

Tractor Supply Company's "For Life Out Here" and the Construction of the Consumptive Rural: An Extension of Rhoades and Irani (2008)

Robert Patterson
University of Virginia, McIntire School of Commerce

Bryce D. Tellmann
South Dakota School of Mines and Technology

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Tractor Supply Company's "For Life Out Here" and the Construction of the Consumptive Rural: An Extension of Rhoades and Irani (2008)

Abstract

Rurality is a powerful force in North America, with implications in cultural, political, economic, and retail domains. This article investigates Tractor Supply Company's (TSC) use of "For Life Out Here" as a corporate motto and commercial advertising strategy, with particular focus on how this phrase leverages ideas of rurality. Through rhetorical analysis of annual reports, web advertising, and in-store product lines, we identify three different forms of rural identity: Spatial, political/group, and individual/consumer. Consideration of how TSC uses rural identity in its corporate communication suggests that it does not so much target rural customers as it does offer consumers anywhere the means to identify as rural.

Keywords

Rural, rhetoric, Tractor Supply Company, consumption

Authors

Robert Patterson and Bryce D. Tellmann

Introduction

The problem of what exactly constitutes "rural" has been recognized by marketers for most of the last century, and likely longer (Meserole, 1938). This question is still relevant today, especially as much of rural America continues to experience post-pandemic population and economic growth (Farrigan et al., 2025). In this article, we pick up a thread of analysis penned in 2008 by Rhoades and Irani in this journal. In their piece, the authors "read" semiotic meanings embedded in a 2004–2005 Tractor Supply Company (TSC) ad campaign titled, "The stuff you need out here." They analyzed three print advertising messages "as to what rural life is" (p. 1), concluding that "it is imperative as communicators that we continue to study how rural cultures are portrayed in the media... it is apparent through this analysis that negative stereotypes about farmers are still being presented" (p. 12). They position their work as a response to Higgins' 1991 plea "for more research looking at the communication gap between farmers and non-farmers, citing the fact that non-farmers hold farmers in high esteem, while holding an idealistic, romanticized view of farming" (Rhoades & Irani, p. 3). As these authors attested, a longstanding call continues for more analysis by both practitioners and scholars as to the nature of messages and representations of what constitutes rural life and rural identity.

Rurality is one of the most rhetorically powerful spatial identities in North America today. Among scholars interested in how rhetorical characterizations of space influence (or are influenced by) cultural understandings and relationships between people, more attention to the retail/commercial aspects of rurality is needed. We have written before about the many ways that rural identity is constructed and used (Tellmann et al, 2022). In our discussions on this topic, the marketing efforts of rural retailer TSC rose to prominence. TSC occupies a unique position in United States culture as the country's largest retailer of products geared toward the hobby farmer or small agriculturalist. Specifically, the persistence of "For Life Out Here" as a corporate motto and strategy, and the interplay of agriculture and consumption—using images traditionally associated with the *production* of food and fiber to encourage the *consumption* of commercially produced goods—merit further inquiry. Ultimately, the case considered here demonstrates that TSC's marketing efforts do not target rural customers so much as they offer consumers anywhere the means by which to *identify as* rural.

While Rhoades and Irani (2008) and others (Denpasar, 2021; Edgar & Rutherford, 2012; Rumble et al., 2014; Schroeder, 2022) described the advertising approach, brand marketing, and semiotics surrounding the "stuff you need out here" campaign, our commentary about TSC's multimodal communications seeks to provide insights into stakeholders' changing relationship to messaging, demographic changes, and monolithic understandings of rurality. By exploring why people identify as rural, we hope to foster a rich discussion of how agriculture and rural consumption both informs and distorts understandings of rurality. By revisiting the agricultural retailer TSC, through this rhetorical analysis, we aim to unlock meanings of rural consumption and its relationship in consummating rural identity and the sense of belonging consumers seek. Such commentaries provide salience and launching points for more scholarship within the field.

The TSC "Stuff Out Here" advertising campaign from 20 plus years ago is now the brand's broader strategy and corporate motto titled "For Life Out Here." Artifactually, we are interested in taking a fresh look at TSC and its role in the construction of rural identity and consumption. By conducting a rhetorical analysis of TSC's "For Life Out Here," we extend the

calls made by Rhoades and Irani (2008) and Higgins (1991) using a modern perspective to delineate both convergences and divergences of "farmer and non-farmer," the "ruralist" and "urbanist," the hobby farmer, and suburbanites. "For Life Out Here" is a rich artifact to unpack. The insights generated by this analysis could be of use to practitioners, academics, those who work on rural development issues (e.g., chambers of commerce in rural areas, foundations focused on rural viability, those working on the Federal Reserve Bank's rural investment initiatives, etc.), buyers for agricultural retailers and farmer cooperatives, county extension agents, agriculturally focused trade associations, small business owners, brand managers of agricultural products, website administrators working for agricultural businesses. and civic leaders serving rural communities.

By investigating TSC's self-presentation in multimodal advertisements and annual reports and in-person observations about the nature of its in-store branding, we posit three different forms of rural identity formation offered by the company: spatial rurality, political/group identity, and individual/consumer identity.

The Plurality of Rurality Represents a Powerful Rhetorical Divide

Inquiry into rurality inevitably brings attention to the notion of an urban-rural divide. Tensions between rural and urban life in the U.S. have received a great deal of attention, even as it is less clear than ever what exactly constitutes 'rural' (Trujillo & Lin, 2025). The challenge is not a novel one: For decades, scholars have been writing about the lack of consensus on an operating definition of "rural" (Bosak & Perlman, 1982). The ambiguity of definition, paired with the potency of rurality as an American ideal, make it ripe for rhetorical manipulation. In 21st century America, the "urban-rural divide" has emerged as something of a super-explanation for American cultural and political life. This was especially apparent in the wake of the 2016 election, which seemed an affirmation of the idea of "red states" and "blue states," with red states being defined mostly by their predominance of counties on the rural side of the "urban-rural continuum" (Scala & Johnson, 2017, p. 162). Explanations of this divide range from rural resentment caused by unfulfilled ideas of the "American dream" (Hochschild, 2018, 2024) to hoodwinked rural voters who have been tricked into voting against their economic self-interest (Frank, 2004) to different social statuses and racial and ethnic differences (Kelly & Labao, 2019; Monnat & Brown, 2017). Yet the results of the 2024 election—in which nearly every area and subgroup of the country voted more Republican than they had in the prior election—cast some doubt on the ease of this explanation (Bloch et al., 2024), or at least on the idea that rural and urban America are moving in opposite political directions.

The existence of multiple definitions of "rural" does not necessarily denote disagreement. Oftentimes, differing definitions are used simply because researchers or policymakers are pursuing particular objectives; an economic definition of rurality, for example, is necessarily going to differ in most cases from a cultural definition (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). In 2024, political scientists, Daniel Shea and Nicholas Jacobs, suggested, using a sophisticated definition of "rural" grounded in census data, that rural America has emerged as a powerful voting bloc. The authors claim that this national phenomenon is evidence of the potency of place-based identity. But which definition is used greatly affects what can be said about "rural America"

(Bennet et al., 2019). This difficulty is compounded when, as in the case examined here, no precise definition is used, but rather a rhetorical-cultural gestalt of rurality generally.

Tensions between urban and rural life, real or imagined, go far beyond electoral politics, and even beyond the idea of place itself. The USDA's 2023 "Rural America at a Glance" report referenced "nonmetropolitan" as both consisting of areas and people (Davis et al., 2023). The Association of Equipment Managers points to a Paulsen and Audience Audit survey, which suggested that of those Americans polled 26% saw themselves as "ruralists" and another 41% saw themselves as "urbanists" who live in cities, "but would like to live in the country," and another 33% don't identify with either moniker, but "simply want more space than they have already" (Gavin, 2024, para. 11). Data from the Economic Innovation Group found that in 2021, nearly 1 million residents (about the population of Delaware) left 78 of the nation's largest urban counties presumably to seek a more pastoral lifestyle (Benzow, 2022). The term "rural" has a daunting variety of rhetorical approaches, including as a strategy or commodity, a rhetorical resource, performance, and as myth (Tellmann et al., 2023).

In attempts to address the broad challenges faced by rural America, researchers encounter problems of scale. This problem is particularly apparent in the long struggle to disentangle "rural" from "agricultural" (Shellabarger et al., 2019). Certainly, many of the ways in which rurality is commodified, performed, and drawn upon as myth are tied up in longstanding associations between rural life and agricultural production. But as Shellabarger et al. (2019) wrote, close attention to the material realities of agri-food systems reveals the insufficiency of simple urban/rural dichotomies, as many rural areas de-agrarianize in the face of farm consolidation and withdrawal from local economies, and as many urban areas re-agrarianize to address food deserts through urban agriculture. Still, these authors do not advocate jettisoning "urban" and "rural" from the vocabulary. The ideas exist in socially powerful ways and do reflect certain realities—but certainly, "while a distinction may exist at one scale, it may not exist at others" (p. 98).

Constitutive Rhetoric Provides a Meaningful Point of View

Despite the difficulty of finding a durable definition of "rural," it is clear that the *idea* of rurality, vague though it may be, is laden with meaning. Rural places, and by extension rural people, are often presented as embodying more traditional, wholesome, and less-complicated ways of American life, particularly in comparison to urban places and people (Combs, 1993). In American cultural life, of course, this is an easily recognizable trope going back at least to Thomas Jefferson's image of the yeoman farmer. But the roots of this trope go back further. Contemporary attitudes and anxieties toward rurality are part of a several-thousand-year-old tradition of the countryside as a place of rightness, retreat, and renewal in the face of ever-increasing urbanity (Gifford, 2020). This is seen most clearly in the tradition of pastoralist literature, beginning with the ancient Greeks, which features idyllic retreats from the complications and temptations of urban life. With this tradition, though, comes tension: Are such representations of rurality authentic images of rural people and places, or products to be pleasantly consumed by the literate, cosmopolitan denizens of the city? And as rural life becomes less spatially, culturally, and economically distinguishable from the city, is the notion of pastoral retreat legible at all?

At the same time, rural people are often presented as living away from or outside urban ways of life, culture, and elements of city amenities. Smolarski (2014) wrote that "the city-image could be understood as Burkean" in terms of signifying an identity (p. 3). In cities, a path could take one from a city center to the "edge" of a river, whereas in rural spaces paths are thought of as trails leading to other rural areas. Either way, a path or trail divides. As Smolarski continued, "edges, like rivers, highways, or railways often cut the city into pieces, dividing parts associated with one kind of *character* [emphasis our own] from parts associated with opposites" (p. 3). Increasingly, living away from or outside of cities or edges (i.e., suburbia) finds agency within consumption culture as being infused with character.

One way in which character is defined is through acts of consumption. As Young (2014) posited, "we buy based on the lifestyle and *identity* [emphasis added] that we feel is encapsulated by the product or service" (p. 103). The work of Burke (1989), Charland (1987), and Foss (2018) on symbols, constitutive rhetoric, and ideological criticism provided an eclectic theoretical construct from which to better comprehend how human identity can connect consumers viscerally to purchasing brands. Charland (1987) noted that audience members within a community can be constituted, hailed, and called into being. Therefore, the consumer's behavioral purchase as a rhetorical act constituted the consumer into an identity that to them feels rural. Under these conditions, Foss (2018) argued the constructed identity compels action, i.e., the act of consumption that makes one identify as being rural and suggests to that consumer how they should act. Foss (1994) posited that a communicative artifact is the origin of where symbols connect to humans as audiences.

These findings suggest (1) rural identity has often been found to be constructed and contested, and (2) commercial consumption can function as an identity-affirming activity. As researchers of rhetoric using a constitutive approach, we are naturally predisposed to the notion that rural identity is as much constructed as it is discovered or experienced. One of the ways in which this construction happens is through consumption. That characteristics of rurality have become an object of commercial consumption is evident, for instance, in the rise of Carhartt, formerly a workwear brand, into a must-have fashion label. Simply put, rural identity isn't just about where you live, but about what you buy.

Tractor Supply Company's "For Life Out Here" calls for a deeper conversation about rural identity formation and consumption. Rhoades and Irani (2008) referred to TSC as an "agricultural company," but given TSC's product mix and consumer demographics, it is less of a traditional agricultural supply company in 2026 than it is a rural-lifestyle brand. TSC products also appeal to those former urban dwellers who have moved into more rural areas and seek to farm as a hobby versus farming as their primary income stream. For us, TSC and "For Life Out Here," as a place-based discourse, hails consumers to identify as a collective community with rural-focused merchandise. "For Life Out Here" is the meta-artifact as it suggests a line of spatial demarcation that is consumable, as much as it is functional. "For Life Out Here" also symbolizes a kind of rural character.

"For Life Out Here" Raises Two Questions

Tractor Supply Company's use of "For Life Out Here" rhetorically constructs rural identity and consumer belonging. "For Life Out Here," first as simply an advertising campaign slogan and later as a larger act of corporate branding, creates a consumer space that hails identification with its brand differentiation of being a retail seller of rurality. The term "For Life Out Here" also suggests to the consumer an aspirational lifestyle. That is, some consumers are not "out there" yet, but TSC can help bridge that gap in identity. Burke (1989) called these codes the "ambiguities of substance" leading to consubstantial identification or a symbolic species where rhetorical expression can be shared by two groups (p. 180). In this immediate case, those who identify as urban and those who identify as rural, when acting together, "have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial" (p. 181). In plain English, TSC offers consumers a site of symbolic action or inter-action whereby those agriculturalists who produce agricultural outputs mix with those desiring to consume goods that make them appear as if they are living "out there," too. The richness of this artifact and its potential for helping unpack its symbolic potency seems worthy of exploration.

Having identified "rural" as an important locus of meaning and given the relevant themes suggested by the discussion above, we seek to address two questions. First, how does "For Life Out Here" serve as an identity marker for TSC customers? Second, what image(s) of rurality does TSC present?

Positionality and Approach

To address these questions, we applied ideological criticism, which rhetorician Sonja Foss (2018) described as looking "beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests" (p. 237). Looking "beyond the surface" does not mean that the critic assumes that the artifact is hiding something sinister—it simply means that the critic attends closely to how the artifact under analysis encourages certain views of society and the world, including what it means to be part of the "in" group implied by the artifact.

Both researchers have a background in rhetorical analysis and speech communication. Additionally, one of us brings scholarly familiarity with corporate and organizational communication, and the other has published on matters of metaphor and group identity. Especially as we work in different parts of the country (one in Virginia, and one in South Dakota), we designed our interpretation to leverage our personal areas of expertise, while still maintaining agreement with each other's analytical work.

Categories of Artifacts Clarify Stakeholders

Both authors spent time reviewing TSC's website, retail media ads, and content marketing (e.g., tailored to shows like *Yellowstone*, *The Last Cowboy*, and its history of corporate sponsorship of Professional Bull Riders (PBR) events and Hometown Heroes) to identify a reasonable corpus of material. Focusing on the maturation of "For Life Out Here" from an advertising campaign slogan to larger corporate branding, we used artifacts that provided insight to arrange the discussion. These artifacts can be grouped into three categories: (1) annual

reports, (2) television advertisements, and (3) in-store brands. Obviously, this list is not exhaustive. But these categories represent how TSC communicates itself to a broad swath of stakeholders: Annual reports are directed at insiders, or those with a financial interest in the company; television advertisements (many of which are also used as YouTube advertisements, content marketing, and omnichannel strategies) are directed at its existing customer base and potential customers who may be enticed to shop at TSC; and in-store brands are directed at existing customers, or at least those who have already made the decision to enter the store or browse products online. Of particular interest were uses of "For Life Out Here" that extended across all three categories.

Although "For Life Out Here" has been a fixture in TSC rhetoric more than a decade, we focused on artifacts between 2020 and the present. This marks the beginning of Hal Lawton's tenure as CEO and the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which had significant effects on how TSC characterized its brand, especially in the face of much-discussed large-scale relocations of Americans from cities to the countryside (Benzow, 2022). This resulted in a set of artifacts that included five annual reports; 13 in-store visits to 10 different stores in Texas, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Dakota; and 24 TV advertisements. Prompted by current events and responses that tied into the primary themes, we also included three press releases from TSC.

Unlike other forms of qualitative analysis, rhetorical criticism often does not follow a prescribed series of formal steps, but instead engages in a more generative process that "allow[s] what is most interesting and significant in an artifact to be captured and explained" (Foss, 2018, p. 411). With the help of two undergraduate research assistants, we gathered artifacts from the three categories. Each author examined an initial set of artifacts for themes related to "For Life Out Here" and the construction of rural/consumer identity and wrote up their analytical comments. These sets of comments were then passed to the other author, who performed their own analysis of the artifacts to bolster, elaborate, or refute the first author's analysis. This passing usually involved discussion between the two authors to share insights.

Rural Identities from "For Life Out Here"

Three themes, each representing a different aspect of rurality, emerged from the selected artifacts. Together, TSC's various means of constructing an identity for its customers offer forms of rurality as a (1) spatial identity, (2) group identity, and (3) individual consumer identity.

Rural Spatial Identity: Many Rurals into One "Rural Lifestyle"

Although TSC's vision of rurality is divorced from any particular geography, this is not to say that there is no spatial component of the commercial appeal. Perhaps more obviously than the other rhetorical characteristics, TSC's public-facing communications seek to create a sense of spatial identity for their customers—an explicitly rural spatial identity. Since 2004, TSC has put forward different forms of the phrase "out here," clearly marking this two-word phrase as an evocative phrase to engage, invite, or create their target customer base (Rhoades & Irani, 2008). The two words, "out" and "here," are remarkably rich in the amount of spatial baggage they imply. "Out" suggests distance away from something else, a separation from the easy comforts of population centers. It also suggests a form of exclusion, but not necessarily a negative one. As

deployed by TSC, "out" gains shades of pastoral retreat, an escape from the worldly intrigue and unhealthy complexity of urban or official spaces. "Here" affirms that the location suggested by "out" is indeed marginal, away from some center, but also that this margin is exactly that inhabited by TSC customers. "Out here" is the inverse of "in there," and TSC's long deployment of the phrase suggests pride of place in unnamed, less populated areas.

In the 2004–2005 print campaign analyzed by Rhoades and Irani (2008), this spatial identity primarily related to material needs, that is, "the *stuff* you need out here." By the 2020s, this had morphed to a broader message about lifestyle, but the spatial element remained. In a 2020 *Forbes* interview, Senior Vice President of Marketing Christi Korzekwa acknowledged the fluid, polysemic nature of the company's "out here" motto:

It means a lot of things to a lot of different people. You can take the literal translation of it, which is, I live out here, I live in the country, in rural America. I might have a little more land. I might have animals like chickens or goats. But it can also be aspirational. Or it can be a state of mind where you just look for those values from authenticity and looking for that ability to really go back to your roots. And so we think about it as just a very genuine and authentic way that people live their lives. That very self-reliant lifestyle. (Knox, 2020)

This strategic variability—being resolutely spatial yet flexible about the exact nature of that space—can be clearly seen in recent television and online video advertising. In a 2021 ad featuring *Yellowstone* writer and producer Taylor Sheridan, the rugged cowboy figure gravely intones that "the jobs in the American West have not changed much in the last century" (Tractor Supply Company, 2021, 0:07). The idea that jobs "have not changed" is mediated by location. Where have jobs not changed? According to the ad, "in the American West."

But while its *Yellowstone*-focused ads use the American West to provide a spatial sense of rural identity, the vast majority of TSC stores lie east of the Mississippi. Perhaps for this reason, other ads draw upon different ideas of rurality. One spot that ran on Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest entitled, "Simpler Life," eschews the open range and barbed wire fence for farmhouse porches, gardens, wooden fences, and neighbors in close proximity (Tractor Supply Company, 2022). Notably, when the ad lists "gardeners, animal lovers, and landowners" among its customers, the word "landowners" is punctuated by video of a customer on a riding lawnmower. Though vastly different in scale, region, and economic activity, the cowboy on a horse and the suburbanite on a lawnmower come to serve the same rhetorical function: To provide a spatial identity exemplified by the phrase "out here," one that is capacious enough to include ranchers and suburban homeowners, yet that never has to come to terms with, or even acknowledge, the contradictions it presents.

In another video ad that underscores the flexibility of "out here" and agricultural identity, country music singer, Lainey Wilson, narrated, "I'm from a farming community. A little town of 200 people. A fifth-generation farmer's daughter. I consider myself a farmer, too. It's about getting up every single day, planting those seeds, watering them, and watching them grow" (Tractor Supply Company, 2024a, 0:02). The clip that accompanies this voiceover does not depict agricultural activity or rural places, but rather Wilson putting on a cowboy hat, writing

songs on her tour bus, and performing on stage. Much like rurality itself, the identity of "farmer" in this ad is remarkably adaptable, not necessarily associated with agricultural production, but instead connected to a set of values like getting up, working, and long-term participation in a community.

It is precisely these contradictions that make TSC's management of spatial identity fascinating in its particular case and instructive in what it indicates about the larger "rural" consumer landscape. How is it that TSC can draw upon imagery that seems to be a poor fit for many of the consumers it is aiming toward—that is, how can rurality be a compelling identity when envisioned both as the horse-mounted cowboy and as the lawnmower-mounted suburbanite? Simply put, as evidenced in its advertising and annual reports, TSC is not so much aiming for people in rural places it is offering a distinct *spatialization* of a consumer identity (Dansziger, 2023).

Rural Political (Group) Identity and Understanding "For Life Out Here"

Analysis of TSC's annual reports reveals an important shift: In each annual report from 2020 to 2023, the Form 10-K section of the report featured a section with the title "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." This section declared that "Tractor Supply is committed to the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion," and provided figures on the gender and minority distribution of its workforce, as well as information on ongoing initiatives to support DEI efforts (Tractor Supply Company, 2023, p. 7). In the 2024 annual report, this section is no more. One does not have to go far for an explanation: On June 27, 2024, TSC issued a news release announcing its decision to "eliminate DEI roles and retire our current DEI goals" and "withdraw" its "carbon emission goals" to focus on land/water conservation efforts (Tractor Supply Company, 2024b, para. 4). This release also acknowledged TSC's 50,000 "Team Members" who treat customers "like family," support it provides to the National FFA Organization and National 4-H Council, and its investment in veterans groups, first responders, "animal shelters, state fairs, rodeos, and farmers markets." The decision harkens to Burke's (1989) sense of consubstantiality of attitudes among its critical core of stakeholders. TSC's press release goes on, "We have heard from customers that we have disappointed them, we have taken this feedback to heart" (Tractor Supply Company, 2024b, para. 3).

This press release shows TSC's response to pressure from outspoken stakeholders, such as Robby Starbuck, who had been criticizing the company's DEI practices for more than a year before the announcement. Starbuck was quoted in a CNN article as imploring TSC to "stop sponsoring activities like pride festivals and voting campaigns" (Rothenberg, 2024, 4:14). On X, Starbuck harangued TSC for its public tweets supporting LGBTQ+-inclusive stances. He called upon his 500,000 plus followers to boycott TSC stores. Within this rhetorical milieu, University of Southern California professor Shaun Harper posited that TSC "failed to tailor its DEI policy to the culture in which it operates" (Rothenberg, 2024, 4:14). Other coverage of TSC's decision in publications such as *Forbes* focused on the strategic and legal basis of the decision (Danziger, 2024). Another *Forbes* article, published four days after TSC's announcement, under the title "Tractor Supply Company plows into controversy over DEI commitments," mentions Starbuck's characterization of TSC's CEO Hal Lawton as "woke" when Lawton posed for a photo after receiving a COVID-19 vaccination (Faithfull, 2024).

Starbucks was equally pointed with other U.S.-founded-and-headquartered companies. Harley-Davidson, Walmart, Ford, John Deere, Coors, McDonald's, and Target have also decided to pull back and phase out several of their DEI initiatives and diversity policies. All these companies, like TSC, have the reputation of being thought of as quintessential or iconic American brands. Many, although not all, of these brands also have strong ties to consumers in rural America. Brand Keys Inc. has surveyed consumers for 25 years regarding what brands they believe are the most patriotic. Their 2022 survey reported in *Entrepreneur* and the 2025 survey reported in *The Columbus Dispatch* cited the top 50 most patriotic brands and Walmart, Harley, Ford, John Deere, Coors, McDonald's all made the list (Brown, 2022; Perry, 2025).

Together, these companies' shifts away from DEI can offer insight into the identities embedded in consumers, their preferences, perceived priorities, and everyday passions. TSC then is drawing a rhetorical line in the sand, knowing that "For Life Out Here" does come with rhetorical and spatial boundaries, with limits in terms of who are "in" and who are "out." "For Life Out Here" suggests a metaphorical as much as an actual place. Especially given TSC's regular emphasis on its "Neighbor's Club," this recalibrated commitment to in- and out-groups is significant. The Neighbor's Club is a loyalty program offered to TSC customers in both its physical and digital stores, offering rewards for repeat purchases. The use of the word "Neighbor" activates many of the same associations of TSC's other branding efforts—small-scale systems of mutually supportive yet independent producers living the "rural lifestyle." The Neighbor's Club takes on new meanings when it is thought of as an "in" group, meaning your ideological tendencies align with your commercial loyalties. So, it is with little surprise to the authors when in late 2024, TSC doubled down on supporting groups like the National FFA Organization, the National 4-H Council, and showcasing its own Nationwide Farmers Market initiative showcasing "local farmers, growers, craft makers, artisans, and other products within the community" (Tractor Supply Company, 2024c, para. 1). In this advertisement, TSC used a hobby farmer, Paul Falkenburg, who said, "Tractor Supply [Company] keeps my business working" (Tractor Supply Company, 2024c, para. 7) via Farmers Markets.

Similar to its spatial performance, "For Life Out Here" offers a rhetorical appeal to TSC customers. It is a means by which to identify as part of a broad rural community. It suggests a life where a consumer can establish ideological consubstantiality with other, like-minded American consumers. TSC appeals to consumers to internalize a lifestyle teeming with ideology, consumption, and meaning. "For Life Out Here" is a temporal, spatialized, and cultural impulse that shares rhetorical and consumptive appeal in a community distinct from urban ones.

Individual Consumer Lifestyle Identity Connects TSC to Basic Communicative Symbols

Like places and communities, hobbies reveal a lot about a person. They communicate basic attitudes, values, and a way of life held by the hobbyist, and even communities of hobbyists. In the US, many self-described "farmers" are hobbyists. In 2013, the USDA reported that 294,000 or 13 percent of all U.S. farms are operated on 10 or fewer acres (Newton, 2014). The USDA defines a farm as "any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the year" (USDA, 2024, para. 4).

Often, agricultural places and their potency serve as symbolic filling stations (Mabie, 2022). These places help individuals imbibe, to commiserate with others who share similar attitudes and values, and ideologies. Place identity suggests processes of cultural communication. For example, Lengen and Kistemann (2012) wrote, "Place identity is important for maintaining a personal and social identity and for emotional well-being" (p. 1162). An integral part of identity development is place identity, generally defined as an individual's meaning making related to a place and sense of belongingness (Easthope, 2009).

One theme that seems to resonate across this exploration of rural identity is work. Work aligns strongly with TSC's motto, "For Life Out Here." That is, "here" we work. It is not surprising that TSC taps into the potency of the rugged individual laboring to get a job done. TSC evokes a Western mindset in its stores and general marketing motifs. Symbols of the frontier and rugged lifeways abound. Once a TSC customer arrives at a store, there are plenty of symbols of the American West to signal values of hard work and agrarian lifestyles. Customers are met by messages that "Life Out Here" (i.e., rural living) combines functional hobby farming implements and outdoor recreational products. The product line mixes feeding troughs with fire pits and kayaks. Once in the store, the "neighbor" will find a mashup of toy tractors, Carhartt rain gear and work wear, work boots, decorative horseshoes, 5-pointed stars, and weed whackers. As the customer proceeds deeper into the store, they will typically find feed for both small and large animals, magazines that combine functional farming themes alongside periodicals that tap into Western mythology. The back of the store contains functional parts for farm vehicles, such as wheels and batteries. The TSC product line aligns with its motto, as we see a convergence of hobbies and recreational pursuits, clothing and accessories suitable for both work and play, and functional and decorative goods, signifying that customers embrace a particular image of rural culture.

TSC provides consumers with plenty of linguistic symbols to help "neighbors" identify with the "For Life Out Here" ethos. Several sub-brands and lines in TSC's product mix help reinforce this symbolic code. In August 2019, TSC announced in a press release that they were launching its Ridgecut Toughwear line (Tractor Supply Company, 2019). The line consists of workwear apparel, insulated outerwear, work, rancher, and roper boots. The release stated, "Ridgecut Toughwear features materials and enhancements perfectly suited for the working man and woman." (Tractor Supply Company, 2019, para. 4) Later in the release, TSC's VP of product development reiterated this theme, stating, "The second our customers leave our store they are going straight to their barn, stable or workshop where their clothes will take a beating. Ridgecut Toughwear offers them durable, comfortable clothing that can handle a lifestyle where rough weather is frequent and tough conditions are standard" (Tractor Supply Company, 2019, para. 5). The press release also included an image of a man wearing an insulated jacket outside a gate with what appear to be two 5-gallon buckets (see Figure 1). Under the image are the words "For Life Out Here" (Tractor Supply Company, 2019).

Figure 1

An Image Advertising the Ridgecut Toughwear Line (Tractor Supply Company, 2019)



Other TSC-exclusive brands play on similar western and manual labor themes. One can buy charcoal under the labels "Frontier" or "Cowboy," perhaps selecting the specific "Lone Star Blend" and lighting it with "Tumbleweed" charcoal starters. This pattern of branding common consumer products with rugged or agricultural-sounding names continues throughout the store's exclusive brands. We see a strong commitment on the part of the retailer to evoke places in their sub-brands and product lines. These products deepen the sense that "For Life Out Here" is largely a place-based metaphor for living a rural lifestyle. These products align with TSC's vibe that its consumers work hard and play hard, too.

Several of the lines and sub-brands communicate edges and boundaries, as in the Ridgecut, Tree Line (hunting accessories), County Line (outdoor tools and equipment), and Frontier brands. Others evoke imagery of rural and pastoral icons, such as the Red Shed and Barn Star brands. Still others focus on the nature of agricultural work, machinery maintenance, and farm production, such as Producer's Pride, an animal feed and supply brand manufactured by Purina aimed primarily at hobby farmers. Under the surface of these brand names is language and the meanings these brands provide to TSC's Neighbor's Club consumers. These boundaries and iconic references reinforce that "For Life Out Here" separates the TSC consumer from those not living a rural lifestyle.

Each of these brands may help TSC customers navigate the tensions inherent in hobby farming, or non-commercial farming (Sutherland, 2019). What does it mean to invest in agricultural values of hard work, independence, and producer-ism when one does not make their living from agricultural activity? The product lines briefly discussed here help relieve these tensions by offering a rhetorical path to individual identification through the symbolic associations of their branding. Rural identity—and by extension agricultural identity—isn't just about where a person lives but is also about what a person buys.

Discussion and Conclusions

Jacobs and Shea (2024) suggested that rural culture has become nationalized as a form of mass communication, not fragmented along regional, agriculturally specific, or local rural communities. They wrote, "rural America has become 'unified'" (p. 61), and later, that "...Rural culture has now become 'nationalized' - dependent on a few key flashpoints in nearly all parts of the country" (p. 246). As insightful as this point of view is, Jacobs and Shea might have oversimplified. That is, we assert rurality is also highly commodified and that such commodification is largely a rhetorical process that makes a mass and mobilized nationalization of rurality possible through shared and owned traditional and social media curated by nationwide rural lifestyle retail chains. To understand modern American rurality, analyzing retail rurality and the role companies, such as TSC, prove critical to a broader view of the sites where a rural political identity might also be constructed. Future scholarship in this area will find fertile points of possible analysis in the current movements in which stakeholders apply pressures on American firms to engage or back away from certain social and ideological commitments.

As evidenced by the foregoing analysis, TSC does not merely serve the needs of a rural customer base. Rather, it offers customers multiple ways to consummate a rural identity. Spatially, TSC collapses many forms of quasi-rurality into one "rural lifestyle," offering the lawnmower-riding suburbanite the opportunity to identify with the horse-riding cowboy. On the level of political and group identification, TSC increasingly offers a clear demarcation between an "us"—defined by 4-H, local concerns, and conservation—and a "them"—defined by DEI, national concerns, and climate change. Finally, TSC gives individual consumers the opportunity to demonstrate through their purchases that they are the type of individual who is doing real, "old-fashioned" work.

In sympathy with other scholarly considerations about rurality, but in contrast with TSC's own descriptions of rural settings and people, this analysis pushes toward a more complex understanding of the rural, or rather, multiple ruralities. These ruralities need not be geographic. Stemming from the identity categories identified in our analysis, the relationships between three different types of ruralities ask for further examination: (1) "rural," (2) "rural America," and (3) "rural lifestyle." "Rural" may be a spatial descriptor, but "rural America" is a loaded identity term (with which one might identify even if they live in the suburbs). These terms bring with them, of course, social and political implications, closely tied to the emergent voting patterns identified by Jacobs and Shea (2024). A "rural lifestyle," in turn, is something that can be purchased and consumed. This echoes geographer Jeffrey Hopkins' venerable 1998 assertion that invocations of the "rural" in tourism marketing have little to do with space, and more to do with creating a marketable identity. We argue that TSC offers a version of "rural lifestyle" that can be purchased as a way to consummate an identity consubstantial with "rural America," irrespective of if one is engaged in actual agricultural activities or even lives in a spatially rural area. In so doing, TSC transforms "rural" from a spatial descriptor to a sort of buyers' club.

Future scholarship could seek to compare TSC with other national and/or regional rural lifestyle retail chains. For example, big box retailers, such as Lowe's, are starting to expand their clothing lines, including brands such as Carhartt, Free Country, Wrangler, and DeWalt. Lowe's stores continue to expand their square footage dedicated for clothing compared to its historic

product lines. These expansions may suggest shifts in consumer demand and/or demographic categories of customers. Studies that seek to explore how regional retail chains, such as Rural King, Southern States, Bomgaars, Fleet Farm, and Farm Bureau Cooperatives (e.g., Augusta, Virginia Cooperative) may overlap with or differentiate themselves from the products carried by national chains could yield interesting results. Even when considering our observations during the TSC store visitations, we noticed slight variations in the typical purchases by consumers. For example, in two visits to TSC stores in Stephenville, TX, we observed a mix of farm equipment and lifestyle purchases might be the convention in communities where stores are located within certain distances to working farms and ranches, whereas observations at some of the other stores visited showed a different purchase mix.

Future work could add to the methods employed in this study, such as analysis of actual purchases made at different TSC locations. A qualitative study of this type could inform agricultural communication research seeking to flesh out the differences between agricultural and rural lifestyle consumer merchandising. Additionally, there is ample opportunity for rhetorical analysts to dig deeper into the "For Life Out Here" artifacts and challenge or extend this perspective. Analyses of other agricultural artifacts suggest differences in the rural-urban divide would make interesting contributions as well. There is also much work to be done in investigating these questions from different sets of evidence—for example, by conducting interviews with TSC customers. There are likely some TSC customers who once lived in rural communities or rural adjacent communities who have seen growth and development change their communities to something more akin to suburbia. Do they go to TSC and rural lifestyle stores in these same communities to maintain or galvanize themselves against forces that they believe are encroaching? Under a heading titled "Customer," TSC's 2024 Annual Report's Form 10-K offered:

Our target customers are home, land, pet, animal and livestock owners who generally have above average income and below average cost of living. We seek to serve a customer base that primarily lives in towns outlying major metropolitan markets and in rural communities. This customer base includes recreational farmers, ranchers, and all those who enjoy living a rural inspired lifestyle. (Tractor Supply Company, 2025, p. 1)

Future studies could delve deeper into this facet of customer identity.

In the Rhoades and Irani (2008) article that inspired this discussion, the authors called for increased attention to the portrayal of rural cultures, and of negative stereotypes about farmers from a semiotic approach. Our perspective seeks to respond to this call through a more constitutive point of view and critical examination of these portrayals and their use of rural identity markers. Like these authors, we find that TSC offers semiotically rich and multifaceted portrayals of what it means to be rural. Unlike these authors, we find the significance of these portrayals not so much in how they *represent* rural and agricultural life, but in how they *constitute* what it means to be rural. If there is cause for concern, we find it less with negative stereotypes of agricultural producers than with redefining agricultural pursuits as a matter of consumption, rather than production. Future work should take a similarly broad approach, going beyond merely the positive or negative light in which agriculture is cast, and including analysis of how agricultural and rural identities are leveraged.

TSC is notable for its multifaceted approach to marketing a "rural lifestyle," and for the commercial success it seems to have found in doing so. But it is far from the only company making these sorts of appeals. Similar images of rurality can also be found doing rhetorical work outside of the consumer marketplace—politics, entertainment, and even religion, are suffused with similar, sometimes contradictory ideas of what it means to be "rural." As such, there is much more work to be done in this vein. Discourse that exists at the intersection of rural life and agriculture is particularly ripe for inquiry. As the proportion of the population engaged in agricultural productions shrinks, depictions of "rural America" that nonetheless lean on this traditional economic relationship are likely to grant rich insight into the tensions, contradictions, and new lives of agrarian ideals in American culture.

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