

The Cooler Culture War: Brand Identity Politics in the Contemporary United States

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A couple of summers ago I was on a quest for a new soft-sided, durable cooler. I was already a bit of a cooler snob having owned a Yeti for a few years. It did its job, but was too heavy, bulky, and awkward, and I wanted something that was easier to carry. As a conscientious consumer, I researched coolers, read reviews, and watched videos of ice NOT melting to determine what was best for me. However, during my research, I got sidetracked as I ran into a side of the cooler industry I did not expect to find: culture war politics.

In the United States, and throughout other parts of the world, the culture wars, as first coined by James Davison Hunter, are used to describe politics that are pulling people further apart through opposing ideological beliefs as signaled by specific political issues, such as abortion and gun laws. However, while this is related to discourse and belief, the application of culture war politics to physical objects can be more fully supported and explained through Marxist and neo-Marxist cultural theory. Beginning with Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, particularly the values associated with and realities hidden in products of industrial labor, new generations of cultural theorists were able to apply and expand on how meaning is created, assigned, and expressed through consumption. For Thorsten Veblen, consumption was a way to signify social class and values. For Louis Althusser, various identities, ideologies, and realities are available to us by heeding the call to pay attention to, or consume, certain products. Through these processes, objects are no longer objects, but contain meanings, values, and whole belief systems. These associations, through repetition, general acceptance, and lack of critical thought, become naturalized and the objects take on the status of myth, as described by the influential work of Roland Barthes.

Utilizing these foundational and helpful works and theories of cultural studies, from Marx to Hunter, coolers can take on a whole new meaning. As illustrated and discussed throughout this article, within the current political climate of the United States, every aspect of daily life can carry political meaning, signal certain beliefs, or connect to one's individual identity. With the increase in social media,

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people can find others with the same beliefs, share information quickly, and mobilize their actions and efforts. Objects take on more than their function or their personal meaning and can come to stand in for entire political ideologies and contribute to the infiltration of the culture wars into all aspects of everyday life. This examination of coolers and the culture wars illustrates just how ingrained coolers are in American culture and society, how products signal identity and ideological belief, and how once a consumer base feels betrayed by a product, a company must either make amends or pivot to a new marketing strategy to survive.

Coolers are portable ice chests most often made of plastic, metal, or Styrofoam. They feature handles and some even have shoulder straps or wheels to make them easier to maneuver when they are heavy. While there have been more recent innovations with electric plug-in coolers, this article focuses on the traditional coolers that rely on ice or ice packs to keep items cold. These coolers are most often used for outdoor activities such as picnics, parties, outdoor adventure, and travel to preserve food items and chill beverages. With this function, coolers follow a long line of innovative products designed to control the natural environment.

One element difficult to control is temperature. For centuries, humans all over the world have sought to lower or raise temperatures for more comfortable or safe living conditions. Because these modern wonders of climate control are so ubiquitous in our everyday lives, they often go unseen until they fail and the natural temperature creeps in and causes discomfort. For heat, humans discovered fire and were able to advance heating and cooking from there. However, cold was a bit more difficult. Humans desired the cold in order to preserve food and chill beverages. Accounts of preserving food in the cold and chilling drinks with snow or natural ice have been recorded for centuries.¹ Getting ice to warmer climates without it melting required some ingenuity and drive, and these innovations are the precursors to modern coolers and strategies used to sell high-end coolers.²

Early innovations for cold food preservation included transporting ice and storing it for use in ice houses, ice pits, and ice chests. However, none of these allowed for easy mobility in the world before the modern cold chain. In 1803, Thomas Moore, a farmer from Maryland, received the first patent for an ice chest originally made to transport butter. The easily transportable chest is sometimes cited as the original cooler.³ Eventually, technology advanced and mechanical refrigeration of all kinds (domestic, commercial, and transportation) completely

1. Jonathan Rees, *Refrigeration Nation: A History of Ice, Appliances, and Enterprise in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 20; Carroll Gantz, *Refrigeration: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 9–14.

2. Rees, *Refrigeration Nation*, 20–22; Gantz, *Refrigeration*, 23–28.

3. Rees, *Refrigeration Nation*, 118–29.

revolutionized many industries and the entire lives of modern humans across the world; ice was therefore no longer necessary in the preservation of food.⁴ However, just as refrigeration was popularized, so too were automobiles and the American Dream of a family hitting the open road and traveling around the country. This new dream created a new market for transporting ice to cool food and beverages. For these early automobile travelers, another precursor to the modern cooler was the Desert brand water bag. Coming out in 1916, these were made of flax and jute, soaked, then filled with water, fastened to the front of a car, and, through evaporation, cooled the water inside.⁵ While an innovation in the automobile age to cool water on long summer road trips across the vast United States, it was limited and left something to be desired for the cooling of different types of beverages and food.

The first U.S. patent for what most closely resembles the coolers of today was granted to Richard C. Laramy in February 1951.⁶ Soon after, in 1954, the outdoor company Coleman started producing coolers out of stainless steel. However, in 1957, they updated and approved upon their design by adding molded plastic to the inside of the steel and changed the cooler game forever. This plastic helped to make coolers lighter and easier to clean and use.⁷ In that same year, the first Styrofoam cooler was also produced. Though not environmentally friendly, it added another convenient and cheap way to chill and transport food and drinks.⁸ As new materials and technologies were invented, the original design was improved upon and coolers were adopted by people as the best way to take the convenience of cooling food and drink with them outside of their homes, on the road, camping, to picnics, and to any number of different activities. The imagery of coolers in popular culture, from beer commercials to television shows, made them synonymous with fun activities, hobbies, travel, and the outdoors, all outside of the standard monotony of everyday life.

After fifty years of very few changes or developments in the standard cooler products, Roy and Ryan Seiders founded Yeti Coolers in 2006. According to their story on the Yeti website, they were outdoor enthusiasts who found themselves frustrated with the cheap coolers that broke and could not withstand their active lifestyles. According to the website, they needed a cooler that could stand up to the extreme conditions that serious outdoorsmen face. “We decided early on that

4. For a full history of refrigeration, see Rees, *Refrigeration Nation*, and Gantz, *Refrigeration*.

5. Germaines Emporium, “Desert Canvas water bags,” *Youtube*, September 18, 2013, video, 2: 22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQJPI4F7Wq0>; Gantz, *Refrigeration*, 9.

6. “Cooler,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooler> (accessed April 18, 2021).

7. “On the Bubble (1954–1999),” *Coleman Canada*, https://www.colemancanada.ca/en_US/NewCoolers.html (accessed May 20, 2021).

8. David Kravets, “Feb. 10, 1957: Birth of the Cool...er,” *Wired*, February 10, 2009, <https://www.wired.com/2009/02/feb-10-1957-birth-of-the-cooler/>.

product innovation would come from necessity and firsthand experience — not from market research and data analysis. And we'd never sacrifice quality for a few extra bucks. Because having your cooler's lid cave in when using it as a casting platform should never be part of anyone's fishing trip."⁹ The cooler, like any other tool or piece of equipment, had to withstand the parameters of its job. Thus the \$300+ roto-molded cooler trend began.

From its beginning and through 2018, Yeti experienced an explosive branding, marketing, and growth journey. Well-known outdoorsmen from the "hook and bullet crowd" served as brand ambassadors as the Seiders brothers sold a majority share to Coretec who offered logistical and marketing expertise. This included offering smaller and cheaper products, like the now iconic Yeti tumblers. Between 2014 and 2015, Yeti grew significantly and gained quite a following. They went from relying on just trade show attendance and brand ambassadors to careful and strategic retailing at rural feed and hardware stores and more urban outdoor outfitters.¹⁰

After Yeti started to pave the way, the knock-offs and copy-cats quickly followed. Bison started making similar products in 2011, Orca in 2012, and RTIC in 2015. Older companies like Engel and Grizzly also got involved, though Engel's website refers to them as the "original Rotomolded High Performance Hard Coolers" with "50+ years of cooler innovation."¹¹ Even stores like Walmart got involved with their Ozark Trail brand making similar coolers and identical tumblers for a fraction of the cost of Yeti. These companies all undercut Yeti's cost while boasting about their own superiority. Hundreds of hours' worth of videos and endless written reviews and articles were posted online comparing each of the brands to Yeti in "ice melt tests" and other challenges of function and style. Even though the Yeti brand products did not always come out of the tests with the highest ratings, they had the brand name recognition and the lifestyle marketing with which everyone else was competing. For the innovative Yeti, emulation was the sincerest form of flattery.

To set the stage for the culture war debate, Yeti worked on marketing and branding that embedded particular ideologies and identities into the brand, making it a symbol that held much more meaning than that of a simple cooler. This type of marketing can be understood through Roland Barthes's understanding of mythologies. According to Barthes, myth points to something that is outside of

9. "Our Story," *Yeti*, https://www.yeti.com/en_US/our-story.html (accessed May 20, 2021).

10. Bill Saporito, "How 2 Brothers Turned a \$300 Cooler Into a \$450 Million Cult Brand," *Inc.*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.inc.com/magazine/201602/bill-saporito/yeti-coolers-founders-roy-ryan-seiders.html>.

11. "Hard Coolers," *Engel*, <https://engelcoolers.com/collections/hard-coolers> (accessed May 25, 2021).

what is said, seen, written, or shared.¹² To paraphrase, its intentions are not hidden, but instead they are naturalized and this “naturalization of the concept” is the “essential function of myth.”¹³ For Barthes, the term “concept” is the hidden thing that myth alludes to. Following Barthes’s lead, a mythical interpretation of a Yeti cooler reveals quite a bit of complex truths and naturalized assumptions.

To build a mythos, Yeti purposefully targeted outdoorsmen like the founders. Their website has allusions to hunting, fishing, off-roading, surfing, and camping. When I purchased a Yeti Roadie cooler in 2016, it came with a whole welcome packet that included a beautiful magazine, two stickers (reading “Yeti: Wildly Stronger! Keep Ice longer” and “Built for the Wild. Yeti.”), and a small owner’s manual. The manual includes tips on getting the best out of the cooler: ways to keep ice the longest, ways to clean the cooler, and features that made the cooler bear-proof. It explains that “as a YETI cooler owner, you are now a part of the incredible group of YETI owners and fans that make up the YETI Nation” and offers an invitation to get involved with new compatriots on social media, offering the consumer a new identity and a new community of seemingly like-minded strangers. The magazine is where most of the mythological coding lies. The cover features a grizzled fisherman, clad in camouflage, on a fan boat. There is no title on the publication or any words other than “Yeti,” in its familiar all caps font, in the bottom left corner. Tucked under the height of the fan boat captain’s seat is a small, powder-blue Yeti roadie cooler. It is not the focus of the photo, yet it stands out in contrast to the greens and browns predominant in the photo. Inside the book, we learn that the fisherman is Flip Pallot, a famous outdoorsman who has written books and created shows on the outdoors. Because of his status, he is sponsored by many leading brands of outdoor equipment.¹⁴

Besides Flip, the book also features Aaron Franklin, well known for his barbecue and brisket, Jeff Simpson, a hunter who survived a grizzly attack, and Brittany Griffith, a rock climber. Though Yeti products are not shown in every picture featuring the outdoorspeople highlighted in the publication, they are carefully placed in most pictures: for example, coolers in the backs of trucks and by campsites, colsters (can cozies) and tumblers in hand or carefully placed among other gear.¹⁵ The Yeti products are not the star of the show, though. The star is the outdoorsman, the person doing the adventuring. Yeti is a quiet companion, always there, not in the way, serving the needs of the individual. It is the conduit through which individuals can adventure, the thing they do not need to think about or worry about. It will sit there and serve its purpose, be reliable, and go along with the ride. Barthes writes: “Mythical speech is made of a material

12. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 130.

13. *Ibid.*, *Mythologies*, 131.

14. Yeti Catalog, 2016.

15. *Ibid.*

which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.”¹⁶ So, through their marketing and branding, Yeti pulls from what Americans are familiar with and what is in their nature: a desire to be in the wilderness, to tap into the inner wild, to dominate the natural environment around them, and to control it by making its properties bend to their will and whims.

While recognizing this, it is also clear that this natural world that individuals want to dominate is also not the real world in which most live on a daily basis. The ability to go out into the wilderness is not something that everyone can make a living off of. It is something that the modern-day version of the leisure class might do. In modern industrialized and capitalistic societies, those fighting with the natural elements and relying on the land for their survival are usually portrayed as impoverished. Those outdoorsmen who require the expensive hunting and fishing gear are of a different class. Throughout his book on the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen discusses the consumption of materials and writes that “the base, industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their subsistence. In the nature of things, luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class.”¹⁷ His work is a commentary on the leisure class and the ways in which they over-consume beyond what anyone would deem reasonably necessary for life, but is a by-product of industrialized, capitalist society. According to Veblen, “Throughout the entire evolution of conspicuous expenditure, whether of goods or of services or human life, runs the obvious implication that in order to effectually mend the consumer’s good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable it must be wasteful.”¹⁸ A \$400 Yeti does far exceed what is necessary as far as coolers go, having the same function as a much cheaper version. However, for individuals with expendable income, time for leisurely pursuits, and a desire for a cooler, they will still purchase it and justify it as an important and necessary part of their adventurous lifestyle.

Veblen also explains the phenomenon of “pecuniary emulation.” Of this, he says, “The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation. [...] The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction.”¹⁹ So, the purchase of high-end products, in this case, expensive coolers with the mythos of success in outdoor leisure activities, is a badge of honor. At once it communicates something about the income someone has, the amount of time they have for leisure, and that they have noble, manly, and rugged outdoor pursuits. However,

16. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 110.

17. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912), 70.

18. *Ibid.*, 96.

19. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

it is also about comparison with one another and keeping up with trends. As Veblen continues:

The end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavourable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, the chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard.²⁰

The cooler may be the object to strive for because it allows entry into a desirable class of people with desirable characteristics that the consumer wants to adopt with their purchase. However, as with most acts of materialism and consumption, the satisfaction is fleeting and the cycle of new wants, identities, characteristics, and products begins again.

The purchase of objects that could fall under the realm of conspicuous consumption are both to stand out from others in what you have, but also to fit in with the crowd to which you aspire to belong. Much of the marketing and purchasing of the coolers, and outdoor equipment in general, serves both of these functions. Using Karl Marx to understand the value of these objects is helpful. While Veblen is clearly talking about the social elements involved in the consumption of goods, Marx explains that the value of objects “is something purely social.”²¹ Related to this, he writes, “A commodity’s simple form of value is contained in its value-relation with another commodity of a different kind, i.e. in its exchange relation with the latter.”²² Like the layers of naturalized meaning that come from the mythical meaning of the concept as described by Barthes, Marx explains, “the mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value.”²³ Instead, he refers to it as “fetishism,” explaining that there is a value “which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” and that “this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them.”²⁴ The cult of Yeti is produced through the marketing of the cooler and Yeti products as status symbols; they highlight a disposable income and the appearance of someone with rugged

20. Ibid., 31.

21. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 149.

22. Ibid., 152.

23. Ibid., 164.

24. Ibid., 165.

outdoor abilities. However, while this status and know-how is mythologized through the branding, marketing, and consumption process, it actually requires none of those implied abilities. That is part of the myth.

Once a product takes on a cult status, it is no longer just about the carefully crafted image produced by the company, but also the meaning and added mythos that comes from the consumers. For Yeti, something they have said they do not want their product associated with is the #Yetibutts.²⁵ The trend, popularized several years ago, features photos of women in bikinis and thongs sitting on Yeti coolers facing away from the camera. They adopt the same posture: leaning forward to give the effect of a smaller waste and larger and rounder buttocks that spread across much of the cooler. While taken in many different settings, most are not in the wilderness, but at a party on a beach, a boat, or truck. Originally, the coolers often featured stickers of other outdoor brands, fraternities, universities, and even politics (NRA, Trump, and other right-leaning messages). Sometimes there were flags, both the American and the confederate, in the background. The women themselves were sometimes wearing backwards Make America Great Again hats and holding guns, alcohol, or their bikini top. Though popularized a few years ago, there are still social media pages dedicated to sharing these photos and the hashtag. While some of the original Yeti outdoors branding might be embedded within this and similar social media trends, this one is purposefully leaning away from the simple outdoorsman's life of leisure and adventure and pointing more specifically to one that relates to a younger party crowd and ideological beliefs that more overtly place the brand and their consumers on one side of the culture wars.

The term "culture wars" was first popularized by James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book with the same name to define the ways in which cultural shifts, identity, values, and individual choices are becoming increasingly politicized and therefore further bi-partisan politics with the use of so-called wedge issues. He explains that what we believe is because of "moral authority" and that a war of ideas is occurring "between groups who hold fundamentally different views of the world. On all sides the contenders are generally sincere, thoughtful, and well meaning, but they operate with fundamentally opposing visions of the meaning of America: what it has been, what it is, and what it should be."²⁶ The two sides of this war are what he calls an "impulse towards orthodoxy" and an "impulse towards progressivism."²⁷ In a time and place as politically divided as the contemporary United States, the sides of the war, the impulses towards orthodoxy

25. Charlotte Wilder, "The Cult of YETI Coolers," *SBNation*, December 21, 2016, <https://www.sbnation.com/2016/12/21/14014278/yeti-coolers-cult-christmas-gift-list-2016>.

26. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 63.

27. *Ibid.*, 43.

or progressivism, define the culture, how Americans live their lives, who they vote for, and what they believe. Though many may pick and choose positions from different sides of the aisle on an issue by issue basis, a lot of times individuals' stances on guns, abortion, the pandemic, identity politics, and many other things come down to one's chosen side of the culture wars. At times this is predictable as it is based on the rural and urban split as evidenced by recent election maps and the ways in which representative districts are drawn in the United States. In the midst of the culture wars and the politics of the United States in the spring of 2018, even coolers became political.

In February 2018 the United States experienced a horrific school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As with many other shootings, the aftermath mobilized gun control advocacy groups, but this one stood out because it was led by some of the students who survived the deadly attack. With pressure from advocacy groups, politicians, and the general public, many companies ended their relationships with the NRA (the National Rifle Association), gun manufacturers, and weapons vendors. However, where there is a push for gun control, it is countered with a strong defense of gun ownership and the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution (the right to bear arms). As occurs with these wedge issues, neither side convinces the other, very little is agreed upon, and the schism becomes more deeply entrenched.

In April 2018, two months after the shooting and amid many companies distancing themselves from the NRA, Yeti also cut their ties. The NRA is the most outspoken organization in the United States when it comes to pro-gun and pro-Second Amendment messaging and it throws its membership and funds behind candidates and politicians who will work to advance the gun first agenda in U.S. legislation and policy. According to a letter to NRA members from Marian Hammer, the NRA president at the time, "YETI has declined to do business with The NRA Foundation saying they no longer wish to be an NRA vendor, and refused to say why. They will only say they will no longer sell products to The NRA Foundation."²⁸ In response, Yeti released a statement three days later stating "A few weeks ago, YETI notified the NRA Foundation, as well as a number of other organizations, that we were eliminating a group of outdated discounting programs." However, they "were offering them an alternative customization program broadly available to consumers and organizations." They concluded their statement with "YETI is unwavering in our belief in and commitment to the Constitution of the United States and its Second Amendment."²⁹

Despite this, though, the crack in the relationship between Yeti and the NRA

28. "Florida Alert: YETI Drops NRA Foundation," *NRA-ILA*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.nraila.org/articles/20180421/florida-alert-yeti-drops-nra-foundation>.

29. Yeti (@YETICoolers), "A few weeks ago....," *Twitter*, April 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/YETICoolers/status/988500276855427072>.

was enough for social media, NRA members, rival cooler companies, and conservative politicians to make a big and politicized spectacle out of the situation. Almost immediately, cancel culture propelled the gun-owning, Second Amendment-supporting Yeti owners to film themselves shooting their expensive coolers and blowing them up with explosives. Pelican Coolers announced a promotion that would donate \$10 to the NRA and throw in a free tumbler with the purchase of a cooler, Bison advertised their position with hashtags #2A and #MadeInUsa, and RTIC coolers posted an image of the Second Amendment.³⁰ On April 23, Orca's owner, Cliff Walker, took to the company's Facebook page with the statement "I often think bigger companies forget what got them there. ORCA will always support our 2nd Amendment rights — period."³¹ For Orca, the marketing worked because by May, the NRA Blog posted an article supporting Orca brand coolers with NRA logos. The piece cleverly began, "Did your old, anti-NRA coolers and drinkware blow up in tannerite-fueled explosions? Or perhaps start leaking from .223 caliber-sized holes? We've heard it's a common problem. But don't worry — the NRAstore has the perfect replacements! [...] The NRA Orca 20 Cooler and Chaser Tumblers are beefy, over-built and brimming with NRA pride!"³²

Through the process of interpellation, as has been explained by Louis Althusser, aspects of our daily lives and popular culture offer consumers possible identities that are wrapped up into certain ideological belief systems.³³ Therefore, in marketing and advertising, companies sell consumers not only a product but a possible identity that aligns with beliefs they have about themselves, their desires, and larger ideologies. The same thing is done with politics when politicians appeal to voters through ideological beliefs. According to James Davison Hunter, identity is important to our cultural conflicts; he writes, "Political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding. [...] They are not merely attitudes that can change on a whim but basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness for the people who live

30. Ariella Gintzler, "Cooler Companies Capitalize on Yeti's Spat with the NRA," *Outside*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.outsideonline.com/2423806/best-memorial-day-sale-outdoor-gear>; Kate Gibson, "Cooler Wars: Rivals Hope to Cash in on NRA Feud with Yeti," *CBS News*, April 28, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cooler-wars-rivals-hope-to-cash-in-on-nra-feud-with-yeti/>.

31. Orca, "Message From Our Owner," *Facebook*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/orcacoolers/photos/a.433058753460672/1682541731845695/?type=3>.

32. "NRAstore Product Highlight: NRA Orca Cooler and Chaser Tumblers," *NRA Blog*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.nrablog.com/articles/2018/5/nrastore-product-highlight-nra-orca-cooler-and-chaser-tumblers>.

33. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, eds. M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 84–86.

by them.”³⁴ Embedded within all of these posts from the NRA regarding Yeti and competing cooler companies is an expression of and an offer of an identity; that of conservatism and an impulse towards orthodoxy, which Hunter defines as “a commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority.”³⁵ In this situation, that authority would be the Constitution and the upholding of the Second Amendment that states, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

The inverse of this conservatism, the impulse towards progressivism, is defined as “the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.”³⁶ In other words, those calling for gun control are not necessarily suggesting scrapping the sacred Constitution, but instead are calling to reframe it in modern terms, through “rationalism and subjectivism.”³⁷ For example, when arms were mentioned in the constitution, they were low capacity muzzle loaders and flintlocks that could only hold one round at a time and therefore get less than a handful of shots off in a minute. There was no such thing as the modern military-style weapons with huge and easy to change magazines with the capacity to shoot six hundred rounds a minute. The resymbolization from the progressive end of the spectrum considers the use of “arms” in the Constitution and asks if what exists today should be included in that. Therefore, for some of the progressive leaning crowd, Yeti’s rejection of the NRA and its promotion of a traditional understanding of the Constitution was seen as a positive and those individuals posted their support of the company amid the conservative outrage.

And just like that, the conversation and selling point of the coolers was no longer about their strength, durability, and performance. It was not about being an outdoorsman; it was not about establishing oneself as a member of an elite class through conspicuous consumption and pecuniary emulation; and it was not about ice not melting. Instead, the cooler had been sucked into the culture wars and became a symbol of one’s stance on guns, the Second Amendment, the NRA, and an ideological vision for the future of the United States. Though Yeti had been tied to conservatism in some ways, through the connection to southern, rural, and traditional culture (not to mention Yetibutts), one action unwound the careful mythos of Yeti coolers and the company who capitalized on it.

This phenomenon is clearly not limited to coolers. In a capitalist culture, where products are given added meaning through purposeful marketing and branding and politics are often for sale, this is extremely prevalent. Well before

34. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 42.

35. *Ibid.*, 45.

36. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

37. *Ibid.*, 44.

2018 and increasingly since, companies have and continue to produce not only material goods but ideological beliefs, identities, and political stances. Left-leaning individuals in the United States have called for many boycotts over the years. In recent memory, well-known boycotts of particular chain stores (like Hobby Lobby) and restaurants (Chick-fil-A) over topics related to women's reproductive rights and support of the LGBTQIA+ community have occurred and been popularized by the attention received on news platforms and social media. Likeminded people learning of a CEO's stance, corporate policies, or political donations took to social media to call on others with similar views and values to join them in making their stances known and put their wallets where their values lie. In response, it seemed that more and more companies were willing to put their virtue signaling into their product lines. For example, Target and many other companies have been creating Pride collections and adopting targeted marketing techniques for the month of June (proclaimed LGBTQIA+ Pride month by President Obama in 2011). Currently, politics in the United States has made issues of trans rights, particularly in relation to women's athletics, access to gender-affirming care, hormone blockers, and policies policing trans children. As conservative states are creating policies and laws preventing gender-affirming care and progressive states and organizations are fighting more for trans rights and highlighting trans activists, conservative boycotts of those same companies embracing Pride month and featuring Pride collections are occurring. For example, in May 2023, Target pulled some of their originally planned Pride merchandise in response to vandalized displays and threats to their employees in light of the cultural and political commentary regarding trans rights and LGBTQIA+ legislation.³⁸

Much of the backlash received by Target and other companies and brands also came in the wake of Bud Light's partnership with trans social media influencer Dylan Mulvaney. In April of 2023, Mulvaney created a post in which she was discussing March Madness and her transition to womanhood while drinking Bud Light and promoting an online contest Bud Light was hosting. The very short and one-off post was immediately picked up by conservative commentators, politicians, and celebrities who fanned the flames of the culture wars on social media. Much like the backlash against Yeti coolers where videos were posted of angry consumers shooting coolers, two days after the Mulvaney video, rock star Kid Rock, famous for his music and alliances with conservative politicians, namely Donald Trump, posted a video of himself to Instagram in a Kid Rock Fish Fry sweatshirt and MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat shooting an automatic rifle at several cases of Bud Light. The video ended with Kid Rock looking at the

38. Anne D'Innocenzio, "Target Becomes Latest Company to Suffer Backlash for LGBTQ+ Support, Pulls Some Pride Month Clothing," *AP News*, May 24, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/target-pride-lgbtq-4bc9de6339f86748bcb8a453d7b9acf0>.

camera and proclaiming “F**k Bud Light and f**k Anheuser Busch.”³⁹ In the days following this, Bud Light was dropped by many of their regular customers as well as by many stores and restaurants as jokes, memes, and targeted insults at Bud Light and Mulvaney circulated on social media. Much of the reporting has also focused on the decrease in sales and stock value as well as Bud Light being dethroned as the best-selling beer in the United States. Beyond the backlash against Bud Light for their perceived embrace of the trans community, there has also been a backlash against the brand from the other side of the aisle for the way that Bud Light executives have seemingly given in to the conservative boycott and betrayed their LGBTQIA+ consumers, community, and employees.

As for Yeti’s life after the NRA and Second Amendment boycott, Yeti waited out the short-term memory of the United States news cycle, changed marketing tactics, and embraced new consumer markets. With new items being introduced regularly, including camp chairs, dog bowls, gear boxes, dry bags, and new and limited-edition color options, Yeti is appealing to a different and wider demographic. No longer focusing on being the perfect cooler for the rural outdoorsman who is hunting and fishing, Yeti has expanded to other outdoor activities emphasizing camping, rock climbing, van life, and water sports. They also continue to broaden their consumer base by changing their mission and focus. For example, according to Yeti’s 2022 Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Report, they have “worked across the company to elevate [their] commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and reinforced [their] connection to communities and organizations that help [them] preserve and increase access to the WILD.”⁴⁰ Their approach, which focuses on diversity and inclusion, the environment, and sustainability, conforms to what some on the conservative end of the spectrum dismiss as “woke” culture. With the current boycotts of LGBTQIA+ marketing and product lines as seen with Bud Light and Target, the “wokeness” is usually what is being targeted and seen as pandering to popular identity politics of the day. In the face of this, Yeti is purposeful and one way they are changing their consumer base is by making an active commitment to expand their ambassador program to make it more diverse. This includes outdoor enthusiasts of various races, gender identities, and sexualities. The company is also very clear about its desire to create an inclusive environment for employees as well. They use the term “YETIzens” throughout, a play on the inclusivity, responsibility, and democracy implied in the word “citizen,” and they highlight their “Employee Affinity Groups” that offer employees “an opportunity to connect

39. Kid Rock (@kidrock), video, *Instagram*, April 3, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CqmUBDegYwN/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again.

40. “Keep the Wild WILD: 2022 ESG Report,” *Yeti*, <https://www.yeti.com/on/demandware.static/-/Library-Sites-YetiSharedLibrary/default/va5941af6ba4437fa7c4448cb2602e4e50ab723f7/2022-YETI-ESG-Report.pdf?version=1,668,555,891,000> (accessed June 10, 2023).

with their peers around shared identity, interests, and passions, but they also create a platform for YETIzens to share ideas for creating an inclusive environment with [their] senior leadership.” These include groups dedicated to women, African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, LGBTQIA+ community, Lantinx, and veterans.⁴¹ Looking at the visuals of the Yeti website, social media pages, and ESG report, it is clear that the company is earnestly working to promote active lifestyles outdoors with an inclusive range of activities and people represented.

Also, within popular culture references, Yeti is following Subaru in that it is now often associated with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, mainly lesbians. On social media, there are often jokes about lesbian identity being shown through the ownership of Yeti coolers and drinkware. TikToks joke about “lesbian starter packs” and point to brands like Yeti and Subaru. In fact, Subaru dealerships have had promotions involving Yeti: a free cooler with the purchase of a car. Subaru is often cited as one of the brands that capitalized off of the marketing strategy called “gay vague” that hints at LGBTQIA+ interests and identities with subtle cues. The branding of Subarus in the early 1990s included advertisements with codes that, if privy to the code, winked at a lesbian identity. Subaru was purposeful in this marketing, seeing lesbians as an untapped market for an active outdoor lifestyle.⁴² It seems evident then that Yeti is riding on Subaru’s coat tails and through such promotions and outreach are appealing to the built-in active, outdoorsy lesbian demographic.

This revelation that consumers can use the objects they purchase as signals of their identity and that companies purposefully help to build those identities through their marketing and branding is nothing new. However, with the divided politics in the United States today and the ongoing culture wars, more and more elements of everyday life are becoming politicized. When the objects we purchase put us on one side of a wedge issue, our identities can become more entwined with our political beliefs and the prepackaged ideologies that inform those beliefs. When this occurs, we are perhaps more likely to unwittingly fall in line and fail to question or critically examine our leaders, our laws, and the world around us. It is good to be a conscientious consumer but also important to form an identity and belief system outside of what we consume. Who knew a cooler could hold so much?

41. “Keep the Wild WILD,” *Yeti*, 14.

42. Alex Mayyasi and Priconomics, “How Subarus Came to be Seen as Cars for Lesbians,” *The Atlantic*, June 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/how-subarus-came-to-be-seen-as-cars-for-lesbians/488042/>.