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# "Be a Sturdy Oak:" the Art of Manliness and Rebranding Masculinity in 21st Century America

Leslie J. Peckham

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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“BE A STURDY OAK.”

THE *ART OF MANLINESS* AND REBRANDING

MASCULINITY IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AMERICA

by

Leslie Peckham

A Thesis Submitted in

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## ABSTRACT

### “BE A STURDY OAK:” THE *ART OF MANLINESS* AND REBRANDING MASCULINITY IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AMERICA

by

Leslie Peckham

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

This thesis presents the ways the blog, *The Art of Manliness*, negotiates a rebranding of masculinity through nostalgia-based marketing initiatives and individualistic language and perspectives. This blog, dedicated to the self-improvement of the modern man, relies on “intentionality” and makes room for both traditional forms of masculine consumption and progressive masculine domesticity. The thesis begins by illustrating the ways marketing initiatives have had a hand in creating masculinity and the ways society has adopted or rejected these representations. It goes on to discuss how a contemporary blog on masculinity, *The Art of Manliness*, has incorporated some of these marketing techniques to disburse a brand of masculinity that challenges some of representations put forward by other publications targeted at men. It also discusses the ways the discursive community present on the site helps to disburse this brand by embracing or rejecting certain ideas on the site as is evident from the moderated comments sections. I argue that this is a new identity, built by embracing traditionally manly skills, while encouraging consumption without the marginalization of other cultural groups.

*Dedicated to the friends, colleagues, and family members*

*that patiently supported me throughout this process.*

*Especially Nick, who helped me see the finish line when I couldn't,*

*and Elana, for helping me tackle "the beast."*

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## Chapter One: The Stuff Men Are Made Of

Since their inception, men's magazines have created a market by distinguishing the spheres of men's and women's consumption. These magazines were started mostly in the 1930s in an era when most goods were marketed toward women, the primary buyer for all things in the home. Women, particularly wives and mothers, were culturally assumed to rule the domestic space. As the chief buyer, all appliances and furnishings were marketed to the woman of the house. As a result, advertisers were faced with an interesting problem when cultivating a market that would address men. Their challenge was to recontextualize the art of consumption as a masculine activity. In her work, "In Spite of Women," Kenon Breazeale dissects *Esquire* magazine for a closer look at how these markets were made. She found that, Arnold Gingrich, the then editor of *Esquire*, felt compelled to take into account the way media and culture represented women in certain ways. He developed a product that "sought to constitute consumption as a new arena for male privilege by launching in text and image what amounted to an oppositional meta-commentary on female identity."<sup>1</sup>

Since that time, the way men's publications address their audiences has evolved. What this thesis addresses is how *Art of Manliness*, a blog dedicated to the self-improvement of the modern man, has emerged as a newer form of address to men- one that makes room for both traditional forms of masculine consumption and progressive masculine domesticity. I argue this is a new identity, built by embracing traditionally manly skills, while encouraging consumption without the marginalization of other cultural politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Breazeale, Kenon. "In spite of women: Esquire Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer." *Signs* 20 no.1 (1994): 1-22.

*Art of Manliness (AoM)*, is a self-help style blog committed to helping men “return to a more manly skill-set,” while adhering to a progressive frame of mind. The site is authored by a couple, Brett and Kate McKay, and has an impressive list of “manly contributors” with a variety of useful backgrounds from mountaineering to classic men’s fashion. Brett started the blog as “something fun to do in his spare time” while attending law school at the University of Tulsa College of Law. Previous to that, Brett spent time doing service in Tijuana, Mexico before getting his degree. Kate got her degree in History at Brigham Young University before spending some time in AmeriCorps. From there, she received her Masters in Religion from Oklahoma City University and has taught American History and Humanities at Tulsa Community College.<sup>2</sup> The couple lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma with their two children and both work full time on the blog.

The articles highlight a variety of interests: career advice from men that have been there, advice on social skills in both casual and professional settings, and special topic sections typically spanning more than one article installment. Since beginning in 2008, *AoM* has gained over 100,000 subscribers, 83,600 Twitter followers, and 431,000 Facebook “likes.” The *Art of Manliness* is a site that shows interest in an “old-fashioned” kind of masculinity while maintaining a socially progressive awareness. Functioning as a “how to” text, *AoM* offers advice and coaching on a variety of “manly” topics, from how to tie a tie and carve a turkey, to how to create a positive family culture and be a good neighbor. The *Art of Manliness* provides a forum for men on being a “better” man, and an ongoing conversation on what that means in contemporary society. As a means to establish this “new” identity for masculinity, *AoM* also hosts advertisements that direct

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<sup>2</sup> "About," *Art of Manliness*, last modified 2010, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/about-2/>

men to specific styles and products that fit in with their masculine ideal. I contend that *AoM* and other sites like this are changing perceptions of contemporary masculinity and, in turn, “rebranding” masculinity.

This thesis dissects contemporary masculinity and the ways it is addressed as a market. In particular, I am interested in placing *AoM* amidst the context of a particular representation of contemporary masculinity: young man, seemingly groundless, lacking serious prospects and apparently without ambition. This archetype is depicted endlessly in television and film. It’s a character marked by what sociologist Michael Kimmel describes as “Peter Pan Syndrome,” or the trend in American culture for young men of college age to maintain a sort of college mentality long after their education is completed. Kimmel cites several reasons why this may be a trend in masculinity, including the disenfranchisement of young white males by affirmative action efforts and the rise of women in the work place. These issues and others have contributed to a sense that these men are no longer required to uphold traditional conceptions of masculinity.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly men are forced to consider questions about the meaning of masculinity versus what it means to be a man, in relation to both other men and women.

To understand this shift, I look at past stereotypes of different kinds of masculinity through analysis of men’s interaction with male oriented blogs and magazines. I search for patterns and trends in masculinity. What is “the lost art of manliness” as described by the authors of *AoM*? Is the kind of masculinity idealized on *AoM* a true throwback to masculinity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century or is it changed in some way? If it has changed, in what ways has it changed and to what perspectives and what

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<sup>3</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. HarperCollins, 2008.

values does it align itself? Emily Matchar writes in *Homeward Bound* about the changing notions of domesticity in our contemporary era. She writes about “rescuing ‘lost’ domestic arts,” and that Generation Y men, “acculturated to value money and power, [are] becoming increasingly interested in work-life balance and increasingly disinterested in ‘working for the man’.”<sup>4</sup>

What is the role of consumerism to this “new” masculine identity? What distinguishes him from other kinds of male consumers? This thesis also analyzes how *AoM* incorporates the individualistic ethos of DIY culture, aligning its cause with a subculture that has seen a significant rise throughout the past several years. Through analyzing the products and habits endorsed by *AoM*, I establish a better idea of what this “new man” looks like and how he fits into society’s future, as well as how these perspectives are being adopted by the culture at large. To answer these questions, I have conducted a textual analysis of *Art of Manliness* and analyzed how its readers interpret its advice and endorsements. I interviewed Brett McKay, a founder and author of much of the content on the site, in order to better understand what his motivations and inspirations for creating the site are. Finally, I have analyzed the ways the community on the site is enabled to interpret *AoM*’s messages in what ways they have embraced those ideas.

#### Literature Review:

For the past two decades, the concept of masculinity has been widely contested in many academic circles, including sociology and gender studies. These shifting notions of what masculinity looks like and how it is performed have helped to come up with a picture, loosely sketched, of masculinity and maleness in contemporary society. To understand

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<sup>4</sup> Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

the ways scholars have come to grips with these questions, I begin by exploring the history of men's magazines. How do publications like *GQ*, *Men's Health*, and *Esquire* serve as examples in their community? What sorts of perspectives are issued by these publications and to what consequences have they come? What follows will give context to some of the contemporary problems found in masculinity and discuss how audience attitudes are shifting in light of an emergent "progressive masculinity." I discuss scholarship on types of masculinity offered by magazine publications both before and after second wave feminism, the response contemporary publications have put forth, and how these projections are wrapped in the greater DIY subculture that gives context to these "new progressive men."

*Masculinity at Large:*

It seems that since women entered the work place in greater numbers men have been at a loss. Brett McKay admits as much on *AoM*, stating in one section, "The feminism movement did some great things, but it also made men confused about their role and no longer proud of the virtues of manliness," virtues that can be assumed to have been dissonant to the feminist cause.<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich notes in the introduction of her book, *The Hearts of Men*, that the "breadwinner ethic" and prevailing idea that married men are responsible for "the lifelong support of the female unemployed," is not only beyond outdated but also a farce to begin with.<sup>6</sup> Good marriages are now understood to be mutually beneficial; however, as Ehrenreich points out, wage discrepancy and

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<sup>5</sup> "About," Art of Manliness, last modified 2010, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/about-2/>

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment* (Random House Digital Inc., 2011), 3-11.

conversations about the value of labor have stalled this progression somewhat. In the 1950s, the gender roles mandated that men go to work and women run the home. For men, to do less was to be deemed somehow, “less than a man.”

Things have changed dramatically since then. The rise of second wave feminism saw a collapse of Ehrenreich’s “breadwinner ethic” and a surge of women entering the workforce. What has remained is the basis of my study. Which changes has masculinity sustained well, and where are its weaknesses? Scholars such as Susan Faludi and Michael Kimmel have worked to give context to these issues. In *Guyland*, Kimmel seeks to define and contextualize what he defines as “Peter Pan Syndrome,” or the unwillingness of many college-aged men to assume the responsibilities of “traditional masculinity.”<sup>7</sup> This is something McKay had in mind as he scanned bookstores looking for men’s magazines: “It seemed to me that the content in these magazines were continually going downhill, with more and more articles about sex and how to get six pack abs. Was this all there was to being a man?”<sup>8</sup>

What McKay found was an apparent lack in content that addressed the male market in a meaningful way, especially in the gap bridging adolescence and adulthood. As the necessity of a man to fulfill his “breadwinner” role has diminished, many men have taken to “postponing adulthood” in favor of maintaining a lifestyle more suited for young, college-aged men. Evidence of this can be found in the popularity of the “idiot man child” character found in several Judd Apatow films and television shows such as *Family Guy* and MTV’s *Jackass*. Often times these characters resort to a kind of self-

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<sup>7</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Harper Collins, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Quote from McKay, found on *AoM* “about” section, accessed March 10, 2014

exploitation, or hurt themselves and perform disgusting stunts in order to gain the attention of audiences. Lindgren and Lelievre describe this in part as an extension of the marginalization of white masculinity or the creation of “subordinated masculinities” with a need to over compensate based on these anxieties.<sup>9</sup>

In *Manhood in the Making*, David Gilmore writes about how different cultures around the world have dealt with, conceived and experienced manhood or, “an approved way of being an adult male.” He writes that, “masculinity suffers from a ‘taken for granted’ syndrome,” that could perhaps account for why males in many cultures feel the need to fill the role of “idiot man child” instead of some semblance of “breadwinner.”<sup>10</sup> In America, these anxieties have manifested culturally in television shows and movies like those mentioned above, and socially in the form of many “men only” groups. In *Misframing Men*, Kimmel discusses groups such as Promise Keepers and the changing landscape of American military academies that subscribe to a more “outdated” form of masculinity that adheres to “traditional” gender roles. He then takes his ideas further by discussing certain subcultures within masculinity where the definitions of power are in flux. He explains the position of masculinity in relation to third-wave feminism, stating that, “the largest, if least acknowledged, response to women’s equity has been the quiet acceptance of gender equity at both the public and private level” and how these

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<sup>9</sup> Lindgren, Simon, and Maxime Lélievre. "In the Laboratory of Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender Subjectivities in MTV's Jackass," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 5 (2009): 393-410.

<sup>10</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the making: Cultural concepts of masculinity*. Yale University Press, 1990.

ideologies support one another.<sup>11</sup> How this position manifests itself within different communities is discussed later in this thesis.

In *Stiffed*, Faludi discusses her search to understand “manhood in crisis,” as it has been called by both sides of the political spectrum. However, her attempts to find any common ground from which these issues initially arose, “collapsed as soon as anyone asked the question: ‘why?’” For Faludi, the search to understand began at batterers counseling, where she found a link to domestic violence from men “losing their compass in the world.” This can be described by frustration and desire to change, tempered by “hyperbolic, almost hysterical grievances- so many men seem to be doing battle with phantoms and witches that exist only in their own overheated imaginations.”<sup>12</sup> This frustration mirrors the over-compensation of those “subordinated masculinities” discussed by Lindgren and Lélièvre and draws attention to an apparent lack of an appropriate “pressure valve” for masculinity. All these anxieties seem to stem from one overarching concern: if culturally we assume masculinity is incapable of change, it will be.

I want to shift now to look at a cultural site where these conversations are taking place. In *Hard Looks*, Sean Nixon discusses the “institutional practices of cultural production and circulation,” and the visual codings and imagery present in advertising, press ads, menswear shops, and popular men’s magazines. Magazines, particularly titles that deal with fashion, are prone to using imagery that sells to the prevailing attitudes

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<sup>11</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities*. Rutgers University Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1999), 14.

(and incomes) of the time in which they appear. For instance, Nixon points out that the 1980s marked a shift in which imagery that “drew on the codings traditionally associated with representations of femininity in consumer culture” started appearing in men’s magazines.<sup>13</sup> Edwards agrees that men’s fashion, masculinity and consumer culture are “understudied” and that magazines such as *GQ* and *Arena* “have been developed, aimed specifically at a style conscious male readership.”<sup>14</sup> But some of the ways in which this imagery has changed have spurred trouble in the masculine community. For example, there is a persistence of gendered attitudes in society’s view of what is an acceptable version of femininity or masculinity. Another issue is that as men’s imagery follows women’s, there has been an increase in the sexual objectification of the male subject. Fiona Atwood writes that this is in part due to a postmodern trend toward “porno-chic”. Another could be the machismo-driven depictions of masculinity in the 1980s and ‘90s. This has included the bending of masculine interests toward sports, gadgets, and machines, as well as the “Laddish rejection of body maintenance and objectification.”<sup>15</sup> The backlash has been severe and damaging to both the masculine and feminist causes as “Laddism” threatens to send masculinity back sixty years. This draws close to the issue McKay first noticed browsing for men’s magazines at the bookstore; because of this imagery and the way it is marketed, men were being reduced to nothing more than

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<sup>13</sup> Sean Nixon, *Hard looks: Masculinities, spectatorship and contemporary consumption* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 3-9.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Edwards, *Men in the mirror: Fashion, masculinity and consumer society*. London: Cassell, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Feona Attwood, “‘Tits and Ass and Porn and Fighting:’ Male heterosexuality in Magazines for Men.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 83-100.

disembodied muscular torsos. But before I explore these threats and their causes in full let's explore the historical context that brought us to this point.

*Masculine Representation in Magazines Prior to and During 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave Feminism*

In order to pinpoint the changes that have happened in masculinity, a historical context is needed. The movement of fashion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a shift in the appearance of masculinity in high society- from colorful silks, lace, and pantaloons to somber black suits and top hats. Barthel covers this discussion from a slightly more Marxist point of view by raising the point that images of masculinity are associated with specific products. As these items in turn become associated with masculinity, people empower these goods with existing ideas of hegemony and masculinity. Hence, hats and canes and other objects come to typify an idealized form of masculinity, making it easier to symbolize the divide communicated by appearance (between men and women). This kind of commodity fetishism is integral to the way in which magazines have hailed men and created a lucrative consumer market within masculinity.<sup>16</sup>

This is a reoccurring theme in popular male publications from past to present as is evident in the work of many scholars. Kenon Breazeale writes in "In Spite of Women," why *Esquire's* editors felt compelled to "take account" of the feminine and discusses the "consequences for media culture of its need to represent women in certain ways." Born in the 1930s during the Great Depression, *Esquire* saw "diminished male self-esteem" as an outgrowth of the Depression, and henceforth, leisure was used to assuage this depression. This was the birth of a market that catered specifically to masculine tastes. *Esquire's* staff wanted to build a market that would favor masculine consumption, one that catered to

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<sup>16</sup> Diane Barthel, "When Men Put On Appearances: Advertising and the Social Construction of Masculinity." *Men, Masculinity, and the Media* (1992): 137-153.

masculine taste in the same way that the market had been addressing women.<sup>17</sup> In essence, what was done was to study the effects of marketing on consumers of women's magazines and then transfer those ideas to this new market, one that would be characterized in direct opposition to the women's market.

This kind of masculinity was heralded by the publication of another men's magazine, one specifically not for women, *Playboy*. Ehrenreich writes that, at the time, *Playboy* was more or less a mouthpiece for a "diffuse and swelling movement" in masculine consumption. As other magazines worked to distinguish a men's only market, *Playboy's* readership became the concentration of that market. Now, instead of conforming to society's approved measure of a man, *Playboy* invited men to find morality in fun. It was as much an endorsement of pleasurable consumption as it was a backhand to the tenets of traditional masculinity and the institution of marriage in particular.<sup>18</sup> Bill Osgerby tackles a characterization of this issue in his article titled, "A Pedigree of the Consuming Male," wherein he illustrates a rise in what is referred to as men's "leisure class." Here, the word leisure is used in place of domestic- a word that was synonymous with women's tastes in this era. This distinction is used to separate male consumption from female domesticity.<sup>19</sup> While other men's magazines of this era stuck to manly pursuits in the great outdoors, magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy* allowed for

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<sup>17</sup> Kenon Breazeale, "In spite of women: Esquire Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer." *Signs*, 20 no.1, (1994): 1-22.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2011) 42-51.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Osgerby, "A Pedigree of the Consuming Male: Masculinity, Consumption and the American "Leisure Class," *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* Malden: Blackwell, (2003): 57-86.

men to spend their time buying furnishings for a suave bachelor lifestyle. The male reclamation of domestic space was in full swing.

Connell writes of the men's liberation movement of the 1970s as a time of interesting political discussion that showed "deep conceptual confusion about gender."<sup>20</sup> Here, questions of the validity and necessity of hegemony as a means to describe masculinity were tentatively raised, as the site of masculinity shifted for the first time in decades. Ricciardelli, Clow and White investigate this conversation with in-depth analysis of eight different men's magazines including; *Men's Health*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Maxim*, *Stuff*, *Out*, *Details*, and *FHM*. Their study points out that views of hegemonic masculinity have changed over time with the evolution of generational differences and structural changes in society. Their analysis also points out, as others in this review have, that the manifestation of these changes seems to be located in the musculature of men depicted in these publications. The prevailing attitude is that "men should engage in bodywork in order to attain the lifestyle they desire" with note to the dominant musculature of the 1980s action hero.<sup>21</sup> These views are in line with those from a few decades earlier, when men were first invited to find pleasure in consumption, except now the focus of consumption was not on the reclamation of the domestic space, but of the male body.

The terms of masculinity have changed several times in the last few decades. The 1980s saw the rejection of the sensitive and often gender-bending man of the 1970s, with

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<sup>20</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities: Knowledge, Power and Social Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Ricciardelli, Rosemary, Kimberley A. Clow, and Philip White, "Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals of Masculinity in Men's lifestyle Magazines," *Sex Roles* 63 (2010): 64-78.

his glam-rock androgyny and progressive-era acceptance of feminism. This was a character that heralded a dynamic shift away from the *Playboy* ethos to one more accepting of the dramatic cultural shift in perspectives during the civil rights era. This was an era of prodigious change in culture and society's frame of thinking on gender. Yet it seems each representation is not without its equally compelling and sometimes damaging reaction. MacKinnon notes in *Representing Men* that the increase in "masculine studies" can be read as much a study of the history of advertising as a study of why and how men are represented in the publications that hail them. Advertisements in the 1970s reinforced stereotypical gender norms and depictions while ads in the 1980s showed an increased sense of individualization. However, despite these depictions, consumer culture has always been allied with domesticity and therefore femininity. MacKinnon writes that, "Consumer society may grow to see itself as submissive and easily manipulated, and thus to see its males as occupying the position that was once attributed exclusively to the female."<sup>22</sup>

The "macho-man" of the 1980s was depicted in cinema by stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger and in politics by Reagan-era conservatism. The reclamation of masculinity was worn in power suits, and seen in advertisements that placed men in direct opposition to the kind of domesticity used to excite consumerism within women. In addition to an increased machismo, 1980s depictions of men in magazines such as *Arena* and *GQ* offered images that objectified and sexualized representations of the male body "in ways more commonly associated with representations of femininity in consumer

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media*. London: Arnold, 2003.

culture.”<sup>23</sup> This was the continuation of the idea put forward by the first editors of *Esquire* and *Playboy*, that the feminization of the middle class is a source of male anxiety. Greenfield, O’Connell, and Reid also explore these ideas in their article, “Fashioning Masculinity,” which explores the beginnings of *Men Only* magazine in Britain, in which, “like *Esquire* its essential dynamic was simultaneously to exploit and deny the feminine.” By putting down femininity, masculinity could become a lucrative market. By declaring its heterosexuality, publications like *Men Only* were able to promote a form of masculine identity based on consumption and fashion.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Contemporary Responses and Changes*

The 1990s saw the rise of the “New Man,” a sensitive, gender aware persona that was allied to the causes of feminism and as secure in his sexuality as he was comfortable with others. This was another turning point in masculine markets, the first time these markets appeared to include gayness in their representations and made room for feminine concerns. It was now acceptable for men to consume, and be consumers of masculinity.<sup>25</sup> The magazine industry seemed ready for a new direction. In the 1990s, *Details* magazine picked up on this and “using particular depictions of gayness to construct new male audiences,” created a new market for men’s magazines while also “legitimizing them as

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<sup>23</sup> Bethan Benwell, "Is There Anything “New” About These Lads? The Textual and Visual Construction of Masculinity in Men's Magazines," *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis: Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture* VII, (Amsterdam: John Benjamin’s Publishing Company, 2002): 149-174.

<sup>24</sup> Greenfield, Jill, Sean, O’Connell, and Chris Reid, "Fashioning Masculinity: Men Only, Consumption and the Development of Marketing in the 191930s." *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 4 (1999): 457-476.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Edwards, *Men in the mirror: Fashion, masculinity and consumer society* (London: Cassell, 1997): 72-85.

‘authentic’ straight identities.”<sup>26</sup> Rosalind Gill writes that the terms used to describe masculinity in the 1990s include “new father,” “superwaif,” “blackmacho,” “soft lad,” “new boy,” and “modern-romantic.” With the exception of the last two, which were referenced more specifically in fashion, those labels function to capture “the apparently novel ways in which contemporary manhood is lived.”<sup>27</sup> Consumption was now viewed differently by the masculine community and had grown to be viewed as a “socially acceptable leisure activity for men and as a symbolic part of a successful lifestyle.” The “New Man,” though deemed to embody the type of narcissism associated with rampant consumerism, was also lauded for being “caring, nurturing and sensitive,” as well as “passive and introspective.” These affectations, however, soon began to get sneered at as another representation, “a counter-reaction if ever there was one,” was created to distinguish yet another market for men that rejected this “New Man” ideal.<sup>28</sup> Here we find the Lads.

Just as *Playboy* was a backhand to then traditional versions of masculinity, the “lads” are a reaction to gender-and feminist-friendly version. Stevenson, Jackson and Brooks conducted a comparative analysis of *Loaded*, *FHM*, *Maxim*, and *Men’s Health* to see how the ideologies presented therein held up against similar publications aimed at

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<sup>26</sup> Jimmy Draper, “‘Gay or Not?!’ Gay Men, Straight Masculinities, and the Construction of the *Details* Audience,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27.4 (2010) 357-37.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Power and the Production of Subjects: A Genealogy of the New Man and the New Lad’ in Benwell, B.” *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines* 19, (Oxford & Malden: Blackwell, 2003): 34-56.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Edwards, *Men in the mirror: Fashion, masculinity and consumer society* (London: Cassell, 1997): 39-85.

women.<sup>29</sup> One question they asked was how the success of men's magazines influenced the social construction of masculinity and how that success could be measured among young men. What they found was that the conversation had shifted, magazines were now using their stylization and narrative to discuss "the negotiation of sexuality."<sup>30</sup> The sensitive "new man" of the 1990s was under attack by a new version of masculinity referred to as "Laddism." There is plenty of literature on the conflict between the "New Man" and the "New Lad." Edwards writes about this conflict in short, that men's magazines, past and present, have "always been for men but rarely about men."<sup>31</sup> The "New Lad" (henceforth referred to as "Laddism") was a mid- to late-1990s reaction to the sensitive "New Man" typified earlier in that decade. Benwell defines Laddism as different from "New Man" in three distinct ways: the rejection of feminist-friendly ideas, the re-embrace of very rigid conformist conservative models of masculinity, and the adherence to misogyny and homophobia.<sup>32</sup>

These behaviors are exemplified in several ways, including the magazines' emphasis on muscular fitness as well as the heavy endorsement of the consumption of red meat and beer (and admonishment of men who do not). This is similar to the stance taken in the Breazeale article that discusses the marginalization of women and the products

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<sup>29</sup> Stevenson, Nick, Peter Jackson, and Kate Brooks, "Reading Men's Lifestyle Magazines: Cultural Power and the Information Society," *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (2003): 112-131.

<sup>30</sup> Stevenson, N., Jackson, P., & Brooks, K. "The Politics of 'New' Men's Lifestyle Magazines," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3, (2000): 366-385.

<sup>31</sup> Tim Edwards, "Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, Style, and Men's Magazines," *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (2003): 132-146.

<sup>32</sup> Bethan Benwell, "Is There Anything 'New' About These Lads? The Textual and Visual Construction of Masculinity in Men's Magazines," *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis: Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture* VII, (Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2002): 149-174.

marketed to them by men's magazines. *Men's Health*, the first edition of which came out five decades after *Esquire*, proved to be much the same in ideology. Here the language is patently misogynist, quotes demean women openly, attacking everything from women's "inferior" cultural status to the whole of feminine taste. These perspectives on health and women are sometimes wrapped up succinctly as exemplified here with one of the magazine's witticisms, "There's only one kind of flesh we like better and even then she'd better know how to grill."<sup>33</sup>

This is the exact market that *AoM* founder McKay found so objectionable, a masculinity based on the same objectification that vexes female consumers. These images are problematic for endorsing body image issues and unreasonable consumerist agendas. For instance, *Men's Health* does give ample health advice, but it does so in a way that "reproduces a type of hegemonic masculinity associated not with health, but with a variety of negative health behaviors," among these, bad diet and excessive alcohol consumption. Additionally, the magazine "advocates" a type of muscular fitness that is not attainable "without a huge amount of effort." Similarly to women's magazines, these ideals put forth have the potential to create anxiety, hooking readers in with "the promise of shortcuts to the far-off goal."<sup>34</sup>

Crawshaw addresses *Men's Health's* content as well, although with slightly less negative terms. While Stibbe notes that some of the narrative presented in *Men's Health* is pejorative, he says the magazine does so in ways that make information accessible to men by presenting it via "a buddy," so that they don't feel as though they are

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<sup>33</sup> Men's Health, "Special Carnivore Section," Dec 2000, pgs 165-172.

<sup>34</sup> Arran Stibbe, "Health and the Social Construction of Masculinity in *Men's Health* Magazine," *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 1 (2004): 36.

“capitulating to a more powerful expert.” Crawshaw deems this to be in part due to the way men experience health in their bodies in “a highly specific way,” making room for emphasis on individualization and personal responsibility and accountability.<sup>35</sup> Beni also discusses these issues in his “Lifestyle Magazines and Biopolitics of the Male Body.” Here, the boundaries between “healthy” and “sick” bodies are discussed as well as the male to male gaze and the “othering” of women and homosexuals. If the aesthetics put forward by men’s magazines construct an unattainable ideal, men are therefore encouraged to resort to harmful behaviors such as using steroids in order to achieve these goals. Furthermore, this contributes to “othering” by distinguishing a market based on the need to be different from women and “other” men. “Men are now encouraged to use a whole set of beauty and body care products that were traditionally associated with women; for this reason, advertisers must legitimate these products for masculine use, one strategy being that of using stereotypical images of the male body.”<sup>36</sup>

In part, these issues are due to societal gender constructions and how these are used to define masculinity. As Brett McKay looked around him, he found a need for men of his generation to regain some of the “confidence, focus, skills, and virtues that men of the past had embodied.”<sup>37</sup> What was missing was a masculine equivalent of what feminism did for women. Men needed to be reintroduced to what it meant to be “an honorable, well-rounded man.” Kaufman writes in *Beyond Patriarchy* about the

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Crawshaw, "Governing the Healthy Male Citizen: Men, Masculinity and Popular Health in *Men's Health Magazine*," *Social Science & Medicine* 65, no. 8 (2007): 1606-1618.

<sup>36</sup> Federico Beni, "Framing Media Masculinities Men's Lifestyle Magazines and the Biopolitics of the Male Body," *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (2002): 465-478.

<sup>37</sup> McKay, Brett. "About." *Art of Manliness*. 2010. <http://www.artofmanliness.com/about-2/> (accessed March 16, 2014)

“historically specific, socially constructed, and personally embodied notions of masculinity. We confuse maleness (biological sex) with masculinity (gender) at our peril.” His work gives historical as well as global context to the “displacement” of patriarchy, additionally pointing out that “patriarchy is one of the bases of the current organization of the world’s societies; its demise is a precondition for fundamental social, economic, and political change.”<sup>38</sup> How AoM’s brand of masculinity affects these changes is the focus of my thesis.

### *Masculinity and Intentionality*

Throughout my research, I have found a theme of self-sufficiency and rugged individualism that can be connected to DIY style consumerism, or buying the raw materials to make certain commodities oneself. I have sought to discover the connection between masculinity and the “DIY subculture” and how it is influencing masculine domesticity and how this will affect cultural perceptions of manhood at large. Like Kimmel’s assertion that the ideas presented in third-wave feminism are beneficial to modern conceptions of masculinity, so too is the cultural rhetoric of self sustainability and ecological mindfulness helpful to this dialogue. For example, Dick Hebdige’s work on subcultures from “beat” to “punk” to “hipster” describes certain trends in the prevailing ideologies of a culture. His work centers more on these subcultures in London in particular, however, there does seem to be a connection between attitudes about masculinity and which subculture moves into the mainstream.<sup>39</sup> If punk hadn’t become

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<sup>38</sup> Carrigan, T., Connell, B., & Lee, J. “Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity,” In M. Kaufman Ed., *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 139-192.

<sup>39</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*. Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1979.

mainstream, would Laddism have been able to get the same traction we've seen today? As the DIY ethos has evolved, from its punk rock roots to contemporary self-sustainable movements, how has masculinity progressed down this path as well?

Tanja Carstenson writes in "Gender Trouble in Web 2.0," about the construction of masculinity and its shifts in the digital age. Largely a feminist perspective on gender issues on the web, her research holds a discussion of the gender binary. As I've discussed, regular presentations of men in magazines and blogs have shown "a typical portrayal of a man as tough and composed, professional, loyal to his work and interested in typical male activities," whereas gender presentations for women are presented as "affiliative and attractive."<sup>40</sup> Her writing also contains some discussion on how these portrayals are bad for everyone, in terms of their construction of gender norms.

In her book, *Homeward Bound*, Emily Matchar discusses a rising trend which she calls, "new domesticity." A-line dresses making a comeback alongside lumber-jack beards, symptoms of a society that is seeking to "reclaim lost arts" and "get back to basics." This type of lifestyle idealized by these men (and women) is a "180 degree turnaround from the consumerist fantasies of the late 1990s and early 2000s."<sup>41</sup> Halfacree writes, "Overall, the intellectual voice, as represented by social theory, and the inspired here-and-now character of DIY culture can learn and grow through one another."<sup>42</sup> These

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<sup>40</sup> Tanja Carstensen, "Gender Trouble in Web 2.0: Gender Perspectives on Social Network Sites, Wikis and Weblogs," *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 1. no. 1 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Keith Halfacree, "'Anarchy Doesn't Work Unless You Think about It': Intellectual Interpretation and DIY Culture," *Source: Area*, Vol. 31, no. 3, (1999): 209-22.

ideas are represented on the *Art of Manliness* blog in its language on “intentionality” and will be discussed later in my thesis.

Methodology and Chapter Breakdown:

One model for my research is Amy Erdman Farrell’s *Yours in Sisterhood*, a study of *Ms.* Magazine. Farrell focuses her work on how the publication evolved over two-decades after its initial publication. At the time of its inception in 1972, *Ms.* was dedicated to the expression of “popular feminism” and provided an open forum “where women of many different backgrounds can find help and information to improve their lives.”<sup>43</sup> Early on, the founders of *Ms.* understood the benefits of an alliance with Madison Ave. By accepting the powerful capitalist system and the financial resources therein, they were able to fund the movement, though not without consequences. *Ms.* was faced with the difficult challenge of promising its readers an “open forum” to discuss positive changes for a better world while trying to meet the demands of a media industry that was uncomfortable with its politics.<sup>44</sup>

What *Ms.* Magazine did was provide a venue and a forum for the “discursively created” feminist movement. This involved identifying multiple networks where feminist ideologies were purveyed and promoted as well as being accountable to their audiences’ understanding of what a feminist organization should look like. What Farrell analyzed in her work was how a publication can signify a “coming of age moment” for a particular social movement and how that publication is able to withstand social pressures from members within that movement while remaining commercially viable.

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<sup>43</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the promise of popular feminism* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1998): 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

I have dissected *Art of Manliness* in a similar way. I am familiar with the discourse surrounding masculinity and have used *AoM* as a model of where this movement could go. I have analyzed the content found on the blog as well as the content found on its comment feeds and in its forums for ways in which these conversations are evolving. Is the type of masculinity claimed and endorsed by *AoM* a signifier of a “shift in consciousness necessary for [men] to perceive the need for new kinds of organizations” similar to a “coming of age moment” for this movement?<sup>45</sup> How do founders Brett and Kate McKay tackle the site’s possibilities and limitations “within the context of commercial culture?” How do they use *AoM* to provide sustenance to this movement and provide an important place for discourse? I have considered audience member roles and comment moderation in building this type of community and as the keys to its success.

Janice Radway points out in her work, *Reading the Romance*, that audience members, editors, and writers form “interpretive communities.”<sup>46</sup> These communities digest information and ultimately do the work of attaching cultural meaning and significance to issues raised. The way this information gets sorted is important for doling out significance and consequences as well as the lessons learned by the discursive community. Like *Ms.* magazine, *Art of Manliness* is an interpretive community that walks the balance between being an important forum for the discourse of individuals and maintaining the good graces of its advertisers. *AoM* is host to many contributors, many of whom have other businesses that can find it beneficial to be part of the *AoM* network. As

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid: 8.

Farrell points out, the biggest challenge for *Ms.* was that it was, from the beginning, “firmly enmeshed in a commercial mass media matrix.” She draws from the work of George Lipsitz, whose work on popular and commercial culture always noted the inherent friction between a movement’s images and icons “within a multiplicity of discourses.”<sup>47</sup>

As *AoM* is a blog and not exactly held to the same commercial standards of the “mass media matrix” I have looked for the ways it has used this to its advantage, look for disadvantages, and ways that it has exceeded those challenges and others. I have also looked closely at the audience to see the ways in which, by content alone, *AoM* may or may not have a commercial edge because of the approximation of its cause to patriarchal hegemony. Throughout this process I have interviewed Brett McKay and ascertained how their blog distinguishes itself from other forums on the topic of masculinity.

Society’s gender issues have improved immensely in some areas but remain challenging in others. Laddism and the back-step of masculine progress seem to move cyclically, and I admit it is difficult if not ironic to compare the early struggles of a feminist magazine in the 1970s to the trajectory of a “masculinist” blog decades later. However, the authors and editors of *Ms.* were nonetheless faced with similar challenges when being “the mouthpiece of popular feminism.” They knew that in order for their magazine to gain traction at all, there needed to be a shift in consciousness, enlightening women to the need for new kinds of organizations. Just like Brett McKay, when scanning magazine racks for evidence of masculine discourse, they knew that in order to build on the movement they were going to have to find it first.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 5.

In chapter two I present my analysis of the discourse presented in the articles published on *AoM* since 2013. I break these articles down topically: lifestyle, dress, health, skill, career, and family. I dissect the value structure presented by this site and compare its function as a blog to the print magazines that came before it. I have also addressed the types of ads found on the site and their connection to DIY consumerism. My understanding is that a blog functions much like an online magazine, but here I will note any differences. I also offer some discussion of the ethos behind the blog by interviewing founders, Brett and Kate McKay.

Chapter three addresses the audience surrounding *AoM*. The site features a health “community” section where users are invited to ask questions and offer advice on a wide variety of “manly” topics. These topics seem to include everything from dating and beard maintenance advice, to a lively discussion on whether or not salt-water kayak fishing is safe or wise. There is a page for “Groups” including a support group for widowers and one for men who enjoy engaging in debate, a chat room, and a classified section. *AoM* offers member profiles so men can network socially from one forum to another. Finally, I discuss issues of race and sexuality as they are discussed in the articles and forums on the blog.

I have taken an in-depth look at the *AoM* community to see where the content on the blog has made an impact or met an impasse. *AoM* has firm policies about publishable content- something I have addressed in interviews with Brett McKay to ascertain how comments are edited and which ones get left out. I pay special attention to the ways the community embraces the advice given on the site and the ways this contributes to *AoM*'s rebranded masculinity. I also included some discussion from the interview on the

evolution of the *AoM* family and its contributors in an effort to understand the direction this blog will take masculinity.

In chapter four I describe connections *AoM* has to similar sites and suggest a few implications for further study. Here, I also discuss whether or not my research has found a firm connection between masculine consumption and green consumerism and the implications of such a connection. I compare my findings against a larger consumerist backdrop as I compare the ethos behind *AoM*'s consumerism to the discourse of individualism. *Ms. Magazine* lost its footing when it could no longer support the demands of its audience and its advertisers simultaneously. My question is, if *AoM* lashes itself to a larger consumer movement such as DIY culture will it be able to support both causes or will the discursive community abandon one ideology for the other? I also suggest which communities could be included more on the site, as well and point out the limitations of my study and new directions going forward.

## Chapter Two: The Art of Constructing Manliness

What does it mean to be manly? In an article published in November 2013, Brett McKay addressed this question in an article titled “Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness.” He began by working through a brief history of language in order to illustrate a few manly virtues. In the article, McKay invites his readers to look deeper into the subject of masculinity by analyzing the meaning of masculinity through the way society names it. The opening line of the article illustrates this perfectly: “Unless you regularly read this blog, you may never have heard someone use the word *manliness* in writing or conversation. Ditto for *manly*, unless it was said a bit in jest and with the requisite eye roll.”<sup>48</sup> He goes on to say how *man*, once used to describe distinct traits and qualities, is now mostly used just to describe a person’s gender. How did this come to pass? How has the commoditization of certain kinds of masculinity contributed to building *The Art of Manliness*, and how does its nostalgic view of masculinity work to build a market of male consumers?

So what *does* it mean to be a man? From the article on manly language, McKay references an understanding that runs from antiquity, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the present: “Pertaining to a man, masculine; manly; suiting, fit for, becoming a man, *or* made use of by, as *manners, dress, mode of life*; suiting, or worthy of a man, *as to action, conduct or sentiments*, and thus, manly, vigorous, brave, resolute, firm.”<sup>49</sup> And yet, so much of contemporary masculine representation in the media focuses on stereotypes of

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<sup>48</sup> “Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness,” accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>

<sup>49</sup> “Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness,” accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>, italics from source

manliness that are hallmarked by immaturity, incapability, and a lack of direction. So how does *Art of Manliness* begin to address a market of men that are surrounded by representations they simultaneously resemble and reject and to what values does the website align itself?

The site constructs its sense of manliness through the nostalgic appearance of bearded strong-men and adherence to Teddy Roosevelt-esque scrappiness. These backward-glancing ideals lend themselves to “a man’s man” kind of ethos that cleverly shrouds some previously feminized ideals, such as introspection and self improvement. This kind of branding is central to the way the site gets its message across: *AoM* values individualism and self-sufficiency as well as emotional wellness all wrapped up in a great fitting suit. Throughout this chapter, I breakdown how the site builds these ideas and others to form its brand of masculinity, and how that is used to address audiences. I will also illustrate how the site’s nostalgia-based marketing plays to a certain value set within masculinity.

### Nostalgia and Building a Men’s Market

Upon entering the site, visitors will immediately notice the nostalgic style of *AoM* with its depictions of turn of the century “strong-man” characters in the heading and the preponderance of vintage, black and white photographs dispersed throughout the articles. Nostalgia is an important factor in many successful advertising campaigns as it draws on the appeal of looking back to a more “ideal” time, whether or not that ideal was lived or not. *AoM* addresses masculinity in much the same way. Many of the values endorsed on the site are throwbacks to traditional values presumed of masculinity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as if men at that time had the benefit of a contemporary social

consciousness or the social permission for a rich emotional life. The site plays up the idea that men of the past were better able to express their emotions, but this is closely tied to the nature of nostalgia-based marketing. Often the thing being pined for never truly was to begin with. The irony is that as consumers encounter this type of marketing, they long for a time period they were likely never part of. It's not that men of the nostalgic era were less emotional; rather, society at the time questioned the reasons for a man's emotional expressions and judged them more harshly as well. Therefore, nostalgia in marketing binds itself to consumers' romanticized notion of the past.

The genius behind this style of marketing harkens to a device used by ad agencies for decades, the myth of the American frontier man. Douglas Holt writes about this in terms of how the frontier man or "gunfighter" image was useful in marketing Jack Daniels post-prohibition and again after both world wars. By intertwining the then little-known brand to the American frontier story, Jack Daniels distilleries were able to imbue their product with the values held by society at that time: "The frontier was viewed as the great socializer of American men, and, hence, the fountainhead of America's strength as a nation. Over time, stories accumulated dramatizing how men attained virtuous traits- courage, self-reliance, honesty- through their perilous encounters on the frontier."<sup>50</sup> This works the same on *AoM*. Because the narrative of the American frontier is a myth, new markets can re-imagine its effects to suit their current needs. Even the advertisements on the site cater to these sensibilities, offering brands like *Huckberry* and *Frank and Oak* with bearded gentlemen wearing suits as their models.

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<sup>50</sup> Douglas B. Holt "Jack Daniel's America Iconic brands as ideological parasites and proselytizers." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6, no. 3 (2006): 359-360.

This tactic of employing the American frontier man myth is hugely successful and imperative to the way *AoM* attracts its audience and is replayed in the values it endorses. In particular, it draws on the “self-reliant” nature of the frontier man. The appeal is in the perceived way he takes care of himself against the harsh unpredictability of nature except, on the blog, nature is presented as the modern world and its infinite and overwhelming possibilities. Examples of this can be found under the “Manly Skills” section of the site. Here, men can look up practical skills such as “How to Jump Start a Car” and “How to Install a New Thermostat,” as well as less practical skills like, “How to Carve an Axe Handle From a Log,” and “How to Make a Cigar Box Guitar.”<sup>51</sup> This kind of individualism with a wink to the tongue-in-cheek manliness Brett addresses at the head of this chapter is the basis of *AoM*’s rebranding of masculinity. The combination of DIY craftiness and masculine independence in this section is a nod to both the nostalgic tone of the site and the overarching message of self-sustainability. It also helps that it is presented in a way that a user of the site must access himself if he decides he is interested, as if to say, “a man shouldn’t be afraid to get his hands dirty, and here’s some advice if he needs help with that.”

This privatized approach to self-governing is apparent in many articles on the site, but is countered by other articles that discuss the importance of friendship and

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<sup>51</sup> Brett and Kate McKay, “How to Jump Start a Car,” accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2008/09/11/how-to-jump-start-a-car/>

Brett McKay, “How to Install a New Thermostat,” accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/10/30/how-to-replace-a-thermostat/>

Darren Bush, “How to Carve an Axe Handle From a Log,” accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/11/12/how-to-carve-an-axe-handle-from-a-log/>

Manly Guest Contributor, “How to Make a Cigar Box Guitar,” accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/10/13/how-to-make-a-cigar-box-guitar/>

community. The balance that is struck here emphasizes being your own man, and in doing so, choosing to be the kind of man that is an asset to his community. Interestingly, this appears to be a near parallel of messages encoded into the language of women's magazines. However, the image of self-made success is tied closely to characteristics of masculinity. In her book *Self Help Inc.*, Micki McGee discusses helping one's self with an emphasis placed on doing so only if you are in a certain position. For example, as long as one is single and unattached, you may pursue help and self fulfillment, never at the expense of your dependants. "Men were deemed self-made, while women, lacking the appropriate masculine characteristics for success, were, ironically, designated as the self-made man's invisible helpers."<sup>52</sup> Hence, men are encouraged to be themselves for themselves, and women are instructed to do the same as long as it doesn't jeopardize their family life. The "adoption of feminist registers," such as pleasing one's self, in women's magazines, as pointed out by Rosalind Gill, serves to push female magazine readers to be more in control in their lives. Women are encouraged to seek an active work/ home life balance that offers "a fantasy of being able to work, bring up children, produce spectacular dinner parties, and also fit in regular 'home projects' such as creating a garden pond or a mosaic."<sup>53</sup> In this way, *AoM* actually follows a formula similar to the way women's magazines reach out to their readers with messages of empowerment that overlay a rather traditional, heteronormative agenda.

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<sup>52</sup>Micki McGee *Self-help, Inc.: Makeover culture in American life*. Oxford University Press, 2005, 15-16

<sup>53</sup> Rosalind Gill, "Gender in Magazines: From *Cosmopolitan* to *Loaded*," *Gender and the Media*. Polity, (2007): 184.

### The Values of Masculinity on *AoM*

*AoM*'s nostalgic appeal is pushed forward through the types of values supported on the site. One of the major cornerstones of adulthood as it is expressed on *AoM* is the idea that a man produces more than he consumes. The emphasis on self-reliance seems to be connected to the ways adults differ from youths. With this value on top, the site can push its nostalgic appearance and tie it in with the American frontiersman myth. In order to present these values, I've re-categorized the articles on the site into three topics: Personal life, professionalism, and "manovationals," or philosophic discussions about masculinity. There are some values these topics have in common, such as a man should be personally accountable for his actions and responsible for their consequences. The individualistic sensibility present across much of the site does not seem to reject the notion of communal good, but does assert that a man must first provide for himself, then his family, and finally his community. In other instances, certain values only come to the foreground in specific situations. For instance, being a gentle and doting father involves values like compassion and infinite patience. Elements of these values can be useful in a professional setting. However, being "infinitely patient" with a bad boss does not work well with other values placed on professionalism on *AoM*.

Intentionality is another important value endorsed on the site that is imperative to *AoM*'s brand of masculinity. Differing from the nostalgic narrative of much of the site, this spin on what could otherwise be described as "mindfulness" appears to be a masculinization of a tactic more often discussed in texts that hail more feminine audiences. For example, in an article that discusses the mindset of new fathers, McKay

encourages his readers to practice their “tactical breathing.”<sup>54</sup> In other publications, this could be described as “yogic breathing,” and is usually infused with flowery adjectives meant to relax readers and connect them to nature. On *AoM*, however, this tactic is described as being one that is employed by soldiers and the like that are put in highly stressful combat situations.<sup>55</sup> The masculinization of this common meditation technique and the situations that describe its usefulness are important to the ways the site connects with its audience.

In an article discussing the rising trend of the “lumbersexual,” author Willa Brown noted that in times past the glory of the lumberjack was associated with fresh air and manual labor- all things that would cleanse a man of the overwhelming cultural fatigue he might have experienced at the turn of the last century. But the story of the lumberjack is not necessarily one of “youth and ardor and strong life,” but rather one of man vs. nature, “They were not part of the forest. If anything, they were terrified of it—and for good reason, when it took so many lives.” While lumberjacks themselves “reserved the bulk of their nostalgia for drinking, fighting, gambling and visiting prostitutes in town,” culture at large had a different conclusion to make.<sup>56</sup> How does culture make use of nostalgia and why are certain aspects raised up as values? This next section looks at the values highlighted on *AoM* and their relationship with nostalgia.

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<sup>54</sup> “New Dad Survival Guide: The Skillset,” Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/12/11/new-dad-survival-guide-the-skillset/>

<sup>55</sup> “Managing Stress Arousal for Optimal Performance,” Accessed June 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/08/15/managing-stress-arousal-for-optimal-performance-a-guide-to-the-warrior-color-code/#breathing>

<sup>56</sup> Willa Brown, “Lumbersexuality and its Discontents,” *The Atlantic*, Dec 10, 2014

*AoM & Personal Values*

Friendship and male bonding are greatly important to the ethos of *AoM*. Part of this is reflected in the design of the website. As *AoM* draws on images from the past to reflect the mindset presented in its articles, there are nostalgia-tinged photographs of men expressing “fellow-feeling.” The key in cultivating this kind of healthy emotional well-being is vulnerability. If a man is not able to allow his feelings to be shown he cannot expect others to truly know how he feels, whether those feelings are towards an individual or about a situation. By allowing himself to be vulnerable he is able to open himself up to another valuable asset to any man’s life, community. By encouraging readers to let people in and accept vulnerability as part of friendship, *AoM* encourages men to tap into that rich emotional life men of the past are thought to have enjoyed before the portrayal of emotion was feminized. This viewpoint is problematic however, because of the nature of nostalgia as a marketing ploy on the site. On the one hand, men of the past are thought to be more emotionally repressed; on the other hand, many men today don’t seem to be any less repressed. I discussed this with McKay in our interview both in terms of nostalgia and as a style choice. He explained:

Today you cannot hug another guy or be affectionate. This is an anomaly in male history. You go back just even 70 years ago, you can find these photos and snapshots taken of men where they’re basically hugging each other and being really affectionate. And you don’t see that today. So what we do is we’ll take some of these concepts that [are] positive pro-social things we want to encourage in men and say like look, here’s this bad-ass from history who charged San Juan Hill and at the same time he wasn’t ashamed of having a rich deep emotional life. And that seems to work.<sup>57</sup>

This plays back to the power of the American frontier myth and its narrative. Holt notes, “Myths are imaginative stories and images that selectively draw on history as

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<sup>57</sup> Brett McKay, interviewed by Leslie Peckham, via Skype, April 17, 2014.

source material. Because myths are narratives rather than rational arguments, their ideological effect works through the magical elision of facts and ideals.”<sup>58</sup> The bad-ass Brett is discussing in the quote above is Theodore Roosevelt, one of the heroes of the site and a key figure in the American frontier myth. By aligning the ideas of *AoM* with historical figures with favorable values, McKay works to persuade his audience that being in touch with one’s emotions is healthy, and that emotional fitness is a worthwhile pursuit.

Another way *AoM* addresses personal values is in the authorial tone of the articles. Most of the articles I researched have included a portion of personal narrative from the author, whether that is Brett McKay, he and Kate, or another of the *AoM* staff writers and contributors. In each narrative, the writer usually reveals something personal about himself and uses that as a platform to discuss the issue at hand. For example, in an article titled, “What I’ve Learned Raising a Daughter (Thus Far),” McKay admits apprehension about his daughter because he didn’t know if he could relate to or help raise a child that would likely prefer “tea parties to a rugby match.” Then he tells his audience how all that vanished the first time he held her. “The fears I once had about not being able to love a girl as much evaporated as I became the ridiculously proud parent I’d always mocked.”<sup>59</sup> When asked about this in our interview, McKay was a little resistant at first:

I very rarely interject myself into the post, but oftentimes the reason I do it, there’s a point to it. There’s all these websites where people are like, “yeah, this is

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<sup>58</sup> Douglas B. Holt "Jack Daniel's America Iconic brands as ideological parasites and proselytizers." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6, no. 3 (2006): 359.

<sup>59</sup> “What I’ve Learned Raising a Daughter (Thus Far),” accessed April 27 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2009/05/19/what-ive-learned-raising-a-daughter-thus-far/>

my brand, you can follow me,” and that makes me feel weird. So I don’t do it for that reason. So when I do inject myself into the post it’s like I’m trying to show people that I’m not the paragon of masculinity or manhood or manliness, I’m learning right along with guys. Oftentimes the post, like the how-to-stuff, like I didn’t know how to do that before and so I tell people, “I didn’t know how to change the oil in my car and I’m a 30-year-old man. So I had to ask another guy to help me out.” So I’m trying to basically say hey, it’s OK to ask for help. It’s OK that you don’t know everything, as long as you’re trying.<sup>60</sup>

By using his personal narrative to connect with audiences, McKay gives a signal to his readers that it is OK to do so in their own lives, thus building a culture of sharing into *AoM*’s brand of blended masculinity. McKay’s willingness to teach by example, and to be that example, puts him closer to his audience. In narrowing this gap, the site’s mode of address is constructed to appear non-threatening and more relatable or even approachable to his audience. This sets it apart from other cultural forms that hail male audiences.

*Men’s Health* magazine also addresses its audience in an informal manner. As Arran Stibbe has argued, *Men’s Health* uses the discourse of medical science and the discourse of the “buddy” to address its readers. In the same *Men’s Health* article discussing “platelet aggregation” and “homocysteine levels,” for example, the scientific discourse is mixed with “informational terms such as ‘yellow goop’ and ‘a cold frosty one,’ reminding the reader that it is the buddy speaking, not the scientists.”<sup>61</sup> In doing this, the magazine makes information accessible to men while also making a very important nod to masculine power relations. “If men take the advice of a friend, they are

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<sup>60</sup> Brett McKay, interviewed by Leslie Peckham, via Skype, April 17, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Arran Stibbe, "Health and the Social Construction of Masculinity in *Men’s Health* Magazine," *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 1 (2004): 36.

not capitulating to a more powerful expert, the ‘pompous know-it-all’.”<sup>62</sup> Stibbe notes that some of the language in *Men’s Health* is pejorative, as if the utilization of the “buddy” character to deliver bad news about health somehow softens the blow. However, as the magazine partially constructs its reader’s desires via its imagery of ideal masculinity, this “buddy” has a serpent’s tongue when it comes to doling out meaningful advice. This is similar to the ways women’s magazines have addressed their audiences.

Rosalind Gill writes:

Woman’s magazines share a number of important features: they tend to address readers as equals and friends and to adopt an intimate tone: they are organized around the shared pleasures and labors of femininity: they are invariably constructed in opposition to masculinity (focused on what women share by dint of being women) and are also structured by implicit exclusions relating to age, ‘race’, sexuality and class: and they adopt a language of individualism, with an emphasis on personal solutions at the expense of collective social or political struggle.<sup>63</sup>

While *AoM* does use personal narrative to draw audiences and its friendly tone does put it alongside titles like *Men’s Health*, there are differences that make it distinct. Unlike the ways *Men’s Health* and women’s magazines address their audience, *AoM* does not build its readership in opposition to women or other professionals; rather, it tries to find ways to be inclusive (albeit in a generally heteronormative fashion). The inclusion of personal narratives in the construction of *AoM* articles differs from the “buddy” used in *Men’s Health* in two major ways. First, the construction of a “buddy” is false. The would-be “buddy” is a fabrication of the magazine in order to a) keep the perceived masculine hierarchy intact, and b) capitulate to a higher authority *in place of the reader*, thus preventing the reader from being accountable for the decision making process. In

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Gender in Magazines: From *Cosmopolitan* to *Loaded*,” *Gender and the Media*. Polity, (2007): 183.

contrast, and secondly, *AoM* presents personal information as background to the issue at hand, allowing for readers to come to their own understanding via empathy. This not only allows readers to make their own decisions, but also invites them to participate in a culture of sharing, which extends into the comments sections. Thus, *AoM* puts itself on the same level as its audience and shirks the pedestal held onto by so many other media outlets.

For *AoM*'s brand of masculinity, dating means taking a look back at the values of an older generation. Here a young man may find tips on how to make small talk, courtship rituals, and how to make the all-important decision to start a life together. The values here are based around respectful yet sentimental communication. After all, man's rich emotional life should begin with forging close male friends, but in many cases the natural extension of emotional wellbeing eventually moves past friendships and on to romantic companionship. Successful dating is based on strong, open communication and the establishment of clear boundaries. In these relationships, it's important to remember that two people, no matter how close, do not share the same mind, and it's important to check in and make sure you are on the same page with each other.<sup>64</sup>

This is wildly different than the kind of relationship advice one might expect from a publication such as *Men's Health* or *Esquire*. Here, relationship advice clashes with the tone used to deliver much of the rest of the content of the magazine, rendering most of the advice meaningless. Advice is usually doled out using the voice of the "buddy." An expert might insist on using the "needs script," but the "buddy" tone used to address such matters could over-simplify the importance of communicating these needs in favor of

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<sup>64</sup>"How to Communicate Your Needs in a Relationship," Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/05/15/how-to-communicate-your-needs-in-a-relationship/>

man to man jocularly. Conversely, women's magazines dole out advice that seems fraught with contradiction. One such publication, *Women's Own*, addresses readers as married women but recognizes that many of them are not, often idealizing marriage while ignoring the fact that one in three will end in divorce. Relationship advice sways from encouraging women to take control, cautioning them against using too much, and sticking to what they are comfortable with. Instead, *AoM* offers relationship advice in a straight forward manner that is accessible to its audience. Value is placed on direct communication that avoids confrontation while getting needs across and encouraging readers to commit to compromises whenever necessary.

On fatherhood, *AoM* places the strongest value on intentionality. The prevailing idea presented throughout many of the articles is based on building a family culture *by design*, not by *default*.<sup>65</sup> This includes articles with topics from "The Ultimate Guide to Buying the Perfect Engagement Ring," to "Figuring Out How Many Children to Have."<sup>66</sup> According to Brett McKay's advice, a man must decide with his partner what kind of family he wants and create it. *AoM*'s adherence to strong nuclear family values both is and is not inclusive and variable in its building from a contemporary mindset. By including women as central to leading the family instead of second to their husbands, the site sets itself apart from other publications by representing women as equals. Unfortunately, this leaves out a host of "unconventional" family types, like single parent families or same-sex parents, which the site neglects to represent at all. Probably, this is

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<sup>65</sup> "Fathering With Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture," Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/07/22/family-culture/>

<sup>66</sup> "The Ultimate Guide to Buying the Perfect Engagement ring," Accessed Nov. 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2009/07/01/the-ultimate-guide-to-buying-the-perfect-engagement-ring/>

because the site is, unconsciously or no, addressing a specific type of masculinity that is heteronormative while allowing for, but not necessarily accepting, the presence of other kinds of masculinity. I return to this point shortly.

Intentionality is a value highly praised on *AoM* both in creating a family and living in a community and is central to their rebranding of masculinity. “Fathering With Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture” begins by describing the kind of family “we all wanted to be part of when we were growing up; Everyone loves and respects each other, and when they are together, everyone has a blast.”<sup>67</sup>

Corporations and companies work largely in the same way; they build a culture into the infrastructure of the organization and create the culture they live in. Husbands and wives can sit together and decide how their family is going to be from day one. By assuming this kind of corporate language works the same for the family unit, that unit functions as a microcosm for society; therefore, by valuing and creating a positive family culture, this model of the family institution helps its members turn into contributing members of society.

One key aspect of the family institution, according to the site, is the establishment of family traditions. “Traditions can be big or small, but they differ from routines and habits in that they are done with a specific purpose in mind and require thought and intentionality.” Throughout the article authored by both Brett and Kate McKay, the importance of tradition, as well as some methods for creating those traditions, are highlighted and then discussed further in the comments. Traditions provide identity and teach values, strengthen the family bond, offer comfort and security, and provide a means

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<sup>67</sup> “Fathering With Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture,” Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/07/22/family-culture/>

to pass on a family's cultural and religious heritage. They also add rhythm to the seasons of life and help make for grounded individuals, the authors claim.<sup>68</sup>

Another nod to nostalgic family traditions is the weekly family meeting. The article that addresses this topic is written by both Brett and Kate. It suggests that while many women take charge of the details of home and work, one way for a man to assume a leadership role in the home is to assume the duties of planning a family meeting.<sup>69</sup> As the children grow, they can take on leadership duties as well, and will learn a lot about communication from watching their mother and father distribute familial responsibility. This way, children learn to take an active role in building their family culture as well. Another of the more overlooked family traditions that the site champions is the tradition of family dinner. *AoM* asserts that family dinners are a simple way for the family to keep on the same page, teach manners, and learn the conversational arts, not to mention providing another important venue for building family culture.<sup>70</sup> Finally, as your family becomes solidified, another value presented on *AoM* is to create a family mission statement. This begins with a husband and wife team discussing how they plan to build an intentional family culture and grows from there to include children as they progress

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<sup>68</sup> "Creating a Positive Family Culture: The Importance of Establishing Family Traditions," Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/09/creating-a-positive-family-culture-the-importance-of-establishing-family-traditions/>

<sup>69</sup> "Creating a Positive Family Culture: How to Plan and Lead a Family Meeting," Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/02/14/creating-a-positive-family-culture-how-to-plan-and-lead-a-weekly-family-meeting/>

<sup>70</sup> "Creating a Positive Family Culture: How to Get the Most out of Family Dinners," Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/04/08/creating-a-positive-family-culture-how-to-get-the-most-out-of-family-dinner/>

along the stages of life. As the children grow, they participate in ever more meaningful ways, thus ingraining a culture of participation and sharing into the next generation.<sup>71</sup>

These articles on personal advice have an emphasis on intentionality and vulnerability. While opening one's self up allows for deeper personal relationships, intentionality assures that important relationships stay intact. The importance of male bonding gives men a place to work out issues away from family and spouses but also makes sure the family unit is kept strong while looking out for a man's emotional well being. This duality in a man's personal life represents the checks and balances needed to keep any person healthy in their relationships with others. However, while the values portrayed on *AoM* emphasize strength in interpersonal relationships, in the *AoM* mindset, arguably the most important relationship one has is with one's self.

#### *AoM & Professional Values*

The Career & Money advice on *AoM* largely addresses an audience that is of working age. Most of the articles in this section deal with financial responsibility post-college, how to select a career, and how to make one's self valuable in an ever changing job market. For example, a series by Jeremy Anderberg, a full time contributor to *AoM*, discusses the viability of college for young men and weighs the pros and cons of a traditional four-year degree, offering insight on alternative options. This is important to the overall structure of the site because of its focus on intentional decision making, self-reliance, and mindfulness about one's future.

Anderberg begins by working through a history of college in America and how this evolved from a luxury to a rite of passage. This history includes the commoditization

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<sup>71</sup> "Creating a Positive Family Culture: How and Why to Create a Family Mission Statement," Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/08/21/creating-a-family-culture-how-and-why-to-create-a-family-mission-statement/>

of higher education by for-profit institutions in the post-war era. Anderberg cites this as a major reason why one should approach with caution when thinking about applying for college or any other 4-year degree. Crippling debt and the lack of preparation for “real life” and the job market are the leading reasons he gives for not attending one of these institutions. He also dissects the stigma attached to attending two-year colleges and vocational schools. The self-reliant mindset of *AoM* in general is also brought forth in the article, “Is College for Everyone? 11 Alternatives to the Traditional 4-Year College.” The first item on the list of alternatives is starting one’s own business.<sup>72</sup> This is relevant to *AoM* because it is the basis for how this site originated. The value here is placed not on education, but on making a plan and following through with it, particularly if that plan includes going into business for yourself. This too is tied to the nostalgic overtones on the site as men of a certain age in decades past would either take up the family business or go out to pursue a career of their own. College was something for a wealthier class of people, not necessarily the next step on the life ladder. What Anderberg’s article does is remind young men that visit the site that they have options, that private enterprise can be one of the best paths to success, and that exploring options like these can lead to some worthwhile experiences.

Finally, Anderberg leaves readers with a list of ways to be thriftier, reminding them that, “A mature man is a self-reliant man.”<sup>73</sup> “Students graduate as consummate consumers who are wholly unprepared to switch roles and take on the mantle of

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<sup>72</sup> “Is College for Everyone? 11 Alternatives to the Traditional 4-Year College,” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/04/17/is-college-for-everyone-10-alternatives-to-the-traditional-4-year-college/>

<sup>73</sup> “The 3 Biggest Financial Regrets of College Graduates and How to Avoid Them,” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/08/06/the-3-biggest-financial-regrets-of-college-graduates-and-how-to-avoid-them/>

producers.”<sup>74</sup> In this case, to be self-reliant is to exceed one’s dependence on conventional materials and to learn to make good with what one has. This perspective mixes individualism and humility, which is valuable because it teaches a man to be realistic about his prospects and plot a course accordingly. It also makes the site’s message of self-reliance more palatable if it is mixed with ideas of thriftiness and adaptability, values that are usually associated with consumption and therefore feminized. A man learns to consider his options more fully, rather than following the expectations placed on him by his parents or society in general.

Another article, “Hit the Ground Running: How to Ace Your First Day and First Week at a New Job,” addresses career anxiety and preaches self assurance and preparedness to help one feel comfortable in the workplace and win the boss’s good opinion.<sup>75</sup> The advice here is rather general, nothing that especially hails men in particular. But the presence of an article of this kind is relevant to the idea of bettering young men’s job prospects just by helping them once again consider their options. Getting one’s life in gear can sometimes feel like a daunting process, one that many young people in general seem to balk at. Michael Kimmel discusses in *Guyland* that there seems to be a preponderance of young men who get stuck in a “low gear” after college and end up floating through their 20s (and sometimes beyond) without much ambition or direction.<sup>76</sup> Another article by Brett McKay titled, “Good News! Your Life Isn’t

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<sup>74</sup> “Is College for Everyone? Part II: The Pros and Cons of Attending a 4-Year College,” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/24/is-college-for-everyone-part-ii-the-pros-and-cons-of-attending-a-4-year-college/>

<sup>75</sup> “Hit the Ground Running: How to Ace Your First Day and First Week at a New Job,” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/05/30/hit-the-ground-running-how-to-ace-your-first-day-and-first-week-at-a-new-job/>

<sup>76</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Harper Collins, 2008.

Limitless!” helps to quell analysis paralysis in this area.<sup>77</sup> Here, McKay discusses a book by Meg Jay titled *The Defining Decade* and works through some of its lessons with readers. He discusses how it is difficult, and can seem impossible, to figure out what one wants in life, but using the wisdom of Jay and his personal narrative, McKay steers his readers into a more productive mindset. This is reiterated many times over on the blog—that though individuality is nice and our society prizes it, a single person isn’t that special in the grand scheme of things. It’s better to be humble and work hard at tangible things than to dream big and go nowhere.

Other advice proffered to young professionals includes how to start a business, how to deal with a job that is less desirable, and, finally, how to quit a job gracefully and maintain any good connections established while there. The narrative of self reliance is tempered with humility and the necessity of learning from one’s mistakes. In the article about starting a business, practicality is reiterated throughout the article, encouraging readers to pursue this path (as it is a viable alternative to college), but also to be resilient. The article “How to Deal with a Job You Don’t Like” starts off accepting how one can get to this point but points out positive changes a man can make within himself before making that final move to quitting.<sup>78</sup> “How you do anything is how you do everything. Good habits are formed in the things we don’t like to do, but do anyway because that’s how you become a reliable man.” The final phrase in the article instructs readers to refrain from sharing their “sob story” about unenjoyable employment and, “Instead, tell

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<sup>77</sup> “Good News! Your Life Isn’t Limitless!” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/04/29/good-news-your-life-isnt-limitless/>

<sup>78</sup> “How to Deal with a Job You Don’t Like,” Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/12/10/how-to-deal-with-a-job-you-dont-like/>

me what you're going to do to take charge of your workday and make it better," shifting focus away from fruitless complaints and toward positive, goal-oriented direction.<sup>79</sup>

The overall "bootstrappy-ness" of these articles is where the most traditional values presented on *AoM* are endorsed. In all, this section on professional values discusses the need to have a professional life, while inciting readers to build a career of their own. It acknowledges the need for money to get started, and suggests a variety of outlets ranging from a four-year university to sheer will power. But mostly what these articles discuss are options and a man's willingness to participate in his life by choosing one option and going for it rather than floating half-heartedly between a few options or doing nothing.

#### *Manovationals and Being a Better Man*

In the introduction to this chapter I described an article that deals with the topic of manliness. The article takes the reader through the historical construction of the language of manliness- what that means and how it has changed through the centuries. Today "manliness" has become a glib marketing tool. Manliness as a concept represents a kind of masculinity that is associated most often with athletes and that is usually referenced with a wink, as if to be "manly" is lacking in seriousness, or wanting an authentic or meaningful representation of taste. Manliness used to mean much more than a smirk at the end of a Doritos commercial. In this final section I go through some of the discussions on *AoM* about how masculine identity is formed and actualized by individuals, and what parts of it are being rebranded by this site.

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<sup>79</sup> "How to Quit a Job (Without Burning Bridges)," Accessed April 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/30/how-to-quit-a-job-without-burning-bridges/>

In the same article on the language of manliness, Brett and Kate McKay go through the history of language and pull out as many masculine adverbs as they can. “The ancient Greek word for courage- *andreia*- literally meant *manliness*. Courage was considered the *sin qua non* of being a man; the two qualities were inextricably linked.” The article goes on to describe how courage, along with wisdom, justice, and temperance, make up the cardinal virtues that can bring a man (or any person, really) to excellence. The evolution of this idea goes on to include other virtues such as bravery, honesty, activity, and piety, along with gentleness, “A man is not less manly, but more so, because he is gentle.” The language of manliness includes words such as “manly” and “manful,” meaning a man can make a “manful effort,” or that a man can have a “manly handshake.” Here, along with the other virtues discussed, manliness also comes to possess such qualities as vigor, bravery, resolve, and firmness. To be “unmanned” is not to lose one’s masculinity, but to be “deprived of the powers and qualities of a man. The term was frequently used in reference to a man’s giving in to a strong emotional reaction.”<sup>80</sup>

This opens up a discussion about the ways society addresses masculinity and how this reflects the conversation a man has with himself about how to be a man. By using the linguistic history of the word “man” as a context for how this conversation is going, *AoM* is again able to relate to its audience on a personal level. Contemporarily, language around masculinity has shifted away from the virtues it used to embody to stand for more simplified uses. Some of these connote a manly slant, such as *man purse*; others are more ridiculous such as *mancation*. *Manovational* itself is one such portmanteau coined by

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<sup>80</sup> “Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness,” accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>

Brett McKay to stand for a piece of text that will inspire a man's spirit. But none is so widely known and perhaps abused as "man up."

What began as a rallying phrase popularized in football locker rooms, the phrase, "man up" has become a shame tactic. This tactic, employed "often by women or feminist organizations seeking to tap into the traditional mechanics of honor and shame in an attempt to motivate men to adopt certain behaviors," has been used in a broad array of contexts both jocular and pejorative to denote that the way an individual is acting is somehow subpar.<sup>81</sup> One thing McKay indicates here is the way language can change when used by members of the opposite sex. One man telling another man to "man-up" on the football field will be perceived differently than a woman telling a man to "man-up" in another situation. The phrase is pejorative in both instances but perhaps easier taken from that former example due to in-crowd status. The article also discusses how this term is used as a marketing tool. One Paul Mitchell line of men's styling products boasts the slogan, "Man Up. Style isn't born. It's groomed." Finally, the phrase is also used by men in man on man attacks against effeminate behavior and sentiments.

The article ends with a brief but interesting discussion on how the language of masculinity has largely gone out of style because of "society's increasing emphasis on gender neutrality." This also claims that women are "generally more sensitive to status-particularly to [men's] status in regards to whether they're a man or not." As identity is usually constructed in opposition with something, it makes sense why the article would move the discussion in this direction. As the author, Brett McKay also concedes the backwards motion of trying to "defeat gender normativity with gender normativity." The

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<sup>81</sup> "Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness," accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>

broader discussion in the article, however, holds that constructing masculinity in opposition to women or other men for that matter is not positive, and generally an out-of-date way of thinking. Instead, Brett offers inspiration in the form of nostalgia, pointing to the historical definitions of manliness as discussed in the article and holding them up as virtue, or a way for men to strive toward excellence. “I’d argue that instead of trying to convince men not to care (which is a losing battle), we’d be better served reviving the classical meaning of these manly descriptors to help inspire men to strive for virtue and excellence.”<sup>82</sup> The irony here is that masculinity of days gone by was constructed exactly in opposition to femininity. But it is my belief that McKay and his site do not intend to construct masculinity in opposition to femininity, but rather in opposition to *current forms of masculinity*.

Brett McKay’s article series dealing with “the three Ps of masculinity; to provide, to protect, and to procreate” insinuates that these are the imperatives for foundation of masculinity throughout the ages and across many cultures. The series covers the ideas put forth by David Gilmore in his book, *Manhood in the Making*, an anthropological history of masculinity. McKay distills Gilmore’s ideas into three main concepts and how they relate to masculinity at large, as well as how they intersect with the values supported on *AoM*. A side note to the series addresses in a methodical fashion how some men may disagree with these concepts as being the most masculine imperatives, but goes on to insist that this reaction is natural and even expected in some instances. The main point is to continue reading as a way to gain perspective. McKay writes that if most men can find value in two of three imperatives, then all the better. He uses his personal narrative to

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<sup>82</sup> “Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness,” accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>

push these ideas forward. As these ideas are discussed as anthropological notions of masculinity across several different cultures, the element of nostalgia takes on more of a historical note throughout this series.

The imperative “to protect” discusses the relationship masculinity has with courage before discussing the idea that, in a historical context, men have always been more expendable than women. Boundaries defended by men go far beyond country and extend to family, lineage, and reputation. “To be socially meaningful, the decision for manhood must be characterized by enthusiasm combined with stoic resolve or perhaps “grace.” I discussed this point with McKay in our interview and how it has evolved greatly in a society that is increasingly embracing drone-based warfare, is overpopulated, and has a workforce half made up of women.

I’ll never have to fight off an invading army, probably. And now you have drones that are coming into play, so those are replacing even more men. And there are other areas, like combat. One of the things that have kept women out of combat is the whole strength thing, right? Men generally have more upper body strength than women, and that’s important for some reason in combat. But, what’s interesting is there’s technology coming out that might even make that irrelevant.<sup>83</sup>

Especially in terms of warfare, men are not called to protect their families the way they used to be. If men are not serving in the military, how does a man protect his family and from what? What makes “protection” a masculine imperative and how does that function in this day and age? Here, McKay opens up this imperative to discussion and the conversation moves to determine how everything from gun control to genetically modified food affects families. This is similar to the argument Faludi puts forward in her book, *Stiffed*. If the place men once held in society is changing or shrinking, how are men supposed to respond? McKay puts forward that there are parts of the nostalgic versions of

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<sup>83</sup> Brett McKay, interviewed by Leslie Peckham, via Skype, April 17, 2014.

this imperative worth exploring, “that you should retain the best parts of these manly duties, discard what doesn’t work, and not throw out the baby with the bathwater.”<sup>84</sup> The article ends by finding the value in protecting what one can in the ways one can, but leaves what that is open to discussion. True to the self-reliant nature of the site, the audience is left to discuss the value of this imperative and what they deem worthy of protecting. As value systems change, the discussion is the most valuable part, McKay asserts. As Faludi says, these changes are not for lamenting but for the construction and implementation of progressive changes that require adjustment.<sup>85</sup> I find this fluid take on an imperative refreshing, though I have doubts on the necessity of manhood in order to find the value of an imperative like protection. As a female, the value of protection has a definite slant toward the self, as most women are taught to be wary of their surroundings and to protect themselves from predators from an early age. Interestingly, this feminine narrative of self protection is absent from the article.

The imperative “to provide” is written as “the most appealing to contemplate,” with the greatest number of men participating in this imperative every day. It’s tied closely with the imperative “to create,” turning chaos into order and taking “the raw materials of life and transform[ing] them into something of value.” This is also the easiest imperative to romanticize. McKay waxes eloquent on the feeling, “I did this with my own hands.” This is a value that the site holds in highest regard. This ethos of doing-it-yourself and becoming a “producer” rather than a “consumer” is how the site defines a

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<sup>84</sup> “The Three Ps of Manhood: Protect,” Accessed March 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/02/24/the-3-ps-of-manhood-protect/>

<sup>85</sup> Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York, William Morrow & Company, 1999, 14

man. Other examples of this belief are shown in the “Manly Skills” section, where it describes how to make or build things of one’s own and in articles about the importance of growing one’s own garden.

To provide was once more about duty than self actualization, but in our modern society providing for one’s self is seen as a cornerstone to independence, one of the most highly prized values. Even a man’s physical prowess can be tied to this imperative as pointed out in the article and in Gilmore’s works. Historically, men have provided the physical labor that has built civilizations. Hunting is also a primal creative act as the “primary means of extracting value from nature by literally transforming wild animals into food.” A good hunter strengthened the entire tribe, hence making him more attractive as a mate and more respected by his peers. Personal autonomy and generosity are also keys to this imperative, according to the site. Just as the hunter who provides for his tribe is desired and respected, a man who gives back to his community is seen similarly. Curiously, the connection between “to provide” and “to create” does not go past the consumption of raw materials into goods and omits that the act of creation is closely tied with femininity and childbirth. Also, the site does not elucidate that the act of provision is masculinized and that, therefore, consumption is feminized; or that in order to provide a man must first consume resources which makes the imperative “to provide” analogous with the destruction of the natural world.

This imperative is further complicated by industrialization. Similar to protection moving out of the hands of humans and into computers in drones, when factory jobs became automated this also left men at a loss. By putting forward this perspective, the site addresses a whole generation of men that lack confidence or the wherewithal to get

past their lack of placement in society. In our interview, McKay told me that this has been a concern for men for a long time. How can a man define masculinity if he can't be a man like his father was? In the article Brett addresses the modernization of this statement by handing the responsibility, "to provide," back to the nuclear family unit. If a man can create a family, father with intentionality, and share equal partnership with his wife then he has already exceeded the masculinity of his father by providing children from well-rounded families that will add to a better society. He also allows for varying gender dynamics within the home by giving examples of families where the woman is the breadwinner and the man stays at home to raise the children. This is a rose-colored answer to how a man provides for his family; simply having a family and providing for it is not necessarily the answer. It is my opinion that this "imperative" overlooks the benefits of contributing to society as a worthwhile imperative, one that McKay himself touches on briefly toward the end of the article:

So the question we're both willing to entertain is, is trading harmonious efficiency for personal fulfillment a good trade? It may be good for us personally, but is it the best thing for the kids? Is it better for them to have a moderate amount of time with both parents, or would it be better for them to have a lot of time with one parent, and a little with the other? What's better for society as a whole? For us to shut down the blog and for Kate to become a full-time mom, and me to become a barber? Or will doing things the way we do them now allow us to both raise good kids and maybe add something valuable to society's store at the same time?

At the peak of the industrial revolution the concern for men was how they could be a man like their fathers and grandfathers were in a pre-industrial society. Folk tales at the time dealt heavily with this concern; Paul Bunyan failed to chop more wood than the machine and John Henry beat the machine to lay rail but died as a result. As McKay explained, "There's a lot of anxiety among men. It's like, what does it mean to be a man where really men aren't necessary in a lot of ways, in the traditional sense. There's a

great quote by Nicolas Taleb, he says the opposite of manliness isn't cowardice, it's technology, and it's true." This is another reason *AoM* endorses entrepreneurship so strongly. It is a way for men to act autonomously and provide for themselves and their families while using technology instead of being replaced by it.<sup>86</sup> Ironically, this also serves the self-sufficiency interests of the site by encouraging men to have a "side hustle" as a back-up plan, in case conventional employment does not satisfy or pan out. McKay himself is self-employed by way of technology and uses his "side-hustle" originated blog to provide for his family. It's romantic bravado perhaps, or indicative of McKay's conservative tendencies, but how else would he market a site he created but by believing in his message himself?

This is followed by the imperative, "to procreate," the most contended of the three imperatives by the audience. McKay works hard to distinguish how this imperative is tied to the idea of family and lineage. He reminds readers that these articles are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and that he "does not necessarily endorse the idea that every aspect of these standards should be perpetuated;" his aim is more to get the discussion started. The reader is encouraged to interpret which ideas suit his life best, which fit with the ideas on the site that suggest a man build his life with intentionality rather than follow the herd. The idea here is to produce more than consume. A man who has enough to provide for a family is able to keep this ratio in check. Similarly, a man who is able to employ DIY style craftiness becomes the artisan to his own family unit. Providing for his family in this way allows for a man to display his own wares in his own home and makes him less reliant on commodities made outside the home.

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<sup>86</sup>"The Three Ps of Manhood: Provide," Accessed March 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/19/the-3-ps-of-manhood-provide/>

The article also discusses the pitfalls of this imperative as it is one that has perpetuated much of the domestic violence throughout history. “And a man can hypothetically act on that drive whenever he wishes, it is possible for a man to not only initiate sex, but to do so without the woman’s consent.” Fear of impotence is also discussed in the article, as it is the most emasculating of all issues that plague masculinity. “Much of the risks men take, the wealth they try to accumulate, and the showy things they do are at their core, attempts to impress women, who have traditionally been the gatekeepers to sex.”<sup>87</sup> This simultaneously objectifies women by placing them in the realm of “goals” and makes men seem simple by relating their life goals to not much more than breeding. This discussion also treads dangerously into rape culture by pointing out what men do to impress women is a justification for sex without giving light to the feminine side of the equation where no promise of sex is given.

Another section addresses homosexuality, though not in any real constructive terms. Rather, the passage seems to accept homosexuality as existing, but seems to indicate that it is somehow less manly: “to be passive is to abdicate one’s masculinity, because it meant he surrendered the male prerogative of control or dominance.”<sup>88</sup> The passage alludes to the pleasure this kind of relationship can offer, but doesn’t go into any real detail before moving on, as if to say, “this is one *kind* of masculinity, but *it’s not the masculinity we’re discussing here.*”

To put some of these ideas in context, McKay acknowledges the difficulty of seeing procreation as a manly imperative, but suggests that it, not courage, should

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<sup>87</sup> “The Three Ps of Manhood: Procreate” Accessed March 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/03/the-3-ps-of-manhood-procreate/>

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*

become the *sin qua non* of manhood. This goes far beyond conceiving offspring. In fact, McKay points out how American culture celebrates the image of the perennial bachelor as the paragon of manliness. But when it comes to the other manly imperatives, to provide and to protect, society has de-emphasized men's importance to these roles. With fewer and fewer citizens joining the military and with women making up half the workforce, procreation is put forward as the last tenant of masculinity by the site. In our conversation, McKay elaborated on this idea:

Right now in America we live in a society that creates consumers. You just worry about what you can take. So I think it's such a positive idea of centering adulthood, whether you're a man or a woman, on being a producer. Contributing more than you take away. When you're a parent, you think about taking care of your kids first. Like if there's food at the dinner table, you don't take the last bite, you ask, you give it to your kid. And unfortunately we have a society where it's, "what's in it for me first, I'll get what's mine, and then everyone else can take care of themselves," which I don't think is good for anybody.<sup>89</sup>

Procreation becomes synonymous with production and with family in particular.

"Without even a tiny fiefdom to provide for and protect, some men will opt-out of the traditional duties of manhood altogether." McKay describes this phenomenon as "men going their own way," and it is discussed as such in the comments section. The intentional construction of a family, in which a man shares an egalitarian relationship with his spouse and is present in his children's lives, is placed as "the last bulwark" against the complete dissolution of manhood.<sup>90</sup> This point is strongly debated in the comments section as readers discuss how this imperative is enacted by men that are homosexual or that are worried about passing on genetic disorders. That the best thing a man can be is a father, I believe, is a bias of the authors of the site, inherent in its design.

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<sup>89</sup> Brett McKay, interviewed by Leslie Peckham, via Skype, April 17, 2014.

<sup>90</sup>"The Three Ps of Manhood: Procreate" Accessed March 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/03/the-3-ps-of-manhood-procreate/>

The values placed on masculinity on this site borrow from traditional values of days gone by and adaptations of these values to incorporate the mindset of a modern age. Tenets of masculinity that were valued in centuries past such as courage, self-reliance, willingness and ability to provide and protect one's family, are mixed with values placed on humanity in a modern age. Ideals formerly feminized by society, such as introspection, mindfulness, and self-improvement, are presented in ways that appeal to men: whether by address, as with "How to Not Be Your Absentee Father," or by construction, as with "Managing Stress Arousal for Optimal Performance." Additionally, the construction of a self through introspection and intentionality is emphasized as it draws from the self-reliant nature of the American frontiersman myth. In the next chapter, I provide a look at the conversations that are happening surrounding these ideas and how the audience is interpreting them.

### **Chapter 3: The Art of Conversation**

Now that the ideas presented on the site have been illuminated, it's time to take a look at who comes to this site and how they are affected by it. This chapter addresses the audience surrounding *AoM*. The site features a healthy "community" section where users are invited to ask questions and offer advice on a wide variety of "manly" topics. These topics include everything from dating and beard maintenance advice to a lively discussion on whether or not salt-water kayak fishing is safe or wise. There is a page for "Groups," including a support group for widowers and one for men who enjoy engaging in debate, a chat room, and a classified section. *AoM* offers member profiles so men can network socially from one forum to another. While all of these spaces offer rich sites for analysis, the brunt of my analysis will be dissecting the conversations taking place in the comments section after each article.

What do these conversations reveal about the audience of *AoM*? In this chapter, I focus on the ways that issues of gender and sexuality are discussed in the articles and comments sections of the blog. I dissect how personal narratives factor into each discussion and contribute to the establishment of community on the site. I will present how the ideologies on the site aim to interpolate a broad audience and in what ways are those perspectives adopted. I will also illustrate how in some ways, the ideologies on the site are intentionally left vague to allow for user interpretation, and in what ways this affects the effectiveness of the site. Finally, I will look at the philosophical values and perspectives brought up in the comments section and which types of conversations stand out. In his work on subcultures, Dick Hebdige wrote about the ways a culture defines itself both from within the culture itself and as it is defined by outside sources.

*Subcultures, the Meaning of Style* sought to identify the ways different subcultures gave

way to their successors. It is my aim to do the same within the various cultural representations of masculinity, particularly how *AoM* has done this within their own cultural community. Let's turn now to some of the ways *AoM* has built an audience that is different than the typical men's magazine audience.

### The Art of Manliness

*AoM*'s audience is made up of mostly American men ages 18-35, with a strong contingent of baby-boomers and some international readers from mostly commonwealth countries, as well as a small population of women. The attitude of this demographic is typically open, with a lot of men coming to the site for information and many coming away with more than they expected. In our interview, Brett noted that the international portion of his audience, at least, also came across as polite and even grateful for having this kind of resource, the majority of his thank you notes coming from Australia or France. Sometimes this thankfulness is evident in the comments section, with a lot of contributors prefacing their comments with words of praise toward the article and the site in general. Others pair these words of thanks with lamentations about being older than the apparent target demographic of the site. Despite the complaint, this kind of reaction still contributes to the overall discussion and culture of manhood.

In the last chapter I detailed how *AoM*'s nostalgia-based marketing plays a huge part in why this is a successful website. But how does nostalgia help build a thriving community, and why is this audience attracted to it? In our conversation, Brett and I discussed some of the distinguishing factors that make *AoM* what it is:

When I started the site, the reason I started the site is that I didn't like *Men's Health*, I didn't like *Maxim* and whatever, I always sort of fashioned myself as the "Anti-*Maxim*" or the "Anti-*AskMen*," where it's just like galleries of babes, galleries of cars, so I would be 'I'm not like that'. And there's some guys would

come over to the site and see what we're doing and like "this is gay" or "this is whatever" and "just a pussy", typical guy macho language. But then there are some guys who check it out and are like "wow, this is cool, it's different", "this actually resonates with me, it's actually improving my life", so there's that.<sup>91</sup>

A key feature of *AoM*'s success is its willingness to distinguish itself outside of the mainstream men's market. Brett's commitment to building a niche outside of the "babes and cars" style of marketing by establishing *AoM*'s masculinity as one based on tradition and nostalgia with a little progressive mindset mixed in draws exactly the kind of men that are turned off by *Maxim* and *Men's Health* and therefore left without representation in the media. The ties to a nostalgic past give this brand of masculinity a sort of dignity that the alternative not only lacks but appears to delight in lacking.

One example of this attitude is the over-all mindset of *ReturnofKings.com*, a rival website committed to the cause of masculinity in a very different way. An article titled, "The Art of Manliness is Poisoning the Concept of Masculinity with Disney Lifestyle Advice," authored by "Quintus Curtius" is a direct attack on *AoM*'s brand of masculinity, calling it "smug, woman-friendly, safe, and feel-good." One of the biggest threats to *RoK*'s brand of masculinity is the presence of women on *AoM*. "Curtius" which is most assuredly a pen-name, begins by blasting Kate's involvement with the site by stating, "Only in feminized America can a woman presume, with her infinite arrogance, to offer advice to men on how to be a man." He goes on to attack *AoM*'s "lack of suffering," advocating men to revel in their angst and bitterness, again attacking the McKays, "You aren't going to corral me into your safe, goody-two-shoes world. I'd prefer to whip out my tomahawk and take a few scalps. That's me." And finally, the author alleges, with no empirical proof, that the McKays are Mormons and that no man "who doesn't drink,

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<sup>91</sup> Brett McKay, interviewed by Leslie Peckham, via Skype, April 17, 2014.

smoke, or even use caffeine can meaningfully speak on... topics that are integral to the single dating male experience.”<sup>92</sup> This sort of “journalism” is blatantly sexist and filled with vitriol that only serves to polarize the exact community it presumes to help. On the contrary, *AoM*'s female inclusiveness in its perspectives on masculinity not only makes it a strong website with a more inclusive audience, but also engages an underserved market with a more progressive, family friendly vision of masculinity. Part of the success of these conversations is due to the heavy moderation of the comments in *AoM*'s articles.

The comments section of any online article is notorious for denigrating into a firefight of ill-mannered gaffs and it is common wisdom to skip the comments all together. To quell these issues, *AoM* employs moderation tactics in order to keep the conversation moving forward. The rules for the comment section are pretty straightforward: Be a Gentleman. I discussed the moderation process with Brett in our interview to find out the extent of his intervention:

Basically they have to be approved first and we welcome dissention and disagreement, but if you're going to be an a-hole about it we're not going to put that up there. If it's not constructive, and actually people appreciate that because I mean like wow, “It's amazing how civil the debate is here about the Art of Manliness.” It's for a reason.

Brett and Kate do all of the site's comment moderation with the help of just one assistant. With thousands of comments coming in each day, this seems like a monumentally thankless task, but one that yields important results for the site. As with the comments section, the Community boards and Forums sections of the site are also heavily moderated. Here, the audience is encouraged to engage in discussion and debate as long as it follows *AoM*'s “gentlemanly” standards. There is space off the main forum

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<sup>92</sup> “Art of Manliness is Poisoning the Concept of Masculinity with Disney Lifestyle Advice,” accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.returnofkings.com/25876/art-of-manliness-is-poisoning-the-concept-of-masculinity-with-disney-lifestyle-advice>

allocated for religious or political discussion and men are encouraged to engage in debate as long as it refrains from personal attack. Brett reserves the right to intervene at will and allows for one slip-up before deleting the user's account outright. While this extensive moderation might seem extreme, members of the site do seem to appreciate having a venue to discuss their issues, both with the topics in the forums and the articles on the site. Even when these conversations veer off-topic, they seem to get to the heart of the issue at hand. To further this discussion, I'll turn now to some of the specific conversations and personal narratives men are sharing on the site.

### A Manly Conversation

As I discussed in chapter 2, "Manly, Manful... Man Up? The Language of Manliness" outlines the evolution of certain terms with which we discuss masculinity. The conversation in the article's comments is a discussion of the value of gender-neutral language. Many men who contributed to the comments feed agreed that terms such as "man-up" were dated if not pointless, with a few striving to justify its use as a joke. Others found the term useful as a way to distance masculinity from femininity and even proposed a few alterations for that cause (ma'am-up being the front runner there). And finally, a few women added to the conversation by overall agreeing on the immaturity of the term, but also adding that the lack of "manly men" in the real world was frustrating. Overall, the consensus appeared to be in accord with the article: that terms like 'man-up' are bad for men but discussing masculinity by using gender-neutral language is problematic as well. This reaction both agrees with the tone of the article and misses the point. Part of the way *AoM* addresses its audience is with open ended articles such as these that allow readers to decide for themselves what side of the fence they are on. On

the one hand, this opens the site to a broader demographic, on the other it obscures *AoM*'s politics just enough to allow them to shift slightly from article to article. As an example of a more progressive mindset, one commenter added,

The problem with "man up" - well, the main problem, anyway, as there are many - is that it's pretty much synonymous with "be an adult," and, as you say, is often used in a shaming capacity. So it's applying masculinity to actions that should be gender-neutral - taking responsibility, apologizing when necessary, etc.<sup>93</sup>

Another commenter's reaction describes frustration and resistance to feminism as a more progressive stance:

Why are people annoyed about the lack of gender-neutral terms? This is a blog on manliness. Of course many of these virtues apply to women, but they take a different form for them. If a woman wants to take on these attributes as described, I seen no problem, but EVERY man has a responsibility to become the best man he can. This is not a gender-neutral site, so please don't complain.<sup>94</sup>

The criticism comes from men who are trying to find a way to discuss masculinity using "in group" terms that do not resort to infantilizing or shaming men. The problem is, men are trying to find away to describe a gender neutral action, such as "apologizing when necessary," within their own cultural community. Hence terms like "man up" become a way to describe the desired actions within a specific community, but then the term gets co-opted by others and used inappropriately, such as in marketing contexts or as a slant against an individual. In either case, the term is demeaning and emasculating. Unfortunately, no consensus was arrived at in the discussion, but the existence of the discussion itself is still useful. This conversation between what it appropriate for men to say to each other and what others say to men is a big part of the construction of

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<sup>93</sup> Kevin, "Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness," Accessed April, 2015, [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/#disqus_thread)

<sup>94</sup> Evan S. "Manly, Manful...Man Up? The Language of Manliness," accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/11/25/manly-manful-man-up-the-language-of-manliness/>

masculinity that *AoM* offers. Having a venue for this conversation still allows for men to make their own standards on an individual basis. The variety of people contributing to the site helps to further these ideologies but only as far as each audience member's perspectives are open to discussion.

Similarly, in an article titled "New Dad Survival Guide," Brett talks about getting into the mindset of being a father and encourages men to "get hands-on right away." "The more you see fatherhood as a challenge that will test your mettle and give you a chance to rise to the occasion, the easier it will be to maintain a positive mindset, and the more satisfying the experience will be."<sup>95</sup> This type of language is reflected in the comments by a variety of men reminiscing on how it felt to be a father for the first time, being thankful for the community and support *AoM* provides, and being thankful that they are not fathers because they know they are far from building a healthy environment for a child.

The more personal the topic, the more likely commenters will bring their own personal narrative to the discussion. One of the most commented on articles I've come across in my research is titled, "How to Handle a Miscarriage," with 283 comments. Most comments reveal a connection to the story. One in five pregnancies end in miscarriage yet it is a very taboo subject for most people. The comment stream on this article has been running for the past two years and still new comments are added daily. As one commenter pointed out,

I apologize for the above details, but was hoping that they could help someone else out. As you know, women don't talk much about miscarriage and men even

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<sup>95</sup> "New Dad Survival Guide: The Mindset," accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/12/12/new-dad-survival-guide-the-mindset/>

less so. That's why I really appreciated this article and all of the comments. Someone asked me today if I had kids. I wanted to tell them what had happened, but just said, "No". I still don't know how to answer that question.<sup>96</sup>

A pattern begins to form about the experience of masculinity and how that is related on *AoM*. Perhaps because Brett is a father, a lot of the site's articles discuss masculinity as it pertains to fatherhood and one's ability to effectively take on that role. Perhaps because, historically, the role of men and fathers has been primarily outside of the home, bringing men in on an issue such as how to discuss and cope with a miscarriage would seem to feminize a man. Rather than finding weakness in vulnerability, however, the perspectives of *AoM* embrace vulnerability as a strength that is neither male nor female but simply human. In this way, the personal narratives in the comments section function as much as a support group as well as a forum for men that are interested in working out what masculinity and fatherhood means to them.

Another prime example of this give and take between author and audience is found in the comments of the article, "Why I Like it When Other Men Make Me Feel Bad About Myself." In the article, Brett discusses comparing himself to other men who have led adventurous lifestyles that would describe the kind of frontier-man myth discussed in the previous chapter—men like Sam Sheridan whose career trajectory covers yacht piloting, smoke-jumping, Muay Thai boxing, and painting. Brett compares this "bastion of masculinity" to himself, "Me? I blog about manliness for a living from the suburbs of Tulsa, OK." The article received a lot of praise from the audience, as well as unexpected encouragement that found the blog an indispensable resource on masculinity. However, some commenters find Brett's admission of lacking manliness confusing:

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<sup>96</sup> Matt, "How a Man Handles a Miscarriage," accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/02/25/how-a-man-handles-a-miscarriage/>

If you believe the best way to raise manliness is to be a good example of it, instead of arguing with people about it, isn't this website just a huge waste of time? And before you get defensive about it, I am asking this purely out of curiosity about how you view your own work, not in a sarcastic way. Because I actually find the website quite useful, but from what you said in your comment above, you sound quite contradictory and you come across to me as very conflicted internally.<sup>97</sup>

This article is unique in the level of participation Brett takes in the comments. He responds to almost every comment, and is encouraging and optimistic in each one. To this comment, his response is nearly a page in length and explains why, though he may only be a blogger in Tulsa, he is still indirectly encouraging men to be, “good examples of manliness who then lead strong, virtuous families, raise good kids, mentor young men, and become leaders in their community.”<sup>98</sup> He makes himself available to his readers and follows-up when they appear unsatisfied with an answer. This level of participation especially to this article is telling. In the last chapter, I discussed the importance of personal narrative to this blog. I believe that this heightened level of participation in the comments section serves to push Brett’s message of the benefits and acceptability of male vulnerability even further while also providing a tone for the conversation to follow. First, it asserts that by claiming one’s vulnerability, a man can be brave. By putting himself out there, Brett sends the message that it is ok for other men to express their vulnerability likewise. Next, it establishes a range of masculine experiences from smoke jumping to blogging and sets them up as something one does, and not who one is. And finally, it allows for men to look up to other men while making them secure about who they are as individuals. As Brett puts it, “Instead of extinguishing the flame because its

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<sup>97</sup> Manuel, “Why I Like it When Other Men Make Me Feel Bad About Myself,” Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/09/29/why-i-like-when-other-men-make-me-feel-bad-about-myself/>

<sup>98</sup> Brett, “Why I Like it When Other Men Make Me Feel Bad About Myself,” Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/09/29/why-i-like-when-other-men-make-me-feel-bad-about-myself/>

light keenly illuminates where I fall short as a man, I look to find a way, as Cormac McCarthy puts it, to “carry the fire.”<sup>99</sup>

### A Gentleman’s Complaint

Some articles on the site inherently spark more controversy than others. Because the comments are moderated, it’s safe to assume that some of the more contentious comments are edited out in favor of more constructive criticisms. In other instances, however, some comments are let through. A few examples illustrate where some of the more contentious points are made on the site. This first comment addresses the role of fatherhood on the site. It comes in response to a quote by Hemingway that Brett points to in the article: “Ernest Hemingway once said ‘To be a successful father... there’s one absolute rule: when you have a kid, don’t look at it for the first two years.’” While Brett says that he doesn’t endorse Hemingway’s tip, he says that men typically do enjoy their children more as they get older.<sup>100</sup> In the comments, Erik starts by saying he prefers Hemingway’s logic on fatherhood, adding:

The problems I see today are not caused by men not being female enough. Quite the opposite. Men today are a sorry excuse for what they have previously been. And so are today’s woman, who’ve become jaded, unhappy, arrogant in getting what they thought they wanted but actually didn’t. I usually like this site and there are tons of good things here, but a few times the ideas are just a male equivalent of feminism and feminism is, especially from the second-wave forward, a horrible horrible ideology.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> “Why I Like it When Other Men Make Me Feel Bad About Myself,” Accessed April 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/09/29/why-i-like-when-other-men-make-me-feel-bad-about-myself/>

<sup>100</sup> “New Dad Survival Guide: The Mindset,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/12/12/new-dad-survival-guide-the-mindset/>

<sup>101</sup> Erik, “New Dad Survival Guide: The Mindset,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/12/12/new-dad-survival-guide-the-mindset/>

This comment is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, it takes a point Brett rejects and holds it up as a valuable aspect of masculinity. To Erik, invoking Ernest Hemingway's perspectives invites him to side with more the "traditional" values of masculinity: ones that appear to be nostalgic for a world pre-feminism. Be that as it may, Brett chose Hemingway's perspectives as a way not to be, which does not warrant the kind of comment made above that feminizes fatherhood all together. Which brings me back to the original issue, if that is the case, then why let comments like this on the site at all?

The fact that comments like this are allowed on the site when it is so heavily moderated is suspicious. In our follow-up conversation, Brett explained some of his reasoning about this specific comment:

The comment in question was approved because it presented, well, I hesitate to use the word "legitimate," so let's say a real point of view out there... In approving comments, we don't just approve those that agree with our viewpoint, but also those that offer a dissenting viewpoint, as long as it's fairly on-topic and not grossly offensive.

In so heavily moderating the comments, it seems that Brett and the other moderators not only use the comments as a way to move the conversation, but also say things they are unwilling to publish in an article. I can assume this comment made it through because Erik is being made an example of, but it also certainly leaves room for other commenters to agree with him. This is problematic because I believe it leads to the kind of ideology that is exemplified on *ReturnofKings.com* but it also gives the conversation about masculinity room to evolve.

This commenter interacted with just one other poster in a separate comment where he agreed that, “modern entertainment portrays dads as goofy clums that can’t do much right,” and compares them to “lesser moms.” Despite the overall negativity of this comment, it perfectly illustrates the border dispute men are having with themselves about what makes a man as well as the roles feminism and femininity are able to have in this community. Being an involved father does not make a man a “lesser mom,” but instead invites men to have a conversation about what makes a model father. The issue is that many men (or people in general) lack a model of what that is, for reasons tied to the media and otherwise. In this way, I have to agree with Erik on his second post, “What they need to portray is a more authentic masculine father image.” The key to Erik’s comment is the question of authenticity. I would say that the ideology of *AoM* on the whole is one that seeks to empower a more authentic masculine image, but that perspective can be borrowed and justified by pro-men and anti-feminists alike. This could similarly account for some of the more open ended perspectives on the site, wherein Brett or whoever the author may be will leave it up to the audience to decide on what parts of the information given will fit into their lives. Just as one person’s opinion is not necessarily representative of the sub-culture they belong to, one person’s personal narrative cannot necessarily describe how that cultural community functions. As a nod to the self-sufficient nature of the site, users are encouraged to make up their own minds.

One of the more illustrative articles on this subject is “Fathering with Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture.” Building an intentional family culture has a lot to do with thinking of a family as a separate culture, similar to the way a corporation or a non-profit functions. This idea, which is laced with the neo-liberal

ideologies of self-sufficiency and self-actualization, makes up the keystone of *AoM*'s perspectives on masculinity:

Understand this: A family culture happens whether you're consciously creating it or not. It's up to you and your wife to determine whether that culture is of your choosing. If you want a positive family culture, you must commit yourself to years of constant planning and teaching. A culture isn't something that's created overnight; it requires daily investment. But the payoff is definitely worth it.<sup>102</sup>

This passage is drenched in heteronormative ideology that focuses on marriage with children as the pinnacle of masculine success. While most of the comments applaud the notion of self-sufficiency or discuss how they look forward to adopting these ideas in their own lives, the only criticism comes from "Keegan," a self-described "Transman" and long time follower of *AoM*. In his comment, Keegan discusses the problematic nature of Brett's decision to write "wife" instead of "partner" or "spouse":

I'm sure it doesn't make you comfortable to write "partner" just as it doesn't make me comfortable to out myself to the entire community but intentionally happy families can have manly "partners" or "spouses" and still be manly. I really think it's the right thing to do to be more inclusive without actually touching the topic.<sup>103</sup>

This comment is poignant on a number of levels. To my knowledge, this is the only commenter on the site to "out" themselves in this manner and offer a perspective on *AoM*'s lacking recognition of non-heterosexual identities. As a site directed at men it's understandable why there is a lack of gender neutral language, but that doesn't excuse the lack of inclusive terminology, as Keegan points out. He ends his comment with a request to Brett, "I would appreciate it if you would take this into consideration in future articles

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<sup>102</sup> "Fathering With Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture," Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/07/22/family-culture/>

<sup>103</sup> Keegan, "Fathering With Intentionality: The Importance of Creating a Family Culture," Accessed May 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/07/22/family-culture/>

and politely educate me if you have already considered this idea but as to why you decided to decline.” To my knowledge, there has been no follow-up.

Despite the heteronormativity of *AoM*, the overarching idea of intentionality reminds men that they have the power to change their lives if they choose to, and can operate within the parameters of their circumstances. Or to put it more simply, thinking about what one wants increases the likelihood that one will get what one wants just by putting the energy into the decision making process early on. This however, does not excuse the lack of attention paid to *AoM*'s gay audience and their requests to be recognized on the site. One of the more controversial articles I researched came with the “Three Ps of Masculinity” series, in particular the one discussing the “manly imperative” to Procreate. This article was widely debated through several different lenses. Some of the initial comments discuss overpopulation, with one user quipping, “With 7 billion + people in the world, I think this is a P we can do without.”<sup>104</sup> Other men find the article outright frustrating and exclusive:

I have to say I'm quite disappointed with the section on homosexuality. I'm not bringing up religion or societal norms. My concern is that I feel as if the section left gay males with no advice whatsoever. OK, so some societies were fine with men engaging in same-sex activities as long as they were not the "bottom." So what! (I won't even go into how demeaning and hetero-centric that kind of mentality is). But this article didn't address what gay males can do to "procreate." It did, however, skirt around a suggestion that they should do their civic duty by finding a woman and making a baby with her. I am big fan of *AoM*, but, as a gay male I sometimes feel like this blog is irrespective of a demographic of its readership.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> James Riggs, “The Three Ps of Manhood: Procreate” Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/03/the-3-ps-of-manhood-procreate/>

<sup>105</sup> OR, “The Three Ps of Manhood: Procreate” Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/03/the-3-ps-of-manhood-procreate/>

This user received ten up-votes and a flurry of comments in agreement. This is not the first time a member of the gay community has expressed frustration about the lack of attention from *AoM*. Like Keegan, OR addresses specific issues with the ways *AoM* addresses gayness, this time pointing out the problematic nature in which they allow for an “acceptable” gay relationship. As if to say, gayness is only acceptable to masculinity if it is demonstrating power over another individual, an ideology that is closely associated with rape culture and not one *AoM*'s writers are likely to align themselves with. Even so, by not addressing its gay audience members, *AoM* neither refutes nor negates these claims and the issues stand. This exemplifies a pattern within *AoM*'s articles, one that opts to hold back on fully weighing in on how the site thinks of gender and sexuality. Some of these issues are worked out in the comments by users that are willing to weigh in on their own behalf, but such a stance is absent from the articles. Perhaps because the comments are so moderated, the publishing of certain comments stands in as silent acknowledgment of the lack of voice on these issues. In this way, users are positioned to carry the discussion where the authors will not.

### Where My Girls At?

Since beginning my research, I've found a healthy population of women on the site that appear to represent a variety of ideologies both embracing and rejecting feminism. What do women's thoughts on the topic add to the discussion of masculinity? In this section I will discuss where women are joining the discussion as well as some thoughts on why some women are drawn to *AoM*.

In an article titled “How to Communicate Your Needs in a Relationship,” Brett and Kate outline how to use a “needs based script” to communicate issues in a relationship. The article cites the book, *Couple Skills*, by authors Matthew McKay, Patrick Fanning, and Kim Pale; and is a good rundown of the ways a couple can improve their communication. The article stands as a prime example of the ways this site can be read as instilling progressive values into masculinity. For example, a wife or girlfriend is considered a partner, not an oppositional force to be “handled,” as in the language of many current male-oriented publications. Granted, when there are issues in a relationship, getting to the point when two people can communicate effectively can come with a learning curve with lots of fighting, but one user has this to say in reaction:

Honestly, I may be the minority in this, but as a woman, I would feel worse if my husband would talk to me like this, especially with those requests starting with "I would appreciate/want/like you to." Somehow I just cannot see anything starting with those phrases to come out of honest intentions - only as a sarcastic remark with even more of a bitter edge. I-statements are good, for the most part... just be VERY careful on your phrasing and tone, or you WILL come off as a self-centered jerk.<sup>106</sup>

Clearly each relationship is unique and each comment is written by an individual with his or her own issues and values. But I was taken aback by this user’s abrasive tone toward advice meant to clarify and aid better communication. A lot of the advice offered on *AoM* is given in a way that readers are allowed to make up their own minds. While this kind of ambiguity is good for reaching a broader audience, I can understand why Nusy might balk at a confrontation that follows the needs-based script if it is given in a condescending manner. For instance, what some readers might take away from this

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<sup>106</sup> Nusy, “How to Communicate Your Needs in a Relationship,” Accessed March 2015, [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/05/15/how-to-communicate-your-needs-in-a-relationship/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/05/15/how-to-communicate-your-needs-in-a-relationship/#disqus_thread)

article is the ways communication can be better, if not a little more equal in a partnership. But this article also implies several other things: that men need to work on communicating their needs better, and that women need to be communicated with via a special formula in order to understand what those needs are. While I do not think the intention of the article is to demean women's comprehension capabilities, I have no doubt that can be inferred from this article's existence on this site.

Similar to the ways "How to Communicate Your Needs in a Relationship" can be interpreted, this next article can be seen from various perspectives. Sometimes it seems that many of the women who come to the site come to understand men, and in the process, come to understand something about themselves as well. In an article titled, "Relationship Red Flags for Men," Brett and Kate offer a list of fourteen behaviors to look out for when choosing to stay in a relationship long-term. Some of the "qualities" on the list include not sharing core values or life goals, never apologizing or taking responsibility for bad behavior, and treating waiters and other service industry members like crap.<sup>107</sup> These, and the rest of the behaviors described on the list, can be true of anyone, no matter their gender, and this point is discussed broadly in the comment feed. Many men commiserate on wishing they'd known some of these "red flags" earlier, and lament the messy ends of past relationships. Interpreted one way, some of the behaviors to look for could seem demeaning to women. One such characteristic is "If ALL of her ex-boyfriends are jerks." Taken one way this could signify bad taste in relationships, or what I call the "bad boy factor." A lot of cultural representations like to comment on the notion that women tend to like dating the "bad boy" rather than the "nice guy." This is a

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<sup>107</sup>"Relationship Red Flags for Men," Accessed March 26, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/31/relationship-red-flags/>

stereotype but not a totally unrealistic depiction. But a few women found additional insight:

As a woman I find these all very true of other women, also I noticed they are all great advice for relationships in general. I have taken some things away from this for my relationships with men. Thanks for another great article.  
Most of the time when I read over your site I'm not sure if the site is just purely awesome or if somewhere in me I am actually a man lol.<sup>108</sup>

This user point out how this advice can be applied to relationships in general, which I think is key in interpreting an article like this. Having bad taste in relationships is obviously not solely a female problem, nor is it represented culturally as such. But on a website aimed at men, that is going to be the leading angle. This also helps to establish a difference between men and women without explicitly stating so, another way the site flirts with progressive ideologies without committing to them. One way that I think *AoM* tries to get around this is by having Kate in the byline. If a woman is seen to share these perspectives it appears to be more acceptable to men and women alike. One user put it this way:

I can't speak for others, but I can certainly represent myself. :) This is hands-down my favourite website because it encourages and inspires me. This website may touch-up on some surface topics (like 'How to Grow a Handlebar Moustache'), but what separates this one from the others, is that The Art of Manliness centers on character. I think that some women come here to understand men, some maybe to find some- hah! For most though.... perhaps for all... women look to find honour, valour, virtue and integrity not just in the world around them, but especially from the inside out.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Tywla Anderson, "Relationship Red Flags for Men," Accessed March 26, 2015, [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/31/relationship-red-flags/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/31/relationship-red-flags/#disqus_thread)

<sup>109</sup> Gringoire, "Relationship Red Flags for Men," Accessed March 26, 2015, [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/31/relationship-red-flags/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/01/31/relationship-red-flags/#disqus_thread)

### A Good Conversation

One of the things I love about reading the comments of any article is seeing where the author re-engages with his or her audience, and gains a better understanding of the issues they brought to light. In an article titled, “A Man’s Guide to Wearing Jewelry,” author Antonio Centeno discusses the various types of acceptable jewelry for men and provides a style guide to accessorizing. The article is somewhat conservative in its perspectives, but allows for some creative interpretation from the audience. One thing that is repeatedly debated however, is the topic of the male engagement ring. In the article, Antonio discloses that he wears his wedding band on the right hand because he was married in a Ukrainian Orthodox Church and, “never felt the need to move it even though we live in a country where 99.99% of people wear it on the left hand.”<sup>110</sup> He goes on to discuss acceptable forms of jewelry for men, advocating for things like watches and cufflinks but admonishing earrings and especially male engagement rings, the latter indecently hitting the “Tone it down, Liberace” side of the scale.<sup>111</sup> Why the masculine bravado and flippant homophobia over such an incidental and frankly, personal choice?

The comments on this article are fairly typical, with some people disagreeing as a matter of personal style statement and others justifying their rationale for “over-doing-it.” But many users disagreed with Antonio’s thoughts on male engagement rings:

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<sup>110</sup> “A Man’s Guide to Wearing Jewelry,” Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/>

<sup>111</sup> Joe, “The Man Jewelry Difficulty Scale,” Accessed March 2015, <http://dappered.com/2012/03/the-man-jewelry-difficulty-scale/>

As for the engagement ring, I think it's a little sexist. It used to mean the woman was "claimed" (owned). Now it's a symbol of a promise. I don't see why both persons can't choose to wear an engagement ring (or neither to wear one at all).<sup>112</sup>

I too disagree with the "no" about the engagement ring. My wife gave me an engagement ring that's basically a simple band, but has stones set into the band. Yes, "engagement ring" has the feminine connotation, but it doesn't have to. There's nothing feminine about my ring!<sup>113</sup>

Acknowledging that these comments are moderated, when someone disagrees with the general consensus, there is always a representative that is willing to work out the issue at hand, or point out what is problematic about a certain stance. One person was able to do so for Antonio:

Hate to tell you, Antonio, but you're wearing an engagement ring every day, LoL. In Orthodox Churches the ring symbolizes the Engagement, the Crowns symbolize the Wedding. That ring on your right hand, while effectively acting as your wedding ring in a society where that symbol is more prevalent, is, in fact, an engagement ring. You exchanged them during the Rite of Betrothal, which didn't marry you, just engaged you officially, even if it took place right before the actual wedding.<sup>114</sup>

Antonio took the comment gracefully, and used it as an opportunity to thank his audience for their participation. This is not always the case, as demonstrated by commenters like Erik, with his oppositional viewpoints on fatherhood. Yet, as I stated above, this could be a way the site benefits from its lack of firm stance because it allows the issues to be worked out by the users in the comments. Mostly, I see the comments thread on this and other websites as a means for a person to voice their views, even if

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<sup>112</sup>Nick, "A Man's Guide to Wearing Jewelry," Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/>

<sup>113</sup> Jared, "A Man's Guide to Wearing Jewelry," Accessed March 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/>

<sup>114</sup> Rawb, "A Man's Guide to Wearing Jewelry," Accessed March 2015, [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2012/03/20/mans-guide-wearing-jewelry/#disqus_thread)

they are seldom heard and occasionally analyzed by passing academics. In a recent exchange with Brett, he was able to shed some light on how this process works:

Obviously, it's a hazy line and a subjective process. But the aim is that the comment section reflect the broader discussion that is going in society. I want people to see the different spectrum of viewpoints and currents that are out there, and to be able to respond to them and debate them when appropriate. Sometimes comments that might make folks recoil, are actually purposely approved for that purpose, as seeing this underside, and feeling that reaction, can be beneficial in a way.<sup>115</sup>

What makes the audience of *AoM* unique is the level of participation the authors have with the commenters once the article has been published. Moderating the comments in order to keep the conversation moving forward is only the first step in molding *AoM* into the kind of community lauded on the site. Responding to comments and asking engaging questions when there seems to be a gap in understanding makes a palpable difference in making this site what it is. When Brett does reply in the comments, it's to help clear up a comment mixed with truth and error, or "for the benefit of these other silent readers who may be swayed by the commenter's argument."<sup>116</sup> This in turn helps to build a model of masculinity in which men openly seek the advice and support of other men without fear of admonishment or vulnerability.

*AoM's* connection with its audience is built on the formulation of a demographic that finds itself experiencing masculinity differently in society. People are brought to the site by the tongue in cheek representations of nostalgic, turn of the century-styled masculinity, but stay for valuable insight that its authors offer up. In this way, the site is able to reach a broad audience not just by hailing an under-represented demographic, but

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<sup>115</sup> Brett McKay, email message to author, April 8, 2015.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

also keeping its politics and ideologies fluid enough to allow for user interpretation. This harkens back to one of the main functions of the site, to encourage its users to aspire to self-sufficiency, the keystone of *AoM*'s masculinity. If readers are enabled to draw their own conclusions, the ideas of the site become the beliefs of its readers. This allows the men of *AoM* to remain varied in the ways they perform masculinity, but united under one cause, to find and represent an authentic masculinity that upholds the values of bravery, honor, and independence in order to be an asset to their community, family, and selves.

#### **Chapter 4: The Men and the Myths**

Throughout this thesis, I have used an analysis of *The Art of Manliness* to illuminate how masculinity can be traced in patterns based on marketing schemes and social beliefs. I have presented historical evidence that supports the existence of these patterns and some of the ways these patterns and representations have changed throughout the last century. I have shown the ways second and third wave feminism have influenced society's thoughts on masculinity and where applicable, shown the ways the discursive formation of masculinity has either pushed back on or embraced these ideas. My research demonstrates the ways in which the blog has challenged some of the representations of contemporary masculinity, and some ways the site and its authors have attempted to promote a balance between the ideas of feminism and contemporary representations of masculinity. In addressing the community brought together by *AoM*, I have pointed out some of its weaknesses. Here, I'd like to reiterate some of my findings as well as present some ways my research could be continued.

##### The Men of *AoM*

The rebranding of masculinity of *AoM* is primarily exemplified in the ways it targets men in families. One of the biggest ways *AoM* distinguishes its brand of masculinity is through embracing the role of fatherhood and where a man is positioned in the family. Here again, the role of man is exemplified in a more traditional sense; however, in this case the men of *AoM* are encouraged to seek a partnership with their wife and go about mindfully building a family based on intentionality. This mindset harkens to the idea of man as the master of his destiny, except that the article makes a point of acknowledging the chaotic realm of parenting and that best laid plans don't

always come to fruition. In these instances, men are encouraged to seek comfort with their spouse and practice their “tactical breathing.”

Examples of this attempt to rebrand masculinity can be found in the imagery the site uses alongside its articles: Vintage black and white photographs of an era gone by accompany each article as well as illustrations describing some of the “manly actions” depicted there. One article describes ways a man can use his baby as an aerobic weight; each illustration is of a strong-man character complete with waxed moustache and manly aerobic unitard.<sup>117</sup> Other evidence that supports this rebranding is the section on manly skills that covers everything from how to jumpstart a car to “How to Develop the Situational Awareness of Jason Bourne.”<sup>118</sup> The latter is a film character in a popular spy series which to some would seem like an amusing and perhaps stereotypical role model for modern men, but one that works in this rebranding. Men have looked up to this sort of role for years—the difference is which part of the representation is marked as desirable. James Bond has long been idolized as much for his cool as for his clout with the ladies. Here, a spy is held up as a good study of situational awareness, a tactical skill. The same can be said of the article on tactical breathing meant to keep a person calm in a stressful situation—not mindfulness or yogic breathing, but tactical breathing written through a militaristic lens. These examples represent a shift in some of the stereotypical ways masculinity is represented and even mixed with a little humor in the site’s depictions. But the message conveyed in the articles is straight-forward and clear, that the virtue of the

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<sup>117</sup> “How to Use Your Baby as a Piece of Exercise Equipment,” Accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/12/08/baby-exercise-equipment/>

<sup>118</sup> “How to Develop the Situational Awareness of Jason Bourne,” Accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2015/02/05/how-to-develop-the-situational-awareness-of-jason-bourne/>

men in these depictions is worth considering, and that there is value in some of the “old ways.”

When Brett McKay looked around him at the representations of masculinity that were offered in contemporary American culture, what he saw disgusted him. Seeing himself as “Anti-Maxim” or the “Anti-AskMen,” McKay sought to build a brand of masculinity in opposition to the “babes and cars” style of marketing by establishing *AoM*'s masculinity as one based on tradition and nostalgia with a little progressive mindset mixed in. Thus *The Art of Manliness* was established as a way for men to help other men by discussing what it means to be a man and what honor is to be found in manly virtue. The keystone of *AoM*'s masculinity is built on the premise that to be a man, a person must produce more than he consumes. This challenges existing notions of consumerism by feminizing “normal” patterns of consumption and suggesting ways a man can consume the materials to make the goods himself. This opens *AoM* up to a litany of individualistic and DIY style self-sufficiency that serves as a foundation for its brand. That masculinity can be built on virtue and self-sufficiency plays to the same nostalgia-based marketing tactics that the creators of the “American Frontier Man” myth used to inspire a large base of male consumers. This mindset places the responsibility for improvement on the individual, a kind of “bootstrappy” mentality tempered with McKay's promotion of male to male vulnerability for *AoM*'s brand of male. By tying in ideas such as self-sufficiency and intentionality, McKay also taps into the lucrative DIY ethos prevalent in today's society. Combined with the vintage aesthetic prevalent on the site, and what there is a compelling character sketch of potent masculinity.

Unlike men who subscribe to *Men's Health*, *Maxim*, and the like, the men of *AoM* are seeking a masculinity based on traditional values and a progressive mindset. These values are upheld in a variety of forms, personal and professional, and encourage a man to be an asset first to himself, then to his family, and finally to his community. On *AoM*, men are encouraged to seek the advice of other men in a mutually accepted culture of sharing. Through personal narrative, *AoM's* authors are able to meet with their audience on a more peer to peer level, and by exposing their vulnerability, support personal growth for the site's readers.

Still, there are some contradictions in the messages disbursed on the site. As one of the larger points made on the site, traditional family values would seem challenged by another of site's endorsements, the entrepreneurial side-hustle. Following such a vocation could surely come to great reward but not without inherent risk. Also the site's ideas about feminism seem tacked on when compared to some of the more masculine bravado published on the site. Keeping these ideas broad is understandably a good way to reach a greater audience, but oscillating on these points will ultimately weaken or undermine the integrity of the site's perspectives. The site's nature as a self-help blog places it in the interests of a demographic that is more open to this kind of advice. Its middle class consumerist agenda is more relevant and accessible to people that started out with this kind of privileged upbringing while its message of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" belies trappings of conservatism. While Brett and Kate cast themselves as liberal or progressive in their environment, their ideas lean more to the right when viewed from a broader lens. Whether or not some of these issues are related to marketing initiatives on the site remains to be seen and could be another area of extended study of the site.

*AoM* represents a positive cultural shift for masculinity. The fact that the site exists as a counter measure to the kinds of masculinity presented by *Men's Health*, *Maxim*, and *ReturnofKings.com*, is proof enough that men are open to this shift. By targeting the demographic left out by the kinds of marketing used in the latter examples, McKay and his team have an opportunity to make real changes to masculinity and the ways it is represented culturally. Still, there are those that are left out. Causes such as feminism or a non-heteronormative lifestyle are sidestepped on the site. Any mention of either of these issues are typically put out as if to say, "here are some perspectives about an issue we are aware of," and then dropped in the next paragraph. What this tells me is that while masculine ideology is improving and perhaps maturing, some of its social perspectives still need to grow up.

### Looking Forward

While *AoM* may stand to represent masculinity and its cultural shift out of adolescence and toward slightly awkward adulthood, there are many questions yet to be answered. Looking at masculinity as a whole, one question I have is why certain cultural representations came to represent masculinity as a whole. In truth, there are many representations of men that are positive: Strong father figures are becoming popular, as well as representations of men that show a balance of leadership skills and emotional awareness. One way I think my research could be continued would be to conduct a study of popular genres and see where, if possible, positive and negative representations stand out. For instance, some of the men of science fiction are known for presenting strong male roles: Captain Mal from *Firefly* is one such figure that could be studied more thoroughly. Also, in which ways does comedy represent masculinity and some of the

characters presented there? Louis CK is a popular comedian whose lack of satisfaction with himself is the main thrust of his comedy.

With men at the top of at least the economic hierarchy, I can understand why certain representations are repeated and yet, the variety of struggles considered in my research has only further convinced me that the cultural formations of masculinity are somewhat behind, in continuing to present manliness as tongue-in-cheek. This is not to say that culture has representations of masculinity completely wrong, just that some of its stereotypical characters are tired and that it's time to see them fade. The buffoonish dad is one representation that is in opposition to *AoM*'s masculinity, and is one that could be explored more critically. Why this slant against fatherhood? If the issue truly lies in a generation without proper masculine role models, how does such a representation serve to empower future fathers to be better? *AoM*'s messages of fathering with intentionality and building lasting partnerships with a spouse counter some of these issues, but it is just one website in a sea of available content.

One such group that I ran across in my research identifies itself as “Men Going Their Own Way.”<sup>119</sup> These are men that, like the men of the Playboy era, have eschewed the virtues of marriage and domesticity to become independent agents of masculinity. Like the masculinity presented on *AoM*, these men align themselves with older, traditional models of masculinity but without the forward thinking social conscience *AoM* alludes to. This is another major issue on the site, one that could be solved by explicitly stating what some of the site's politics are. If McKay and his team would come out and say on which side of feminism they stand, for instance, perhaps more men would see the

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<sup>119</sup> “The Three Ps of Manhood: Procreate” Accessed March 2014, <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2014/03/03/the-3-ps-of-manhood-procreate/>

benefits of this alliance. But as of now, *AoM*'s success and ability to attract its audience is dependent on maintaining ties to a heterocentrist point of view, one that is easily adopted by movements like "Men Going Their Own Way."

To further this research, one could look more deeply into the forums and communities of *AoM* and sites like it and perhaps conduct a comparative analysis of these communities. What I have found is that *AoM*'s brand of masculinity is different in its ideas and theories, but the fact that their community is heavily moderated makes it difficult to use this example as a constant. If one were to dig deeper into the *AoM* community, one might find more similarities between *AoM* and some of its less progressively minded brethren. Also, I think one could look further into the ways the comments are moderated and maybe work more closely with McKay and his team to see how this brand of masculinity is made. One such query could start by conducting a similar analysis of *Return of Kings*, the rival blog to *AoM*. Another would be to delve more deeply into the realm of men's fashion and dissect sites like *Huckberry*, *Dappered*, and the fashion and etiquette blog, *The Gentleman Scholar*, to see what similarities these sites have and discuss why. Is the rise of sites that address masculinity in this way consequential to the times we live in or only relevant in that they are able to work with each other to increase site traffic and revenue? Additionally, one could look for discourses of race on *AoM* and the other sites suggested here and discuss how conversations of masculinity differ across racial lines. Where do these conversations intersect and where do they diverge?

Another question I have explores the types of relationships advocated on *AoM*. In accordance with some of the cultural shifts presented on the site, there have been

significant advancements in representations of female relationships recently as well. Shows like *Garfunkel and Oats* and *Broad City* re-contextualize female relationships with more depth than shows like *Sex and the City*, or at least offer up a kind of femininity more concurrent with the kinds of relationships I'm familiar with. One of the questions I would ask here are in what ways do cultural representations of women present a kind of "Peter Pan Syndrome"? Is this a generational affliction or something that we've only recently become aware of? How can this cultural unwillingness to grow up be explored more broadly? I'm hesitant to point the finger at "millennials" to explain these trends but this may be due to a personal bias against the term. Moreover, I think we find ourselves in times where what it means to be an adult is fluctuating and that in itself is an idea worth expanding on.

In sum, the ways *AoM* creates and brands its form of masculinity uses some familiar marketing tricks but comes through as genuine in its attempts to elevate masculinity to the next level. The bigger flaws that exist, such as the site's lack of attention toward its homosexual audience, are ones that will hopefully be worked out in time. Already the audience has noticed and has called for changes. I believe those requests can't be ignored for long, and have seen evidence in the ways comments are published that the authors are listening. As an audience member myself, I look forward to participating in these changes where I can and, as a woman, help to support what I think masculinity could be. In a lot of ways, doing this project has been a personal study on what the ideal man is to me, which is further influenced by where I am in my life and what my needs are as an individual. But I doubt I'm alone in seeking a partner that is just that, *a partner*. In other words, perhaps masculinity is growing up, or maybe that's just

me. But one thing is clear, the sturdiest trees have roots that sink deep into the ground and limbs that bend in shifting winds. Some of masculinity's cultural representations will change, others will grow.

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