jarrod hesitate to bid on a unit that "If Jarrod wants this unit he's gonna have to get his balls out of Brandi's purse" (Ep. 5). Brandi even acknowledges that her desire for caution and smart investing may hinder their ability to reap large

profits. At one point, she even critiques the limitations of her approach, suggesting that to win a desirable unit from Dave, “We just need to go balls out” (Ep. 9). That is, they need to gamble and spend whatever is needed to win the unit. Through their interactions, Jarrod and Brandi reinforce the ideal auction-based masculinity; successful bidders—“true” men—act on their aggressive and competitive impulses but self-regulate these impulses in pursuit of the economic and individual hedonic benefits thrift provides. Bidders incapable of doing so are marginalized and, in the case of Jarrod, emasculated.

Further blurring the lines between traditional masculine and feminine behaviors is the fact that while bidders’ investment in thrift is not seen in relational terms, bidders are constructed as rugged individualists capable of forming and cultivating relationships with other bidders. The four core bidders, for example, may compete against one another, but they remain friendly, cracking jokes and generally enjoying their time together. Bidders’ collegiality suggests they share a consciousness of kind—an intrinsic connection to others based on shared consumption experiences—similar to that found in brand communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). Much like brand community members, bidders are shown providing proactive mentorship to newbie bidders, instructing them on the nuances of auction culture. Further, in a strong refutation of the “marketplace man” archetype, an absent father fixated on his work (Kimmel, 1996), Darrell and Dave are both heavily involved in socializing their sons, Brandon and Dave, Jr., into auction bidding. Brandon, in particular, accompanies Darrell to most auctions and is shown as an active participant working with his dad to assess value, strategize, bid, and process units while simultaneously learning about omnivorous consumption and the profession. Darrell views his investment in Brandon as a success, concluding, “Brandon can run his own show, he’s perfectly capable of it” (Ep. 3). Dave, Jr. appears less frequently, but Dave’s relationship with his son is a main priority for him: “I’m building an empire that I can pass on to my son. That’s what drives me and that’s why I’m so aggressive at these auctions” (Ep. 6). In an attempt to show he is ready to take over the family business, Dave, Jr. brings his entire life savings—\$5,500—to auction in hopes of winning big (Ep. 19). When Dave, Jr. risks his entire bankroll on a single unit, Dave applauds the risk, saying the bid is “like going up to a black jack table and throwing \$5,500 down on one hand and just stand there and watch the cards flip” (Ep. 19). Dave’s pride grows as they process the unit side-by-side, commenting, “I’m shocked at how good this unit is turning out to be.” Ultimately, Dave, Jr. realizes a \$1,900 profit, symbolically confirming Dave’s success as a mentor.

The mentorship of one’s son may be dismissed as a patriarchal act motivated by a desire to extend one’s personal legacy. However, mentorship occurs throughout the program, establishing it as an act expected of successful bidders. At moments, the program even employs the conventions of contemporary film

and television “bromances,” or portrayals of male camaraderie that integrate strong homosocial bonding and affection into traditionally masculine relational identities. Among others (DeAngelis, 2014), Albert (2013) suggests that male love, friendship, and mentorship present audiences with “an internal struggle of the male characters with their understandings of their identities and roles as men” (162). This portrayal of male bonding is particularly visible in the on-screen relationship between Darrel and Jarrod. Darrell, for instance, invests in Jarrod, helping him overcome his limited consumption knowledge regarding collectible goods. When Jarrod expresses disappointment that an old safe he found in a unit was empty (Ep. 7), Darrell takes the time to teach Jarrod that value can be found in unexpected places: “Did you see the safe? This thing’s the bomb!” As he elaborates,

This is the Olde York Safe Company. These things are real collectible. And what makes this thing so nice, and it doesn’t take a dummy to understand this, it’s got all the original brass fittings, but the printing is on it. And it’s all gold-embossed. That was hand-laid on there and hand painted. Uh, turn of the century. Maybe 100—120 years old, if I had to guess. (Ep. 7)

Darrell ultimately concludes the safe alone may be worth “two to three grand . . . [which] just goes to show ya, there’s always something to learn in this business” (Ep. 7). Not only has Jarrod gained important knowledge that should help him avoid similar rookie mistakes in the future, he internalizes the message that mentorship represents a desirable masculine characteristic. As evidence of his commitment to mentorship, Jarrod invests in another newbie, Bill, even after he outbids Jarrod on a unit (Ep. 17). In this highly competitive marketplace, getting outbid can create some animosity between bidders. However, Jarrod takes this loss in stride. Jarrod is shown empathizing with Bill, who some critiqued for overpaying for the unit and just recently quit his job to pursue auction bidding as a full-time profession, commenting, “I’m not gonna give this guy a hard time ‘cause it wasn’t that long ago that I was the newbie and it was tough” (Ep. 17). Bill finds Jarrod’s mentorship extremely valuable:

I just bought my first unit today and I paid \$2,600 for it. And with the help of Jarrod, he told me I had \$1,500 in it and we haven’t even made a dent in it. And I’m really stoked about it and I can’t wait to go out and buy some more.

Bidders’ investment in mentorship and homosocial bonding sends a clear message that masculinity as constructed in *Storage Wars* requires balancing individualism and fierce autonomy with a caring and communal orientation that preserves the collective characteristics and functioning of the auction community, despite its highly competitive nature.



## Conclusion

Our analysis suggests *Storage Wars* contributes to the construction and legitimization of an emergent working-class masculine archetype relevant to a knowledge and service economy: the working-class storage bidder. Unlike other RTV programs that trade in nostalgic appeals to an older version of masculinity, *Storage Wars* valorizes the man-of-action hero masculine archetype (Holt & Thompson, 2004), successfully balancing rebel and breadwinner masculinities within the auction context. Success at auction, however, requires these working-class men to integrate knowledge and behaviors traditionally coded as feminine into their working-class habitus. Through the documentation of the appropriation of the feminine into the male experience within *Storage Wars*, we argue the program contributes to the transformation of consumption from a salve for men's alienation from the world of work into a legitimate form of productive labor. Consequently, far from representing a marginalized, subordinated masculinity, auction bidders are valorized as the contemporary masculine ideal capable of adapting rugged individualism, adventurousness, risk-taking, and personal autonomy to get by in the new economy.

RTV plays an integral role in the transformation of consumption as labor and the legitimization of working-class auction bidder masculinity. Unlike other emergent masculinities that may remain invisible within larger culture, RTV disseminates masculinities to millions of potential viewers weekly. Much like *Storage Wars*' creator Thom Beers' previous RTV programs, including *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch*, legitimated and celebrated other masculinities, his selection of auction bidding as a context worthy of documentation serves as a de facto endorsement of the legitimacy of this masculinity within the larger masculine hierarchy. By documenting the dramatic treasure hunt-like narrative, the program acclimates viewers to the importance of omnivorous consumption knowledge, thrift, and mentorship and a communal orientation. It blurs the lines between the traditionally gendered nature of consumption—as feminine rather than masculine, leisure rather than work—constructing it as a legitimate realm of masculine investment. As such, the associated status costs of embracing subordinate cultural capital (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013) may be minimized. By presenting bidders retaining their rebel and breadwinner masculinities while engaged in historically undervalued and subordinate forms of feminine labor *Storage Wars* contributes to the cultural definition of hegemonic masculinity within the current cultural, social, and historical context.

*Storage Wars* not only shifts general cultural understandings of hegemonic masculinity but also identifies and recognizes the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities present within the auction context. We argue that Darrell, Dave, Jarrod, and Barry represent distinct auction bidding masculinities that occupy specific locations within the storage auction social hierarchy based on their ability to merge rebel and breadwinner masculinities with the requisite feminine subcultural capital. Darrell and Dave represent the “top dogs,” bidders who most



successfully perform the ideal working-class auction bidder masculinity. Jarrod represents a midpoint in the hierarchy, as he effectively performs rebel masculinity but struggles to balance it with other elements of the auction bidder ideal; specifically, a fully developed working-class cultural omnivorousness, an appreciation of thrift, and a full investment in collaboration and mentorship. Despite Jarrod's shortcomings, he represents the neoliberal ideal of an upwardly mobile member of this community. That is, through hard work and continued investment in learning the requisite skills of his trade, Jarrod reflects the neoliberal ideal of self-responsibility and the "maximisation of the self" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 12). In contrast to the other bidders, Barry's lack of serious investment in auction bidding as a profession places him on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. As a collector, he is presented as engaging in serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982) rather than a profession. He lacks the skills and knowledge required of the profession and, therefore, remains an outsider within this community.

Celebrating hybridized masculinity, *Storage Wars* valorizes male appropriation of feminine skills and marketplaces as a potential pathway to male primacy throughout the decline of industrial labor. This co-optation contributes to the ongoing subjugation of the feminine, precluding what might otherwise be used as an occasion to redefine the gendered division of labor to deny women a prominent place in the new economy. The popularity of *Storage Wars* in combination with the specific masculinities it celebrates bespeaks the adaptability of hegemonic masculinity in the face of structural upheavals in the social definition of labor. As women come to represent an increasing percentage of the workforce in the contemporary service and knowledge economy, *Storage Wars* suggests working-class men are capable of adapting to forms of work coded not only as feminine but also as converting that previously marginalized labor into something to be valorized. Consumption becomes productive through men's investment in this activity. Hence, men's commitment to this previously marginalized form of unpaid domestic labor can transform it into something economically and socially valuable. Our analysis of *Storage Wars* evinces how mediated masculinity depends on the appropriation of the feminine to sustain the preeminence of men's labor in a knowledge economy. The program is a fitting example of how women's gains and contributions to the new economy are elided in the service of keeping "men's work" relevant in the 21st century.

### **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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