



## DOCTORAL THESIS

# *Gun Culture, Gender Oriented Communication and Social Media: The National Rifle Association (NRA) as a Case Study*

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*Dear sisters:*

*The only gun necessary to protect women, and therefore society, is more study, knowledge, empathy, and determination to be able to apply efficient measures that end inequality for a fair and safe world for all people.*

"Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong; it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength"

***G.D. Anderson***

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **To Santa María de Leyre,**

My mother gave me this name in honor of Santa María de Leyre de Navarra. She was also known as '*Reina de la Paz*' (queen of peace). Thank you for giving me the strength to make this project possible.

### **To my beloved family,**

My children are my inspiration, I want to dedicate this work to them, apologizing for the time we could not be together while writing it, but I sincerely hope that this thesis helps you understand that strength will never be found in violence. I also want you to see that the involvement of men and women is needed to build a society fair and equal, you are growing in feminism to achieve a better world. I love you.

To my husband, Rober. Thank you for all your support, for being a present and co-responsible father. I have been able to finish this work, without you it would not have been possible. For more couples based on respect and working together, both at home and abroad.

To my mom and grannie, for teaching me what true strength and self-sufficiency are. You are indeed a strong and powerful women capable of facing all the challenges that life gives us.

To my dad, for teaching me the value of effort, constant work, and success through meritocracy. Nothing is taken for granted, things are the result of hard work.

For the rest of my family who have always been there, uncles, cousins , and relatives who helped me at every moment. Especially my 'tío Javi', who from heaven gives me all the energy I need, I always carry you in my heart.

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicator
<b>NRA</b>	National Rifle Association
<b>SLR</b>	Systematic Literature Review
<b>SPI</b>	Scholarly Publishers Indicators
<b>TSR</b>	Theory of Social Representations
<b>US</b>	United States

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## **ABSTRACT**

The historical relationship between women and firearms in the United States is a multifaceted narrative that has evolved over time around the concept of gun culture persistently perpetuated by the National Rifle Association (NRA) as the most decisive lobby in political and social debates. While Americans have been involved in gun culture through the Second Amendment of the Constitution, the role of women has seen significant changes in this matter. This research tries to investigate the complex interplay between women, the NRA and social media platforms in the contemporary socio-political landscape. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study delves into the representations of women within the NRA, examining how the organization employs digital strategies to shape its image and engage with its female constituency. The analysis reveals nuanced portrayals of women within NRA-sponsored content on platforms such as Instagram. Additionally, the study investigates the ways in which influencers women contribute to and shape the discourse surrounding gun ownership and advocacy on social media. Drawing on feminist frameworks within the culture wars, the research assesses the empowerment narratives, challenges stereotypes, and critiques the potential gendered implications of the pro-gun discourse that lead to what is known as gender wash. Insights from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender, gun advocacy, and online platforms, shedding light on the role of social media in shaping contemporary debates surrounding women's agency within the context of firearms.

**Keywords:** Gun culture; NRA Women; Branded Content, Women Agency; Gender Wash, Social Media, Influencers.



## RESUMEN

La relación histórica entre las mujeres y las armas de fuego en Estados Unidos es una cuestión multifacética que ha evolucionado en torno al concepto de cultura de armas, perpetuado por uno de los lobbies más influyentes en los debates políticos y sociales, la Asociación Nacional del Rifle (NRA por sus siglas en inglés). Si bien los estadounidenses han estado involucrados en esa cultura a través de la Segunda Enmienda de la Constitución, el papel de las mujeres ha experimentado cambios significativos en este asunto. Esta investigación aborda la compleja conexión entre las mujeres, la NRA y las plataformas de redes sociales en el panorama sociopolítico contemporáneo de guerra cultural. Para ello, se aplica un enfoque multimodal que profundiza en las representaciones de las mujeres por parte de la organización, examinando cómo el lobby emplea estrategias digitales para promocionar la cultura de armas entre su público femenino a través de su división *NRA Women*. El análisis revela representaciones sesgadas de mujeres dentro del contenido publicitario de la NRA en plataformas como Instagram. Además, el estudio analiza cómo las mujeres influyentes contribuyen y dan forma al discurso en las redes sociales en torno a la propiedad de armas y la autodefensa. Basándose en el auge de los movimientos feministas dentro del contexto de guerra cultural, la investigación evalúa las narrativas de empoderamiento, los estereotipos y compara las posibles implicaciones de género en el discurso a favor de las armas que conduce a lo que se conoce como *gender wash*. Los hallazgos de esta investigación contribuyen a una comprensión más profunda de las intersecciones entre género, defensa de las armas y plataformas digitales, arrojando luz sobre el papel de las redes sociales en la configuración de los debates contemporáneos sobre la agencia femenina dentro del concepto de cultura de armas.

**Palabras clave:** Cultura de las armas; NRA Mujeres; Contenido de Marca, Agencia femenina; *Gender Wash*, Medios sociales, *Influencers*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We started this work in 2020 after many years observing with astonishment how it was possible to have the use of firearms normalized in United States, a country with such an idealized image and projection. Every year we receive shocking news in Europe about mass shootings in the United States, many in schools. From the perspective of European countries, it is impossible to understand how the possession of guns is permitted.

When we began researching the topic, we discovered one of the key concepts, culture. Term understood as a set of habits (Eagleton, 2016) that we take for granted and that we have normalized as part of our daily lives (Schein, 2019). Everything that becomes culture and appeals to patriotic identity becomes something very difficult to change, something established and normalized as identity-based and different.

Gun culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, practices, and traditions surrounding firearms within a specific social group or community. This term is frequently used to describe the attitudes and behaviors related to guns within a particular society or subculture. In countries like the United States, where gun ownership is a constitutional right, gun culture often plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and policy debates surrounding the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Lacombe and colleagues provide an important point of view on unpacking gun meaning by exploring gun identity. This work moves beyond just examining why people own guns to investigate how individuals subjectively identify as gun owners, and as belonging to a particular social group and political identities and their corresponding ideologies (Lacombe et al. 2019) and how this concept of gun culture has been used by gun rights organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA). Membership in this organization is a reasonable proxy of gun culture, or anticontrol sentiment, in a given state (Goss, 2006). As a topic of increasing significance and debate, understanding the multifaceted dimensions of gun culture is imperative.

Therefore, we decided to base the first systematic review study on gun culture. The first finding studying the NRA's promotion was its segmentation of audiences by gender. For decades, this organization has focused on a very specific audience, according with a survey done by Pew Research Center (2017) the overall demographic profile of guns ownership is well established: owners tend to be white, male, politically conservative, middle class, middle-aged, and live in rural areas. In addition, the central core of gun culture used to be hyper-masculine spaces, with lower female gun ownership representation (Stange & Oyster, 2000; Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009). But, according to NRA, one of the largest growths in gun ownership by women took place in the mid-1990s, from 12 to 20 million women with guns. So, the advocacy group decided to separate the female audience and create NRA Women, presented as the division that gives a voice to female Second Amendment advocates across the country. The organization recognizes that if the Second Amendment is to survive, it needs to expand its base of supporters and bring women into the fold (Schwartz, 2019).

Observing that this division also had its own Women's Leadership Forum designed to engage influential women in supporting the NRA's mission, in addition to a strong digital and social media presence with accounts in YouTube, Instagram and X.

This marked the change of direction in research towards the inclusion of the gender perspective to assess which are the ways of attracting the female and analyze what types of women they are trying to capture, by age, cultural background, and socioeconomic characteristics. And finally, establish what representations are made of these female roles in Instagram and their influence and commitment to their followers.

Another question is whether this protection for women is real or is deliberately built on a biased reality. According to Kelley (2021), the combination of victimization and feminist identity demands action, and this individual agency can be expressed as gun-carrying, an embodiment of empowerment. However, many organizations apply these kinds of communication strategies and actions for public relations purposes without genuinely addressing gender inequalities or implementing meaningful changes, a concept defined as gender wash (Walters, 2022). Therefore, it is accurate to apply the gender perspective to evaluate the real intentions of the NRA with its female division and detect if these actions could be framed within the gender wash concept.

### **1.1. Thesis Justification**

The study of gun culture and its relationship with women represents a critical and timely exploration, reflecting the evolving dynamics within contemporary society. As the discourse surrounding firearms intensifies, understanding how women participate, shape, and are influenced by gun culture becomes imperative. This thesis seeks to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of women's engagement with firearms, addressing the historical, cultural, and social factors that contribute to their roles as gun owners, enthusiasts, and advocates. By shedding light on this intersection, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gun culture, challenge stereotypes, and inform discussions on gender, empowerment, and the broader implications of the right to bear arms. In a time of heightened debates on gun rights and societal responsibilities, this research endeavors to provide nuanced insights that resonate with the experiences and perspectives of women within the complex tapestry of gun culture.

Although there are numerous studies on the NRA and gun culture, what is novel and revolutionary about this study is the deepening of the digital sphere as the main vector of public opinion. Social networks have given way to the creation of common interest groups (Barreto, 2012) around these virtual communities that share a common project between people who are not close physically (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). The historical contributions of women to gun culture within the context of the NRA reveal a complex and evolving narrative. These communities have helped to consolidate the concept of female agency, described as nonviolent direct actions to denote all forms of active struggle for rights or for justice, necessarily focused on collective actions to improve the social positioning of women (Carroll, 1989). However, Goetz and Jenkins (2016) confirmed the systematic exclusion of women's groups from the categories considered most important to be involved in decision-making, so the role of social media has been key to raising the female voice in the gun debate. This uprising has not gone unnoticed by the NRA, who has instrumentalized the feminist movement in its favor, for the perpetuation of gun culture and commercial promotion for the sale of more pistols.

This research proves how this instrumentalization begins to be done through victimization to transform it into empowerment. And since the most effective strategy to improve engagement with the female audience is branded content, pistols are sold

the same as any fashion accessory, and that fanaticism and customization of weapon models for the female audience is the key to the success of the advocacy mission of the NRA.

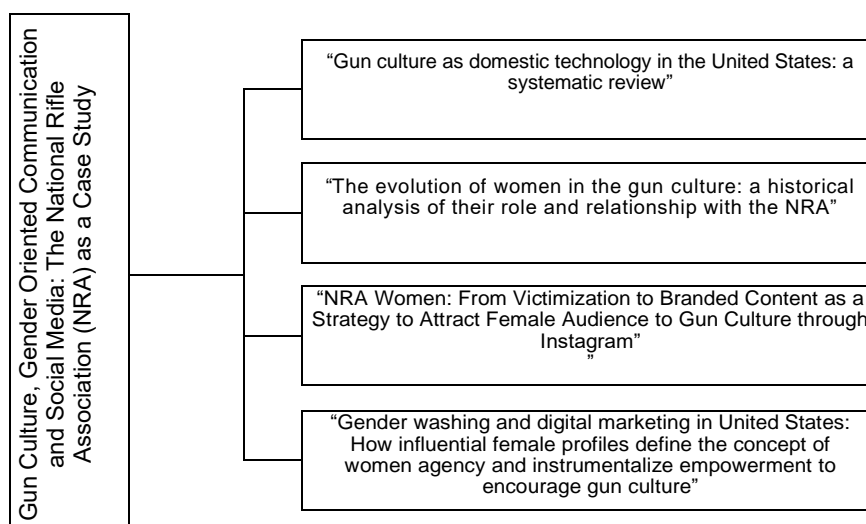
## 1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

Although several studies are focused in the involvement in gun culture influences women's identities, empowerment, and perceptions of self within society, many issues remain to be analyzed in the most recent decade with the rise of social networks as a centralizing element of virtual communities, so we consider it necessary to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the intersection between gender and gun culture, challenging stereotypes and contributing to informed discussions on this complex topic.

In this case, we want to recognize the diversity of experiences depending on the context and sociocultural background and look for the points of union between the different types of women who live together in the United States and idolize gun culture and the Second Amendment. This PhD by publications has been developed to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the fundamental characteristics of scientific production on gun culture as a modern technology in the United States?
2. What are the historical representations of women and female roles that the NRA promotes through different currents of activism?
3. What are the strategies that have worked best for the NRA to promote gun culture among women through social media, taking Instagram as a reference?
4. What type of profiles do the most influential women build on social media to promote gun culture by collaborating with the NRA?

**Table 1.** Graphical summary of the thesis structure.



**Source:** Author's own elaboration.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART

### 2.1. Gun culture as technological domestication: from militias to the standardization of gun possession

There are many references in the literature that frame the evolution of narratives about gun ownership in the United States in defense of the Second Amendment and the Constitution. It has been well documented that NRA members are extremely active politically and civically (Melzer, 2009; Lacombe et al., 2019). Guns are objects that may consciously or subconsciously play a symbolic role in defining in- and out-groups (Bourdieu, 1998). However, the NRA has evolved its narratives to normalize guns as a domestic technology by exalting beliefs that are consistent with maintaining their possession despite the tragedies or problems they directly cause. Generations of Americans can live in a society where guns remain a controversial matter referring to a violent reality (Jouet, 2019). In addition, Mencken and Froese established that American gun owners vary widely in the symbolic meaning they find in firearms; associating gun ownership with moral and emotional empowerment (Mencken & Froese, 2019).

Several opinion trends in favor of gun control maintain that when the Second Amendment of the US Constitution was founded, firearms were technologically much less dangerous, pistols with less range and speed, less damaging. There is a concern that the high rate of fire in semiautomatic weapons can lead to more casualties in mass shooting incidents and many anti-gun associations such as the Fire Family Foundation express their desire to see semi-automatic pistols banned. This debate about how pro-gun legislation can remain so stagnant for centuries while guns have evolved so much technologically has a logical explanation if we relate it to Roger Silverstone's works as 'Domesticating Domestication: Reflections on the Life of a Concept'. In this study, Silverstone delves into the concept of domestication, primarily focusing on how technologies become integrated into everyday life and how individuals adapt to and shape these technologies. The concept of domestication refers to the process by which technologies are brought into the home and become a part of the daily routines and practices of individuals and families and this concept frames the use of technology in the private sphere of people. Silverstone's exploration of domestication extends beyond the mere adoption of technologies and gadgets. He examines the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of this process, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the technologies they incorporate into their lives. The book offers insights into how technology is not just a tool but becomes woven into the fabric of domestic life, influencing relationships, communication, and everyday practices (Silverstone, 1992).

But most of the population immersed in this culture of arms lives with these standardized and integrated technological advances, this perspective of domestication also provides an analytical framework based on the complexity of everyday life and the role of technology in rituals, customs, and social structures (Berker et al., 2006). The domestic use of firearms has also been transmitted across generations through the socialization of children into hunting and shooting sports as well as through service in the military (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011). Gun culture is perceived as a long-term sentimental attachment that distinguishes the United States from other countries (Robert Spitzer, 2004) which results in 393 million guns in American civilian hands (Karp, 2018).

## 2.2. The rise of women as gun fans

To study the origin of the relationship between gun culture and women, we must cite authors such as Tom and Robert J. Smith, who evaluated changes in gun ownership among women between the years 1980 and 1994 based on reports from pro-gun groups and content from mass media. Study that concludes placing the typical female gun owner not as an unmarried woman living in a large city fearful victim of violent crime. Gun ownership is higher among married women living outside large cities, and it is associated more with hunting than with either fear of crime or past victimization (Smith & Smith, 1995).

In addition, researchers Blair and Hyatt (1995) also studied the promotion of gun-related products to women within the framework of problems that American women need to solve, like their own safety. According to NRA, one of the largest growths in gun ownership by women took place in the mid-1990s, from 12 to 20 million women with guns, which is why the NRA decided to segment audiences and create its women's division, NRA Women. The central core of gun culture until that moment used to be hyper-masculine spaces, with lower female gun ownership representation (Stange & Oyster 2000; Carlson 2015) but the lobby group changed radically the strategy for disassociate itself from white power and militia movements (Dawson, 2019; Melzer, 2009).

To complete this vision of women's fascination with firearms in the United States, Laura Browder (2006) made a complete review in the book "*Her Best Shot*", about the different representations of armed women and their roles, also including military heroines as a point of reference for society. This work is recognized for its comprehensive examination of a topic that intersects with issues of gender, identity, and the cultural significance of firearms in the United States. Browder analyzed how firearms have been symbolically and practically linked to women's empowerment, independence, and identity. Through a combination of historical research, interviews, and cultural analysis, this book contributed to the broader understanding of gender roles, gun culture, and the intricate dynamics between women and firearms in American society.

To explain the fanaticism of armed women, we also can study Deborah Homsher's work about contemporary American women's ideologies and the fascination that they have for firearms based on personal experiences and responses to the national public debates. Some women were involved in gun rights advocacy and saw the right to bear arms as a matter of individual freedom and constitutional rights. This advocacy may contribute to a fascination with firearms and a commitment to preserving those rights (Homsher, 2015) and women are proud to be operating in a traditionally men's world; guns are equalizers, and they can restore a sense of strength after victimization (Stroud, 2016) because women who conceal carry guns are challenging this male protectionism (Carlson, 2015) and their subordination in a patriarchal society might explain the greater empowerment carrying a gun (Warner & Ratcliff, 2021).

However, other lines of research maintain that male and female gun owners in the USA are demographically similar with also similar reasons for owning guns (Wolfson et al., 2020). Men also find empowerment in guns as "culture in action" to counter threatened masculinity (Mencken & Froese, 2019) so there are also studies that equate this passion for weapons with that gender perspective.

Therefore, an ideological question also develops within the framework of the culture war, conflict between different cultural, social, and political groups over values, beliefs, and norms within a society (Berman, 2000) with high impact on national unity (Schlesinger, 1991). The issue of firearms regulation enters the central debates of American politics just like other issues such as reproductive rights, systemic racism, and demands for equality of minorities, such as the LGTBI community. Consequently, several authors such as Carlson (2014) consider the issue of gun control as Great Gun Debate; or the Great American Gun Debate (Kates & Kleck, 1997). In this case, according to a survey carried out by the organizations All in Together and Echelon Insights, the question of guns is the first concern regarding the decision to vote among women.

### **2.3. Social media as a centralizing element of women agency: advocacy through the digital sphere**

Several scholars associate advocacy with political engagement strategies, social actions, and mobilizing groups, whose main activities are influencing public opinion; research for interpreting problems and suggesting preferred solutions; constituent action; agenda setting and policy design and implementation; lobbying; monitoring, and feedback (Reid, 2000). According to authors like Van Wessel and colleagues, lobby and advocacy are directly related terms since the function of pressure groups is to make statements about public opinion (Van Wessel et al., 2020).

Women's advocacy and agency are interconnected aspects of the ongoing struggle for gender equality. The concept of agency is usually used to describe the actions of women to build their points of influence in political, civic, and social actions began to be studied at the end of the 80s. Authors such as Carroll identify all forms of active nonviolent struggle for rights or for justice through means that involve assertiveness, open confrontation of oppression or exploitation, and risk to those undertaking the action (Carroll, 1989). Social media plays an increasingly important role in women's advocacy as women's interests are often not reflected in mainstream political debates (Seibicke, 2017). This kind of organization has adopted the Internet as a new means of communication, platform where people can personalize messages and interact more individually with each user (Oviedo et al., 2015).

According to Barreto, social media sites are based on the establishment of common interest groups that no longer need to share a common physical space (Barreto, 2012). What are known as virtual communities that share a common project between people who are not close physically (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). Social media can be classified in different ways according to different criteria, but the most simplified to relate to lobbying is based on if they are generalists, professionals or specialized (Celaya, 2008). But currently, there are other criteria to catalog them: horizontal or without a defined theme, aimed at all types of users, or verticals, where users gather around a specific theme, activity, or content (Martínez-Guerrero, 2018).

New organizational practices and forms of communication emerged thanks to the use of social media to engage in advocacy work (Guo & Saxton, 2014). These authors also conducted a study to address how social work and advocacy organizations use hashtags through examination of the social networks of 105 constituent members of the National Health Council (Saxton et al., 2015). Also, Chalmer and Shotton analyzed more than 1,200 interest organizations lobbying at the

EU level and they support that social media use is best understood as part of an organization's larger set of news media lobbying strategies (Chalmer & Shotton, 2015). Seelig and colleagues also developed a study about the new culture of advocacy through digital media and they concluded with the importance of raising people's awareness about socially and politically relevant issues (Seelig et al., 2018).

Figure 1. Promotion on Instagram of NRA Youth Education Summit



Source: @NRAWomen (2024)

But in many cases, we find agents interested in these social movements just for their own interests of improving reputation through communication strategies that may mislead the public into believing that an organization is more committed to gender equality. These actions are framed within the concept gender wash, studied by authors such as Gerard (2019) who talked about the construction of empowerment through the economic independence of women, creating a false sense of self-sufficiency, and Walters (2022), who presented varieties of symbolic gestures toward gender equality without addressing systemic problems: selective disclosure, empty gender claims, and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, ineffective public voluntary programs, misleading narrative and discourse, and misleading branding.



## **2.4. Influencer marketing as a means of promoting firearms as branded content in the female sector**

Both the NRA and gun and accessory brands have found a way to connect with their female audience through social media influencers, people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches (De Veirman et al., 2017), they are opinion leaders who have the intention to build a great community formed by large groups of followers (Hwang, 2015). This high number of followers could be advantageous to the exertion of opinion leadership as ideas are spread more widely and rapidly and consequently, interpersonal influence is enhanced (Cha et al., 2010). They are figures capable of generating reliability thanks to this unique identity of both being famous and ordinary person (Jin et al., 2019). Also, in this participatory, cooperative media culture, people were actively engaged and shared digital content that inspired others to care about different topics (Seelig et al., 2018).

Influence marketing combines classic sales and promotion techniques with an adaptation to the digital sphere and ultra-segmentation of audiences. Segmentation comprises of three main parts: first, finding homogenous segments within a bigger heterogeneous group, second, assessing and choosing one or several segments, and finally developing a program, service or communication strategy matched to the target's needs, wants and characteristics (Donovan et al., 1999). Influencers are social media celebrities who became famous via their social media presence, as opposed to traditional celebrities who are famous from film, music, and TV shows (Khamis et al., 2017), which allows a selection of much more specialized and less generalist profiles. Companies have adopted these channels as a new means of communication, platforms that allow you to personalize your message and interact more individually with each user (Oviedo et al., 2015).

Celebrity endorsements have been found to positively influence sales, and previous research identifies X and other social media platforms as important mechanisms for sharing endorsements (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2020). Jordan and colleagues studied the contemporary use of social media for gun advertising by gun companies and YouTube influencers. They concluded, according to the sample analyzed, that videos with women included protection themes 2.5 times more often than videos without women (Jordan et al. 2020). But making more reference to empowerment and aspirational content, we can find this thematic analysis of three NRATV programs carried out by Noah S. Schwartz that demonstrates how the NRA uses gun culture by constructing an American identity to encourage gun sales among women. The programs analyzed by the author contain representations of normatively attractive women, and supporters of family values that create admiration among that female audience (Schwartz, 2021).

Although there are many academic studies on the influence of Instagram in commercial, sociological and even political terms, there have been no studies on the influence of Instagram creators on the promotion of firearms, which justifies this study as novel.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Plan & Methods**

We have covered the object of study by using a multi-methodology approach combining techniques that are typical in social research as a process for producing knowledge. This strategy responds to the need of fulfilling a complex topic with a lot of dimensions that cannot be explained by a single point of view. This mixed-methods approach, as discussed by researchers like Creswell and Clark (2008), involves collecting, analyzing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data within a single research study. This approach aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem by triangulating data from different sources. Also, Sampieri (2018) discusses methods for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. In this case, this project includes KPI's evaluation; compilation, classification, and monitoring of data; study of patterns, and content analysis.

The first publication consisted of a systematic literature review, a comprehensive and structured approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research studies and scholarly articles on our topic. Basically, knowledge must be built on previous existing work (Xiao et al., 2019) and the main objective of using this methodology is to identify relevant studies and separate topics that can generate new lines of research to thus set the direction of the thesis toward case studies that can give conclusive results on a research problem (Gough, 2012). The main objective was to focus the review on the understanding of gun culture as a key concept to observe all the edges that are formed around that identity concept around firearms.

For this purpose, the words «gun» and «culture» were chosen to delimit the search in the Web of Science database due to scholarly consensus on the quality of their contributions. Initially, the word NRA was also included to study the relationship of the lobby in the creation and perpetuation of that cultural influence, but it was discarded because it greatly limited the results, and we would have left out very interesting studies on gun culture in the United States. Nevertheless, all references to the NRA in the selection of articles were carefully searched and analyzed.

The selected research areas were Sociology, Social Sciences, Communication, Social Work, and Education, all of them delimited to obtain that point of reference more focused on the understanding of the different perspectives of the United States compared to other countries regarding the use and possession of firearms. After that delimitation, 111 results were obtained in the initial search, but finally, only 87 remained, because they were those that met the requirements for the study, those discarded referred to topics completely unrelated to this research. This selection encompassed how both individuals and institutions consciously and unconsciously interact with firearms, through beliefs, thoughts, behaviors, social and legal norms, as well as the social structures they project onto them. What justifies the application of a method specifically for social studies that refers to a group of problems the scope of which appears so wide, and the definition so imprecise that is hardly possible for a paper strictly limited in size to meet them fully (Moore et al., 2014). This first step in the project was key to directing the course of what we wanted to investigate, which was finally the question of gender after discovering gaps in that segmentation, especially in the study of strategies for attracting women through social media.

The second publication was made through the execution of a critical historical analysis that contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the past. By questioning established narratives of the NRA and engaging with diverse perspectives, we could have an accurate representation of the type of women's roles that the organization selected for promotional actions, which directly contributed to the representation of these armed women, and assess how cultural practices are connected to broader systems of power and discourse (Foucault, 1971).

The selected period begins with the founding of the NRA in 1871 because although it was established under the concept of a weapons club for men, the membership of women was always allowed, and the organization used female figures to promote its activities from the beginning. These representative female figures were analyzed until the year 2023, with the last stages being the most significant concerning the promotion through social media. Several articles published by the women's division of the NRA and some advertising actions have been taken as an object of study to evaluate the differences and similarities between profiles, as well as the most notable characteristics of these women and their promotional discourse. Examples of female members of the NRA will be taken as a reference. We will also include examples of women who, although they are not within the NRA as members, the organization use them as advertising claims due to their relationship with gun culture.

The segmentation form of the study was by historical stages, and we compared them with the canons of perfection associated with women to assess whether the NRA can adapt these representations to those social stereotypes. Four central axes were chosen to compare these profiles: activism, victimization, empowerment, sexualization and motherhood.

For the third publication, an analysis of the Instagram account @NRAWomen was carried out based on the mixed method typical in nowadays social research addressed by authors like Sampieri (2018) and Ramirez (2020). Both support qualitative methods as exploratory research to deeply analyze the contents whereas quantitative techniques are to confirm and generalize findings to a larger population. That represented reality is not an objective and pre-given entity but is actively and collectively constructed by individuals in their social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 2023) so, the analysis of social media is necessary to understand these roles and how they affect representations.

We decided to study the Instagram account of the women's division of the NRA (@NRAWomen) which had 46,600 followers. Currently, this female division also has accounts on Facebook, X, and YouTube, which were discarded from this investigation for different reasons: be inactive or only reposting the content of the NRA's main account, or not have the support of influential brands or profiles in promoting their publications. In addition, Instagram is the flagship platform for influence marketing according to the analytics of Personality Media and We Are Social (2023), which prepare periodic reports on the use of social media.

For this purpose, we collected the main elements of the account activity of the last quarter of 2022 and the first of 2023: number of publications, medium reach per post, number of interactions per publication, engagement rate of each publication, number of mentioned profiles, differentiate between personal or corporate accounts,

average number of followers of those mentioned accounts and probability of exponential reach. Two periods of the same duration were chosen, they are framed in the American Midterm elections of November 8, 2022, taking as a reference pre-campaign, campaign, results, and post-campaign. The objective was to evaluate the NRA's activity in the account specialized in women after knowing through the exposed data that the issue of firearms is decisive for defining their voting option.

In addition, we made a qualitative analysis of the publications that have generated more interactions and mentions of the following key terms: types of weapons, hunting, shooting sports, events, protection, violence, defense, and empowerment. Also, we decided to use Halliday's model implanted in 2004 to identify in publications and photographic and audiovisual content the different modal structures that encode the basic illocutionary forces: Declarative, Imperative, and Interrogative/Reflexive (Halliday, 2004). To further complete the qualitative part, we also decided to include the multimodalities of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) that seek relationships in audiovisual elements, producers, receivers, and subjects represented. The authors point out different elements that can interact with receptors, such as the image, the acts, and the look; social distance and privacy; the horizontal angle and implication; and the vertical angle and power (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Finally, we analyzed the message and the elements of each post to identify the persuasion principles described by Cialdini and Goldstein (2002) and their use in recruiting women through advertising techniques based on authority, reciprocity, scarcity, liking, commitment and consistency, and social approval or consensus.

The fourth publication also responds to the mixed method because it includes quantitative and qualitative analysis of the profiles of influential women in the arms sector, with the novelty of the exhaustive study of gender roles in advertising to examine how traditional gender roles are reinforced and reproduced in visual representations and to explore how those advertisements contribute to the construction of gender identities (Goffman, 1976).

We carefully compared the autobiographical content and the representation of the 5 most influential Instagram profiles in the firearms environment used by the NRA as a reference for female empowerment in its women's division. This method has been applied to measure the presence and behavior of women on social media platforms (García et al., 2014). The selection was made from the profiles of influencer girls that the NRA mentions the most on its own Instagram account, (@NRAWomen). And finally, we've monitored the figures of each profile to be able to compare them with each other and evaluate the following and scope of each account.

### 3.2. Incardination of Publications

This project is made up of four publications, two of them in impact journals from Scopus and Dialnet and the other two are book chapters from Dykinson Publisher. But this doctoral research begins in the communication program with the objective of analyzing gun culture and the case of the NRA as a central institution of promotional actions for the use of firearms. The main objective was to analyze the organization's lobbying and advocacy actions through social media to attract audiences and how they dealt with news about tragedies that constantly occurred.

First of all, a systematic review was carried out taking as reference the keywords 'gun' and 'culture', segmenting the field of social sciences and delimiting the decade between 2011 and 2021 to scope the state-of-the-art collecting academic papers, background studies, materials, research methods, and results to set the detailed final work plan for the next publications. We wanted to identify the lines of research derived from this concept of gun culture and that was where we found the first gap: the scant research on the promotion of firearms specifically to women through social networks while the NRA had a women's division for decades with a strong presence in the digital sphere. The work "Gun culture as Domestic Technology in the United States: A Systematic Review" was published in the Journal *Techno Review: International Technology, Science and Society Review* in 2022 (Scopus Q4).

After these first quantitative results, we wanted to add more studies based on mixed approach, also adding a qualitative part of discourse, narrative and content analysis. Although since that moment there was a research plan, the rest of publications passed final revisions at different times. Therefore, the logical organization has been done in this text with the intention of explaining the true core of this research in a more accurate way. An inverted pyramid structure has been selected, going from the most general concepts to the deepest and most specific layers to understand the research questions well, find possible answers and establish conclusions.

The second publication, "The evolution of women in the gun culture: a historical analysis of their role and Relationship with the NRA", was published in Dykinson (SPI Q1) in 2024. It is a historical-critical analysis and a sociocultural review of the representations of armed women that the NRA has used for promotion. A qualitative study that reviews the main female figures who have been voices of the NRA by their own decision and others who have been used as advertising claims for their connection with firearms, without a declaration on their part of being part of the organization. This has been the contextual part of the thesis to improve the understanding of the evolution of the NRA narratives on different media to attract women and to test whether the organization instrumentalized feminist movements for its commercial and membership interests.

The third publication was a mixed study carried out in three phases: a review of the literature, an exploratory part to obtain all data from the posts that generated the most interaction among the audience on Instagram, and, finally, a more reflective part to address the topic in a critical perspective to obtain conclusive results on the recruitment trends of women to gun culture. The study object was the official account of the NRA for the female division: @NRAWomen. With this work, "NRA Women: From Victimization to Branded Content as a Strategy to Attract Female Audience to Gun

Culture on Instagram”, published in the Journal ‘Comunicación y Género’ (Dialnet Métricas Q1) of Ediciones Complutense, we achieve that transversal vision of which narratives have had the most impact on women in order to advance in the delimitation of these representations.

Last but not least, the fourth publication, “Women and guns: A Historical Analysis on the Uses of gender by the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the Contexts of Culture Wars”, also combines quantitative and qualitative analysis on specific profiles of influencers who promote firearms and are used as a claim by the NRA. This study was published in Dykinson (SPI Q1). To develop this publication, we created a table with performance indicators (KPIs) to make a comparison between the different accounts and their impact. The elements analyzed qualitatively were the profiles and their autobiographical description to identify common elements and establish patterns of representation created by the NRA for the dissemination of their narratives and the recruitment of women.

With this structure, we have sought to improve the understanding of the topic and argument of the thesis and thus be able to respond to the questions planned in the objectives in an orderly and meaningful way.

#### 4. GLOBAL RESULTS

Through this research, an analysis has been carried out on the variables that help us understand the representation of armed women on social media, more specifically, on Instagram, in addition to a study and classification of narratives used by the NRA to attract women. As overall result, we can establish that the NRA is easily adaptable to social trends, more visible thanks to digital platforms, and the lobby can modify the discourse and effectively reach the audience. This makes it a liquid organization, characterized by fluidity and rapid change (Bauman, 2000).

In the first publication, the distribution of research about the scientific production limiting gun culture in Web of Science reveals that 37% of the delimited publications study the different profiles of ownership, 5 of them specifically defining the attitudes of firearms owners. Also, in the database, we found 10 publications focused on gun control, a highly contentious and complex issue that revolves around the regulation of firearms, the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution, public safety, and individual rights.

However, academic research predominantly scopes the concept of self-defense as the central axis of the possession of firearms. We can also find several studies that focus on demographic traits such as gender, speaking about the relationship established between them. Moreover, two of them directly relate gun culture to masculinity and virility, as the main characteristics associated with the defense of home and family.

Consequently, 16 articles that representing 18% of the search, study the gun culture related to some violence patterns. The main research production about this subcategory is divided into two opposing aspects. In the one hand, the relationship between the domestic use of firearms and violent events and, on the other hand, the risk of living in dangerous and conflictive environments and how firearms mean protection. One of these studies is also carried out from the perspective of gender and violence against women in the world.

Results indicate a gap in research with gender perspective because only three papers from the sample are about the use of feminist discourse to extend gun culture as a form of protection and female empowerment while the NRA has been using the feminist discourse based on both self-defense, freedom and power as a claim for decades.

Considering the second publication as the historical axis of the doctoral thesis, we can see how the NRA played a multifaceted role, advocating for the protection and promotion of the right to bear arms between women through exalting activism strategies adapted to the most media events of each historical stage. This study also concludes that women's involvement in NRA activism has been a significant aspect of the broader discourse on gun rights and the Second Amendment in the United States.

The first women that the NRA marks as icons was Deborah Sampson (1760–1827), a remarkable figure in American history for her courageous actions during the American Revolutionary War. Sampson disguised herself as a man, adopting the name Robert Shurtleff, to enlist in the Continental Army in 1782. Referring to the American Civil War, the NRA also praises figures as Harriet Tubman (c. 1822–1913)

and Mary Fields (1832–1914), both black women who fought for abolitionism and the rights of black people.

Following Cialdini's (2002) principle of authority, which bases trust on popularity, another of the famous references that the NRA used as a symbol of the protection of the Second Amendment was Eleanor Roosevelt by her actively engaging in social and political issues. Following this principle of popularity and fame, the organization has also used women so beloved in America, such as Dolly Parton, in addition to actresses such as Angelina Jolie or Eva Longoria. These references contribute to the formation of biased representations based on the perfection projected by these women. It is important to highlight that a gap is detected at this point because none of these women were active members of the NRA, they simply took a position in some public appearance in favor of gun ownership, specifically concealed carry. Therefore, the organization unilaterally decides to use them in its promotional actions as armed women. What can be interpreted as a manipulation of public figures for their lobbying interest.

But what leads this research towards the study of influence marketing through social media is the observation of the new emerging figures used by the NRA for its promotion in the female sector. In this case, the main difference is that the lobby now uses women who are active members, such as Dana Loesch, who became a spokesperson for the organization. NRA has also sought these types of profiles for promotion on social media, if we enter the NRA's Instagram account, we find profiles like Melissa Bachman, Becky Yackley, and Charissa Littlejohn, all of them with similar characteristics: young-looking, normatively attractive women, extolling family and professional values in the firearms sector.

*Figure 2. Charissa Littlejohn, NRA member, advertising for Henry Rifles*



Source: @CharissaLittlejohn (2024)



Thanks to the third publication we verified that the same promotional strategies of any commercial sector also work in the promotion of firearms. By monitoring and reviewing the official Instagram account @NRAWomen, we concluded how the organization is increasingly reducing the use of the victimization strategy in favor of branded content. During the six months evaluated, different brands of guns and accessories were referenced up to 46 times in 52 publications, so they mentioned brands in almost all the posts. During that period, social media influencers were referenced 15 times. Two quarters were studied, and in the second monitored section, the use of influencers as a claim grew by more than 50%.

For the qualitative study, the 5 publications that had obtained the greatest number of interactions were selected. All of them contain branded content. Based on Haliday's model (2006), we can confirm that the 5 publications are declarative, because they are reduced to presenting the pistol models with a clear advertising function but without using the imperative. The first three are identical, exposing a gun on a white background, in close-up to observe all the details. In the other two publications, the NRA includes a woman in the image, and in the fourth post analyzed, which is the only one in video format, the influencer Becky Yackley appears.

In these five Instagram publications, indeed, we do not find a victimizing use of women as objects of protection, but we do observe a commitment to the female sector of equality and empowerment regarding the recreational use of guns. The best example of this commitment in the sample analyzed is the video that encourages women to take the concealed carry course to guarantee the correct and safe use of weapons. However we did not find a direct allusion to self-protection due to the danger of violence in those most successful publications, the last post with this type of content was in December 2022 with an interaction seven times less than the average of the sample analyzed. So, branded content has much more reach and engagement than victimization.

The fourth publication is based on that specific analysis of influencer profiles that the NRA uses as a means of promotion. We found common results that can delimit patterns of representation. All the girls were born in pro-gun states such as Texas or Tennessee and they live in rural areas. The representation of their profile of armed women involves professionalization, they are shooting champions or hunters and the majority have been raised in a pro-gun environment, which implies a normalized view of the possession and handling of firearms.

They present themselves in their profiles as empowered and independent, all of them normatively physically attractive, white, and Caucasian. Which represents an aspirational icon for their audience and makes them an effective advertising medium. The followers are mostly women and weapons manufacturing companies. In addition, the audience of these channels is fans of the firearms business, and they ask frequently about the technical specifications of the models promoted by the influencers. The narratives developed by these women with the support of the brands and the NRA are built as a praxis of digital activism, they are moving the focus away from victimization in order to transform the victim's space into a place of power and agency.

Occasionally, the NRA uses racialized women for specific promotional actions, although it is curious to see how they use them separately from white women, they do not mix them within the same promotional space, this may be due to a search for acceptance by segmenting the audience. However, the representations analyzed show us a biased reality that doesn't cover the cultural and social diversity of the United States. After analyzing all the variables exposed in the 4 scientific publications, we can see how the NRA has always been using aspirational stereotypes to convey the role of a perfect and armed woman. In addition to testing the effectiveness of the different strategies, establishing similarities with advertising trends in the digital environment.

*Figure 3. Images of racialized women taken from a promotional video on the NRA YouTube channel. 'Dear Gun Grabbers: Try Telling THESE Women They Don't Need Guns'*



Source: NRA YouTube channel (2023)

In addition, the pistol models featured on the Instagram account, @NRAWomen, contain pink decorations, flourishes, and other elements stereotypically feminine. Actually, these are the publications that generate the most interaction and we can find in the comments an increasingly growing interest in the technical characteristics and new usability of each model. So branded content also works to promote and sell firearms, which is the goal of the pro-gun lobby.

## 5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion is that the domestic use of firearms has evolved since its origin, establishing itself as a cultural and inherent part of American society. What began as a need for self-defense has transformed into a powerful industry that carries out marketing strategies like any other sector. We could say that in America guns are marketed in the same way as clothing, cosmetics, or automobiles.

But how have we reached that point of normalization? According to Roger Silverstone's studies (1996), the object in question is designed and built for certain functions and the users are the ones who decide and define the application and use of that object. This is consistent when talking about gun culture because weapons have been designed for contexts very different from domestic use. And this is precisely the crucial difference between societies and countries. Why in Europe live with astonishment at the tragic events and the lack of legal action in gun control? The difference in perception could respond to the normalization of this culture as significant for this society. The literature analyzed in the systematic review shows studies that relate gun culture with American identity elements, especially in rural areas, and emotional connotations that imply values and religion. As Robert Spitzer (2004) indicates, it is this «long-term sentimental attachment» to guns that distinguishes American history from other countries and accounts for the United States' favorable gun legislation.

The scientific production analyzed has left us a gap in the gender question, is the gun culture represented differently between men and women? The historical review helps us establish different phases of the representation of armed women. From that first stage of rebellious activist girls who sought to get rid of the patriarchal system and be able to defend themselves, to the most empowered women who take control of their lives with that feeling of power they experience through firearms. Laura Browder (2008) relates women's fascination with guns to empowerment. They are also engaged through self-reliance, the feeling that women can solve their problems. (Blair & Hyatt, 1995).

We can see how the NRA plays a multifaceted role that responds to its lobbying function (Reid, 2000; Van Wessel et al, 2020) advocating for the protection and promotion of the right to bear arms among women with activism strategies adapted to the most media events of each historical stage. Women's participation in NRA activism has been a significant aspect of the broader discourse on gun rights and the Second Amendment in the United States and social media platforms amplify these polarized views, providing a space for individuals to reinforce their perspectives and engage in heated debates.

The polarization and culture war surrounding firearms in the United States reflect deep divisions among individuals and groups with divergent views on gun rights, gun control, and the role of firearms in society. Media coverage often contributes to polarization by framing gun-related incidents in ways that align with different narratives. This influences public perception and attitudes. However, the NRA quickly adapts to the growing social trends of feminism, more visible thanks to digital platforms, and the lobby is capable of modifying the discourse and effectively reaching

the audience through a misrepresentation of the principles of said movement. This makes it a liquid and postmodern organization, characterized by fluidity and rapid changes (Bauman, 2000).

Cialdini's (2002) principle of authority appears represented in two different aspects. In the first stage, the NRA uses famous women in advertisements who have occasionally expressed support for gun ownership but who have no connection with the organization. However, their fame and influence are used as advertising appeal. That trend has been changing with the rise of influencer marketing on social media. In the case study of @NRAWomen, we find that the same principle of the authority of Cialdini (2002) is much more oriented towards professionalization, all the women with influential profiles who also collaborate with pistol brands, are connected to the sector with professional relationships. We can find examples of shooting champions or professional hunters.

This new direction helps to disseminate content with greater credibility and closeness. In addition, this strategy also helps solve the NRA's problem with gun insecurity because they are women experts in the handling of weapons capable of creating highly specialized content about their use and answering user's questions with accuracy. The references to victimization in the account are reduced to give way to a representation of an empowered woman capable of being a mother, wife, attractive, and gun owner, which is represented as a necessary accessory for this construction of an idealized woman profile.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The main limitations of this publication derive from the geographical and time issues. It is a topic focused on a problem in the United States, but the research was mostly done in Spain, also due to travel and stay restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first publication, we found limitations when establishing the search criteria. Although the words gun and culture are quite significant, we would have liked to add the NRA variable, but it completely distorted the results because this abbreviation has multiple meanings in other contexts. However, once the results are selected, they allow us to observe interesting trends to open new lines of research on the gender issue.

The second publication presents limitations when it comes to establishing accurate results for periods, since the NRA does not follow a specific strategy that can be extrapolated, the liquidity of the organization causes many changes in currents when establishing its strategic movements.

The third publication about the Instagram account, @NRAWomen, presents important data regarding women's participation in public discourse, through the account or externally. The followers also provide interesting comments that allow us to observe the relationship of fascination. However, it has not been possible to obtain economic return data from the different campaigns; these data are neither public nor easily obtainable by the weapons manufacturing companies that participate in this promotional content. They are not transparent companies, and their benefits cannot be dissociated from those generated thanks to social networks.

Finally, for the last publication, we would have loved to be able to provide in-depth interviews with the women who appear in the article, but it was not possible due to the procedures necessary for the transfer of data, which are also difficult as they are women who are not residents of Spain, where most of the thesis has been developed. The stays in the United States were insufficient to be able to develop this testimonial work, which I would like to recover for post-doctoral work in the future.

Based on the results of the representations obtained, we found a pattern of white Caucasian women, middle-aged and with high purchasing power. However, in some promotional actions, the NRA also represents racialized women through activist speeches. This opens up new proposals for lines of research that can continue to contribute to the topic shortly. It would be interesting to see if movements in favor of racial rights are also exploited for the sale of firearms.

**Síntesis en**  
**Español**  
(Spanish summary)

Given that the present doctoral dissertation is written in English, a summary covering the background, aim, methodology, results, and conclusions is included in Spanish, in accordance with Rey Juan Carlos University policies.

## 7. SÍNTESIS EN ESPAÑOL / SPANISH SUMMARY

Este trabajo comenzó en 2020 después de muchos años observando desde mi perspectiva europea la normalización del uso de armas de fuego en Estados Unidos, un país con una imagen y proyección idealizada. Cada año recibimos noticias impactantes sobre tiroteos masivos, muchos de ellos en escuelas. Sin embargo, los grupos pro-armas como la Asociación Nacional del Rifle (NRA por sus siglas en inglés) logran mantener el debate sobre la regulación y tenencia de armas alejado de los medios de comunicación hasta que ocurren esos acontecimientos trágicos. La masacre de Columbine en 1999, el tiroteo en la escuela primaria Sandy Hook en 2012, el de Las Vegas en 2017 o el de Uvalde en 2022, también en un centro escolar, han sido los más mediáticos a nivel internacional y han reavivado el Gran Debate contra la NRA (Swartch, 2019), aunque esta asociación con más de 150 años de historia maneja narrativas convincentes que consiguen frenar las medidas para el control de armas.

Para entender esta diferenciación de Estados Unidos con respecto a las armas, se identifica cultura como palabra clave. Término entendido como un conjunto de hábitos (Eagleton, 2016) que damos por sentado y que hemos normalizado como parte de nuestra vida diaria (Schein, 2019). Por tanto, La cultura de armas engloba las actitudes y comportamientos relacionados con las armas dentro de una sociedad concreta.

En países como Estados Unidos, la cuestión de armas juega un papel importante para la opinión pública y en los debates políticos en torno a la Segunda Enmienda de la Constitución estadounidense, que es la que se refiere a la regulación de armas de fuego. Lacombe (2019) aporta un punto de vista importante al analizar su valor identitario examinando cómo los individuos se identifican subjetivamente como propietarios de armas dentro de un grupo social diferenciado y cómo este concepto cultural sido utilizado por organizaciones de derechos pro-armas como la NRA. La pertenencia a esta asociación es un indicador de esa cultura de armas, un sentimiento anti-control en un estado determinado (Goss, 2006).

Por ello, se decidió basar el primer estudio bibliométrico en la cultura de armas, como palabras clave para la búsqueda. Uno de los hallazgos determinantes fue ver la segmentación de audiencias por género que hace la propia NRA para sus acciones promocionales. Durante décadas, esta organización se ha centrado en una audiencia muy específica. Según una encuesta realizada por el *Pew Research Center* (2017), el perfil demográfico general de quién posee armas está bien establecido: los propietarios tienden a ser blancos, hombres, políticamente conservadores, de clase media, de mediana edad y viven en zonas rurales. Además, el núcleo central de la cultura de las armas solían ser espacios 'hipermasculinos', con una menor representación femenina (Stange & Oyster 2000; Carlson 2015; Melzer 2009).

Según la NRA (2024), uno de los mayores crecimientos en la posesión de armas por parte de mujeres tuvo lugar a mediados de la década de los 90, pasaron de 12 a 20 millones de mujeres armadas. Entonces, la organización decidió segmentar la audiencia femenina y crear NRA Women, la división que da voz a las defensoras de la Segunda Enmienda en todo el país. La propia NRA reconoce que para que esa Segunda Enmienda sobreviva, necesitan ampliar su base de seguidores e incorporar a las mujeres (Schwartz, 2019).

Esta división femenina también incluye el *Women's Leadership Forum* diseñado para involucrar a mujeres influyentes en el apoyo a la misión de la NRA, además de una fuerte presencia digital y en redes sociales con cuentas en YouTube, Instagram y X. Esto marcó el cambio de dirección en la investigación hacia la inclusión de la perspectiva de género para valorar cuáles son las formas de atraer al público femenino y analizar qué tipos de mujeres son representadas como reclamo promocional: por rango de edad, origen cultural y características socioeconómicas. Además de evaluar las estrategias de comunicación persuasiva que articula la organización como lobby consolidado.

Aunque existen algunos estudios sobre la NRA y la cultura de las armas (Hofstadter, 1970; Bellesiles, 2000; Mencken & Froese, 2019), lo novedoso y revolucionario de este trabajo es el enfoque sobre la esfera digital como principal vector de la opinión pública y la instrumentalización de la mujer en el escenario de guerras culturales y creciente polarización política e ideológica. Las redes sociales han dado paso a la creación de grupos de intereses comunes (Barreto, 2012) en torno a comunidades virtuales que comparten proyectos entre personas que no están cerca físicamente (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). Las contribuciones históricas de las mujeres a la cultura de las armas dentro del contexto de la NRA revelan una narrativa compleja y en constante evolución.

Estas comunidades han ayudado a consolidar el concepto de agencia femenina, descrita como acciones directas no violentas para denotar todas las formas de lucha activa por los derechos o por la justicia para mejorar el posicionamiento social de las mujeres (Carroll, 1989). Dicha agencia ha sido trastocada y presentada desde la mercantilización neoliberal del concepto de armas. Sin embargo, Goetz y Jenkins (2016) confirmaron la exclusión sistemática de los grupos de mujeres de los debates públicos como puede ser el del control de armas, por lo que el papel de las redes sociales ha sido clave para elevar la voz femenina en estos temas.

Este protagonismo de las mujeres no ha pasado desapercibido para la NRA, que ha instrumentalizado el movimiento feminista a su favor, para la perpetuación de la cultura de armas y la promoción comercial de la venta de más pistolas con un claro sesgo de género. Nuestra investigación demuestra cómo esta instrumentalización comienza a hacerse a través de la victimización para transformarla en empoderamiento porque la estrategia más eficaz con el público femenino es el contenido de marca (*branded content*): las pistolas se venden igual que cualquier accesorio de moda, y ese hincapié en el fetichismo y la personalización de modelos con detalles considerados femeninos, es la clave del éxito de las estrategias impulsadas por la NRA.



## Objetivos

Aunque ciertos estudios se centran en la influencia de la cultura de las armas en las identidades, el empoderamiento y la propia percepción de las mujeres dentro de la sociedad (Kelley, 2021; Schwartz, 2021), hay muchas cuestiones que quedan por analizar en las décadas recientes con el auge de las redes sociales. Debido a esto, se considera necesario aportar una comprensión integral de la intersección entre el género y la cultura de las armas en la era de internet. En este sentido, se plantean las siguientes preguntas de investigación:

1. ¿Cuáles son las características fundamentales de la producción científica sobre la cultura de armas, entendidas como una tecnología moderna en Estados Unidos?
2. ¿Cuáles son las representaciones históricas de las mujeres y los roles femeninos que promueve la NRA a través de diferentes corrientes de activismo?
3. ¿Cuáles son las estrategias que mejor le han funcionado a la NRA para promover la cultura de las armas entre las mujeres a través de las redes sociales, tomando como caso de estudio la cuenta de Instagram @NRAWomen?
4. ¿Qué tipo de perfiles se construyen las mujeres más influyentes en las redes sociales en el sector de las armas y qué acciones promocionales realizan con la NRA?

## Metodología

Hemos abordado el objeto de estudio mediante un enfoque multimodal que combina técnicas propias de la investigación social como proceso de producción de conocimiento. Esta metodología mixta, analizada por investigadores como Creswell y Clark (2008) o Sampieri (2018), implica recopilar, analizar e integrar datos tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos dentro de un solo estudio de investigación para proporcionar una comprensión más completa de un problema de investigación mediante la comparación de datos de diferentes fuentes.

La primera publicación es una revisión sistemática de literatura porque el conocimiento debe construirse sobre trabajos previos existentes (Xiao et al., 2019) y el principal objetivo de esta metodología es identificar estudios relevantes y separar temas que puedan generar nuevas líneas de investigación hacia casos que pueden dar resultados concluyentes sobre un problema de investigación (Gough, 2012). Para ello, se eligieron las palabras «gun» y «culture» para delimitar la búsqueda en idioma inglés entre los años 2011 y 2021 en la base de datos *Web of Science* debido al consenso académico sobre la calidad de sus contribuciones. Inicialmente también se incluyó la palabra NRA para estudiar la relación del lobby en la creación y perpetuación de esa influencia cultural, pero se descartó porque limitaba mucho los resultados. Sin embargo, se buscaron y analizaron cuidadosamente todas las referencias a la NRA en la selección final de 87 artículos.

Una vez detectada la falta de investigación con perspectiva de género, la segunda publicación se realiza mediante un análisis histórico crítico que contribuye a una comprensión más matizada y completa de las narrativas establecidas por la NRA

para evaluar el tipo de roles femeninos utilizados para las acciones promocionales y se evalúa su conexión con los sistemas más amplios de poder y discurso (Foucault, 1971). El período seleccionado comienza desde la fundación de la NRA en 1871, aunque establecida bajo el concepto de club de armas para hombres, siempre se permitió la membresía de mujeres, y la organización utilizó figuras femeninas para promover sus actividades desde sus inicios. Estas figuras femeninas representativas fueron analizadas hasta el año 2023, siendo las últimas etapas las más significativas respecto a la promoción en redes sociales.

Para la tercera publicación se realizó un estudio cuantitativo de la cuenta de Instagram @NRAWomen en el marco elecciones de las llamadas *midterm elections* celebradas en noviembre de 2022 que marcan un momento crítico en los debates públicos sobre temas candentes como el caso de la regulación de armas. También se realizó un análisis cualitativo de las publicaciones que más interacción generaron desde la perspectiva multimodal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) y el análisis crítico del discurso (Halliday, 2004).

Finalmente, en la cuarta publicación se realizó una selección de mujeres influyentes de Instagram en el sector de las armas para su estudio. En este último caso, también se elaboró una comparación de sus indicadores de rendimiento (*KPIs*) y alcance, además de un análisis cualitativo de las narrativas utilizadas en la presentación autobiográfica de sus perfiles tomando como referencia los principios de la persuasión de Cialdini (2002).

## Resultados

Las representaciones de las mujeres armadas en las redes sociales, más concretamente, en Instagram, responden a narrativas utilizadas por la NRA que instrumentalizan y mercantilizan conceptos tales como empoderamiento y agencia femenina para atraerlas como público objetivo. Por ejemplo, aspectos como la defensa personal a través del empoderamiento; la imagen pública; la estética de lo femenino a través de estereotipos; y la maternidad idealizada; aparecen vinculados a la cultura de armas. La victimización ha sido sustituida por una mercantilización del sujeto y las *influencers* promocionan armas desde sus experiencias vitales cotidianas naturalizando su posesión desde posiciones culturales e ideológicas tradicionalmente propias de los movimientos liberales de la izquierda.

La NRA tradicionalmente ha manipulado figuras públicas para vincularlas a la cultura de armas, desde la Primera Dama Eleanor Roosevelt, hasta artistas tan queridas en América, como Dolly Parton, además de actrices como Angelina Jolie o Eva Longoria. Estas mujeres no son miembros activos de la organización ni han tenido ningún acuerdo publicitario, simplemente han mencionado el tema de las armas en alguna aparición pública y la NRA las ha utilizado como reclamo. Sin embargo, más recientemente, observamos un cambio de tendencia en las redes sociales, donde promocionan a mujeres que cuentan sus experiencias cotidianas sobre el uso de armas. Activistas como Dana Loesch, que llegó a ser portavoz de la organización, y también perfiles como Melissa Bachman, Becky Yackley o Charissa Littlejohn, que comparten el mismo patrón sociológico: mujeres de apariencia joven, normativamente atractivas, que enaltecen los valores familiares y que son profesionales en el sector de las armas de fuego.

Esta realidad representada por la NRA no cubre la diversidad cultural y social de Estados Unidos. Por ejemplo, la representación de mujeres racializadas es mucho menor que las mujeres blancas caucásicas. Hemos comprobado cómo la NRA busca transmitir el estereotipo de mujer 'perfecta'. Lo que deriva en una instrumentalización del movimiento feminista, realmente no hay ninguna medida profunda aplicada por la NRA cuyos resultados demuestren una implicación activa en la mejora de la vida de esas mujeres. Se trata de discursos vacíos, sin ninguna sustentación en datos, solo contenido promocional cuyo objetivo es fomentar la afiliación a la organización y la venta de armas como cualquier otro accesorio de moda. De hecho, los modelos de pistolas y rifles presentados en la cuenta de Instagram, @NRAWomen, contienen elementos rosados, florituras y otros elementos estereotipados como femeninos. Son esas publicaciones las que más interacción generan y en sus comentarios hay mucho interés sobre las características técnicas y nuevas usabilidades de cada modelo.

## Discusión y conclusiones

La NRA se adapta rápidamente a las tendencias sociales del auge del feminismo, más visibles gracias a las plataformas digitales, y el lobby es capaz de modificar el discurso y llegar efectivamente a la audiencia desde una tergiversación de los principios de dicho movimiento. Esto la convierte en una organización líquida y posmoderna, caracterizada por la fluidez y los cambios rápidos (Bauman, 2000).

Podemos ver cómo la NRA juega un papel multifacético que responde a su rol de lobby de cabildo, lo que se conoce en inglés como *advocacy* (Reid, 2000; Van Wessel et al, 2020) abogando por la protección y promoción del derecho a portar armas entre las mujeres con estrategias de activismo adaptadas a los acontecimientos más mediáticos de cada etapa histórica. La participación de las mujeres en ese activismo de la NRA ha sido un aspecto significativo del discurso más amplio sobre el derecho a portar armas y la Segunda Enmienda en los Estados Unidos.

El principio de autoridad de Cialdini (2002) se manifiesta en dos vertientes distintas. En una primera etapa la NRA usa como reclamo mujeres famosas que se han manifestado ocasionalmente a favor de la posesión de armas pero que no tienen una vinculación con la organización, no obstante, se utiliza su fama e influencia como activo publicitario. Esa tendencia ha ido cambiando con el auge del marketing de influencia en las redes sociales. En el caso de estudio de @NRAWomen, encontramos ese mismo principio de autoridad de Cialdini (2002) mucho más orientado a la profesionalización. Todas las mujeres con perfiles influyentes que colaboran además con marcas de pistolas están relacionadas con el sector de forma profesional. De tal suerte, encontramos campeonas de tiro o cazadoras profesionales como protagonistas de las acciones de comunicación.

Este nuevo rumbo aparentemente transmite mayor credibilidad y resuelve en cierto modo el problema que arrastra siempre la NRA con la seguridad, porque son mujeres expertas en el manejo de las armas capaces de crear contenido muy especializado sobre su uso y de responder las cuestiones que plantean los usuarios que las siguen. Las referencias a la victimización en el contenido se van reduciendo para dar paso a una representación de mujer empoderada capaz de ser madre, esposa, atractiva y portadora de armas, lo que se representa como accesorio necesario para esa construcción de perfil de mujer idealizada. Esas representaciones

tan sesgadas que intentan dar una apariencia feminista al *Lobby* pueden entenderse como una instrumentalización intencionada, ya que la NRA promociona las armas como empoderamiento femenino sin la aportación de medidas que realmente garanticen el bienestar de esas mujeres, lo que podría catalogarse como un ejemplo de *Gender wash* en el ámbito de la comunicación de cabildeo, definido como ese conjunto de acciones con fines de relaciones públicas que no abordan genuinamente las desigualdades de género ni tienen el objetivo de implementar cambios significativos en políticas de igualdad (Walters, 2022).

## **8. COMPENDIUM OF PUBLICATIONS**

Note: This section features content taken directly from previously published materials in various journals and editorials. These publications were released at different times due to revisions, but we have structured them here to align coherently with the author's intended research plan.

# **Publication 1**

- 8.1. **“Gun culture as domestic technology in the United States:  
a systematic review”**



## GUN CULTURE AS DOMESTIC TECHNOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES: a systematic review

La cultura de las armas como tecnología doméstica en Estados Unidos

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### KEYWORDS

*Gun culture  
NRA  
Domestic technology  
Ideology  
Identities  
Public opinion  
Systematic review*

### ABSTRACT

*Gun culture is an inherent part of American society as a technology of modern times. For decades, the domestic use of firearms has been consolidated under different political currents, identities, and contexts. The NRA has evolved along with the development of different sociological movements that have normalized guns as a domesticated technology exalting beliefs that are consistent with maintaining their possession despite tragedies suffered. This systematic review aims at evaluating research dealing with gun culture from different perspectives as domestic technology to find avenues of research that help understand the dimensions of gun culture endurance as a core value.*

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

*Cultura de armas  
NRA  
Domesticación tecnológica  
Ideología  
Identidades  
Opinión pública  
Revisión sistemática*

### RESUMEN

*La cultura de las armas es una parte inherente de la sociedad estadounidense. Durante décadas, el uso doméstico de armas de fuego se ha consolidado bajo diferentes corrientes políticas, identidades y contextos. La NRA ha evolucionado junto con otros movimientos sociológicos para normalizar las armas como una tecnología doméstica exaltando creencias consistentes con mantener su posesión a pesar de las tragedias sufridas. Esta revisión sistemática tiene como objetivo evaluar la investigación sobre la cultura de armas desde perspectivas como la domesticación tecnológica para encontrar nuevas vías de estudio que aborden las dimensiones de la resistencia de esta cultura como un valor fundamental.*

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## 1. Introduction and objectives

The United States is distinctive among Western post-industrialized countries because of its high percent of gun owners, high levels of gun violence, and less restrictive gun laws (Mauser and Margolis, 1992). American society based their firearms domestic use on the Second Amendment. It was ratified in 1791 along with nine other articles of the Bill of Rights, and it literally means: «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» (Bill of Rights, 1791). However, in 230 years the environment has changed considerably, now there is no imminent risk of armed conflict or war with which the possession of weapons would no longer be justified. But the defense of gun ownership, including military-style assault weapons, is rooted in the view that citizens require the means to protect themselves against threats to their well-being, including government tyranny (Cummings et al., 2018). That thought has become a need for self-defense against different risks in society, focused above all on protection against crime.

But, in another instance, that feeling of the need to carry firearms with a strong culture has been reinforced, so we will seek to define in what terms we speak of culturizing social customs that arose from a specific need. The fact that gun law has evolved so little since the Second Amendment and this culture around firearms has been maintained is thanks to gun lobbies. In 1871, 80 years after the ratification of the Second Amendment, The National Rifle Association (NRA) was created as a non-profit association by Union veterans of the American Civil War. This organization works to guarantee the use and possession of weapons in addition to enforcing laws that allow free use. What started out as a select gun support club has turned out to be the world's largest gun lobby with more than 5 million members. The association define itself as «the America's longest-standing civil rights organization». The NRA has managed to adapt its recruitment actions to the different profiles that over 150 years have required the use of firearms.

This study seeks to answer different questions that could explain the differences in the perspectives of understanding gun culture. For example, the way in which different societies from different sociodemographic environments can understand how the domestic use of weapons is defended after a mass shooting in a school could be answered by understanding how this use is a culture, as one more part of that society. Because from European countries it is observed with fear how the legislation can be permissive with the use of guns when these events occur while a large part of American society sees the possession of firearms at home as completely normal. Why from one point of view is it perceived as an imminent danger and from another perspective is it seen as a defense?

Although this domestic use of firearms began 230 years ago with the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, firearms not only provide safety, but they also mean empowerment and superiority, in a basic social acceptance scale. The social traditions surrounding the use of weapons have created a strong group feeling among American society. As Robert Spitzer (2004) indicates, it is this «long-term sentimental attachment» to guns that distinguishes American history from other countries and accounts for the United States' favorable gun legislation.

For this reason, this article also seeks to respond more precisely to what gun culture is and its dimensions. To do this, we must study what sociodemographic and cultural traits are related to that gun culture. Lizotte and Bordua (1980) defended that the gun culture is divided into categories of users: hunters, recreational shooters, collectors, and those who have firearms for work (police, guards and military). According with a survey done by Pew Research Center in 2017 the overall demographic profile of who owns guns is well established: owners tend to be white, male, politically conservative, middle class, middle-aged, and live in rural areas.

But on the contrary, in the last decades these identities have been transformed with the changes in roles that are being experienced in society and the visibility they obtain from social media. So, another issue to investigate is how gun culture is represented on the new digital platforms and how it affects the perception of public opinion. And to know if that gun culture more associated with normative roles has also been transformed by that influence. In addition, it will be interesting to know if the NRA has also adapted its vision to these new generations to perpetuate the gun culture and increase its area of influence. And this leads to another key point: evaluate the notable differences between legislation and perception, which has barely advanced in two centuries, in contrast with the great technological advance that the firearms market has experienced. The legislation was made when many types of much more dangerous weapons did not exist, and for this reason, it seeks to analyze with Silverstone and Haddon's theories published in 1996 about the 'domestication of technology', how this technological advance has been normalized without changing the perception of the right to carry firearms. And how this 'technological domestication' influences the communicative point of view that fosters this normalization.

Therefore, this research could be the starting point for new articles that study the evolution of gun culture through the transformation of society and its impact produced by the new digital platforms.

## 2. Background and Theoretical Framework

The first thing we must know is what we mean by culture, a well-known and used term but difficult to define due to its numerous applications. Edward Tylor defined this term in *Primitive Culture* (1870) as a quality possessed by all people in all social groups, who nevertheless could be arrayed on a development. More specifically and



referring to the organizational culture, Schein (1990) divided an organization's culture into three distinct levels: artifacts, values, and assumptions. It is at this last level, assumptions, where we find those things that we take for granted, that we have normalized as part of our daily lives. And that is precisely the basis of this study, to see the level of normalization of the use of firearms as a culture even with the technological advance of the last decades.

Eagleton (2016) defines culture in his book called with the same name "Culture" under 4 basic premises: a body of artistic and intellectual work, a process of spiritual and intellectual development, the values, customs, beliefs, and symbolic practices by which men and women live, or a whole way of life. He also adds that culture may involve innovation, whereas culture as a way of life is generally a question of habit.

Taking these definitions into account, we could understand culture as that concept that includes habits, customs, and identities, therefore, what role do firearms play in this? Recent studies by Lacombe *et al.* (2019) provides an important point of view unpacking gun meaning by exploring gun identity. This work moves beyond just examining why people own guns to investigate how individuals subjectively identify as a gun owner, and as belonging to a particular social group. These authors also argue that political identities and their corresponding ideologies have been used by gun rights organizations—particularly the NRA—to create strategically a politicized gun owner social identity (e.g., framing owners as patriotic, law abiding, ordinary citizens), and then mobilize this identity for political action by portraying it as under attack from "big city, urban, elitist" politicians. Moreover, Lacombe *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that gun owners are very politically active because there is a collective social identity tied to gun ownership and therefore, they feel personally invested (2019). In addition, at the same time Mencken and Froese (2019) established that American gun owners vary widely in the symbolic meaning they find in firearms; some associate gun ownership with moral and emotional empowerment and others do not.

NRA membership is a reasonable proxy of gun culture, or anticontrol sentiment, in a given state (Goss, 2006, pp. 220-221). It has been well documented that NRA members are extremely active politically and civically (Melzer, 2009; Lacombe *et al.*, 2019). Patriotism has been the NRA's flagship insignia for decades, practices of firearms purchasing, ownership, and use are relevant to all these convictions. Gun culture is a key in political identity building in United States. The domestic use of firearms has been transmitted across generations through the socialization of children into hunting and shooting sports as well as through service in the military (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011). However, the NRA is changing the strategy and is working for disassociate itself and "regular" gun owners from white power and militia movements (Dawson, 2019; Melzer, 2009). The association works to extend that culture in other less reified profiles.

The review of recent literature has placed the gun culture as a point of study related to violence, urban or domestic. Cook made in 2018 a systematic study to compare how the level of availability of weapons influences the rates, patterns, and outcomes of criminal violence. «Guns are legal commodities, but violent offenders typically obtain their guns by illegal means», according to the data recovered by the police and from occasional surveys of gun-involved offenders most guns used in crime are sourced from the stock of guns in private hands (rather than a purchase from a licensed dealer). Koper and Mayo-Wilson also made in 2006 a systematic review of the impact of police strategies to reduce illegal possession and carrying of firearms on gun crime, including directed patrols, monitoring of probationers and parolees, weapon reporting hotlines, and others.

Other studies such as Winton (2004) and Wright *et al.* (2017) based their investigations on establishing patterns of use of firearms with violence, criminality, and drug trafficking. More recently, Carlson (2020) engaged in a hotly debated issue: gun policy. This study based its results on the article maps out two waves of gun research, Gun Studies 1.0, and Gun Studies 2.0. and concludes by encouraging gun researchers to attend to the politics of evidence as they mobilize scholarship not just to inform the gun debate but also to transform it.

But then the debate continues as to how pro-gun legislation can remain so stagnant for centuries while guns have evolved so much technologically. This could have a logical explanation if we relate it to the 'technological domestication' theory of Roger Silverstone and his collaborators. The term domestication was initially developed to understand the use of technology in the private sphere of people, their homes, their domestic use, which is precisely the key point that differentiates American society from others. According to these studies, human beings experience technological advances as something normalized, so gradually integrated into their daily lives that it goes unnoticed. This process would occur in four consecutive phases: the appropriation of this technology, the objectification of its use, its incorporation into daily activities, and its conversion and integration into society as something rational and normalized. Although there are sectors of public opinion that precisely claim this situation, that pro-gun laws were made when there were no firearms such as semi-automatic rifles capable of killing quickly and effectively and used mostly in mass shootings. But most of the population immersed in this culture of arms lives with these standardized and integrated technological advances, which could be the reason for the lack of progress in legal and political matters. This perspective of domestication also provides an analytical framework based on the complexity of everyday life and the role of technology in rituals, customs and social structures (Berker *et al.*, 2006).

Regarding communications, the study «Targeted advertising: documenting the emergence of Gun Culture 2.0 in Guns magazine»; by Yamane *et al.* (2020); analyzes the rise of self-defense in gun advertisements in The American

Rifleman. According with these results, if we focus on systematic literature reviews that refer to the concept of gun culture, we find very few results. Most focused-on concepts of criminology, especially violence. Hardly any review has been found focused on that gun culture and the influence it has from the communicative point of view.

### 3. Methodology

The main objective was to focus this review on the understanding of gun culture as a key concept to observe the differences and polarization of public opinion regarding the domestic use of firearms. In addition to getting a better perspective about the new strategies that the NRA is applying on its platforms to continue perpetuating that gun culture as an essential piece for arms trading, it was decided to do a study on this concept and review the literature of the last decade (2011-2021).

For this reason, after studying different terms, the words «gun» and «culture» have been chosen to delimit the search in Web of Science database due to scholarly consensus on the quality of their contributions. Initially, the word NRA was also included to study its influence on that culture based on weapons, but it was discarded because we would have left out interesting results on that concept. However, for the results, mentions of this institution in the different articles will be located and analyzed.

The selected research areas have been Sociology, Social Sciences, Communication, Social Work and Education. These fields of study have been delimited to obtain that point of reference more focused on the understanding of the concept for public opinion, establish patterns of behavior and understand why gun culture can be that central axis that polarizes public opinion.

Specifically, 111 results were obtained in the initial search, but finally only 87 remained. 24 articles were discarded because they were not in accordance with the research topics. Most of the articles were excluded because the object of study was purely related to medicine due to coincidence in technical names. An article on weapons used for construction and DIY and another on weapons invented for science fiction were also removed.

### 4. Results

Gun culture encompasses how both individuals and institutions consciously and unconsciously interact with firearms, through beliefs, thoughts, behaviors, social and legal norms, as well as the social structures they project onto them. 37% of the delimited articles study the different profiles of ownership, 5 of them focused specifically on the attitudes of firearms owners. The concept of self-defense is mentioned in most of these papers as the central axis of the possession of firearms. And in the opposite way, many articles study those profiles of possession of weapons extracting data from criminological databases, such as the police authority.

We can also find several studies that focus on demographic traits such as gender, speaking about the relationship established between them. Moreover, two of them directly relate gun culture to masculinity and virility, as main characteristics associated with the defense of home and family, data that coincides with the 2017 Pew Research Center survey. Three other papers study the use of feminist discourse to extend gun culture to the female gender as a form of self-defense and female empowerment. This last fact is interesting because there is still little studied in this line, but the NRA has been using the feminist discourse based on self-defense for almost 10 years to prevent violence against women. They argue that armed women have more options to defend themselves against attacks that put them in danger.

Regarding sexual orientation and the queer collective, another article is focused on study LGBTQ gun owners' perspectives and if LGBTQ's gun carriers identify themselves with the general values that this group defends. In this sense, there is also a perspective focused on self-defense and the sense of security that people vulnerable to violent attacks can experience if they carry a weapon.

Based on cultural background, we can find 2 articles that study the relationship about gun ownership and religion and how guns empower owners morally and emotionally regarding to religious though. The results of this article are quite close to those definitions provided by the mentioned authors who describe them as middle class, white and conservative people. But it brings that perspective of emotional empowerment more related to religion.

From the racial perspective, other articles study the relation between gun violence in Black and White communities. The purpose of this type of articles, included in this search, is to compare the culture of honor perspective associated with rural and suburban gun violence.

On the other hand, 16 articles that represent 18% of the search, study the gun culture related to some violence patterns. The main research in this field is divided into two opposing aspects: the relationship between the domestic use of firearms and violence or the danger of living in violent environments and the protection that weapons give you. One of these studies is also carried out from the perspective of gender and violence against women in the world.

In the database we also found 10 articles that speak specifically of gun control, the debate generated by the possibility of implementing more regulation in the domestic use of firearms and the impact on public opinion.

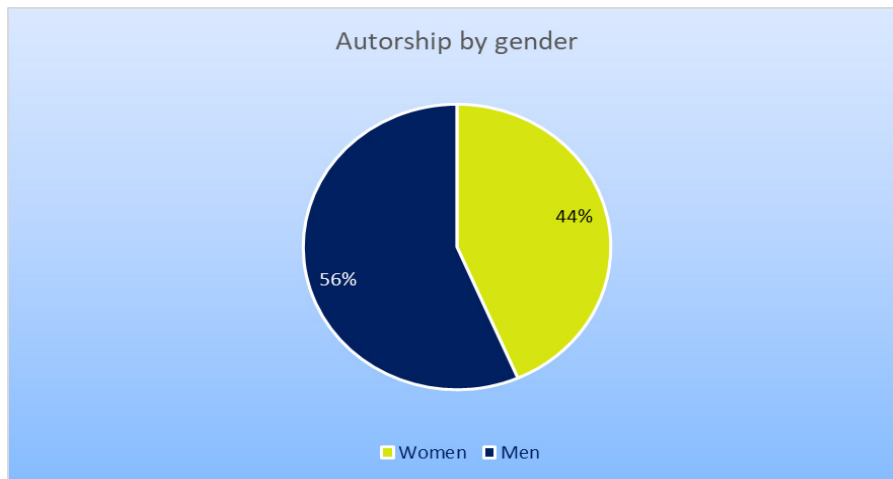
More specifically, different perceptions and points of view are studied, analyzed by types of profiles, and the possible relationship between gun control and lack of trust in institutions is assessed.

If we continue advancing in the topics studied, we also find articles that study representations in the media, more specifically 8 articles, of which 6 of them focus on studying these representations in conventional media, mainly cinema and television. Only 2 of them talk about the representation of topics related with guns on the internet and digital scenarios, one specifically analyzes the role of Google searches related to the psychological impact that school shooting can have. But it is remarkable how none of them talks about the role of massively used social networks such as twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Both the NRA as a lobbyist and supporters of the domestic use of weapons are very active in certain social media. On the other hand, the sector of society that is against the possession of weapons also uses these digital platforms to spread their criticism of the current legislation, especially when a violent event occurs. Therefore, it is concluded that a very interesting line of research is to study the representation of gun culture in social media, the debate generated and the impact on public opinion. However, we have an article that studies search patterns in search engines like Google. It is very interesting to open the way in the analysis of our behavior in the digital environment with respect to the issue of firearms.

Finally, we have 6 articles that study the relationship between the use of weapons and health, specifically mental health. In fact, it's interesting how many studies are on the hypothesis that having a firearm increases the chances of impulse suicide.

#### 4.1. Authorship of the articles

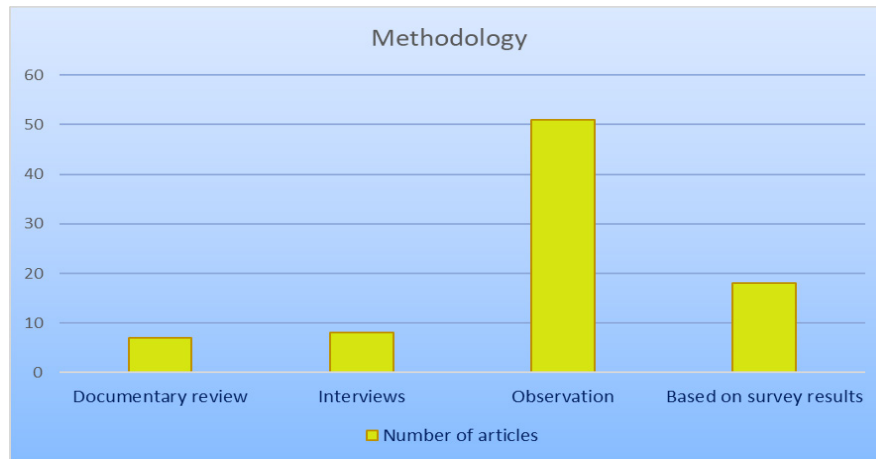
Figure 1. Autorship of the articles by gender



Source: Authors own elaboration, 2022.

Focusing on number of authors, 34 articles are written by a single author, compared to 35 that have 2 or 3 authors. On the other hand, 18 articles have been developed by 4 or more authors. Regarding gender, 38 female authors participated in the preparation of the articles compared to 50 men. This represents a proportion close to 40/60 percent. There are no relevant data regarding the predominance of a specific gender filtering by years, throughout the decade analyzed, the proportion has been similar.

#### 4.2. Methodologies and objects of study

**Figure 2.** Methodology of the selected articles

Source: Authors own ellaboration, 2022.

The typology of the object of study has been descriptive in 57 cases, evaluative in 37 and 1 interventional. This indicates that most studies are based on a description of the situation about the different realities, themes and problems that are experienced around gun culture. Moreover, 50 studies analyze the social level in population groups, while 34 their object of study is massive. Only one study focuses on the interpersonal social level. The nature of the research is empirical in 31 studies while it is theoretical in 55. Regarding the methodology, 8 studies have been carried out through documentary review, 8 through interviews, 52 respond to the observation technique and 18 have been prepared with survey results.

### 4.3. Location of the research object

Regarding the object of study, 70 articles deal with the offline environment, which represents a large majority compared to only 5 articles whose object is online. On the other hand, 11 articles study both objects, offline and online. The country under study is the United States, except for three studies, one made in the European Union, another in Turkey and another in the Fiji Islands, then there are 2 comparative studies between the situation in the United States and Canada. This result is possibly explainable because the United States is one of the few countries in the world that fulfills two premises: legislation that allows the domestic possession of firearms and a deeply rooted culture around the use of weapons with the celebration of sporting events, solemn acts, and fairs. In addition to political sectors, mostly Republicans but also Democrats who base their political actions on promoting the rights to bear guns.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The first discussion is to analyze the quantitative results of this systematic review. After this analysis we will be able to know what new lines of research are opened and if they coincide with the hypotheses previously raised.

According to Roger Silverstone's studies, the object in question is designed and built for certain functions and the users are the ones who decide and define the application and use of that object. This is consistent when talking about gun culture because weapons have been designed for contexts very different from the domestic use. The possibility of a war or militia that must be defended by the people instead of a professional army is almost non-existent. Finally, Americans' use of firearms corresponds to that normalization and integration of technology in human life. Therefore, a close relationship could be established between this Silverstone theory and the normalization of the gun culture. And this is precisely the crucial difference between societies and countries. Why in Europe is lived with astonishment the tragic events and the lack of legal action in gun control? The difference in perception could respond to the normalization of this culture as significant for this society, so that the rest of the countries would not conceive it in a short term, they would lack all that period of 4 phases already explained of integration of that technology in their lifestyle.

In addition, to establish a profile pattern of gun ownership, most studies agree on the concept of self-defense. The relationship between personal safety and crime and violence rates studied in different neighborhoods or environments is interesting. Specifically, one of these studies reveals that crime is less related to the legal possession of weapons because in this case they have been obtained in a non-regulatory manner. Therefore, based on these studies, the feeling of security is fed by violent events. What can that mean? That sensitivity to knowledge of the level of violence in the country or in the immediate environment can be the trigger for that feeling of gun culture to obtain personal protection.

But if we advance in the sociodemographic part and enter the gender perspective, the term self-defense reappears. However, in this case it is complemented by the interesting term «empowerment», independent

women whose weapons provide them with that sense of self-sufficiency and security. This trend could explain the opening of the division that the NRA has for women, where precisely they use female empowerment as a promotional object. According to its own definition: NRA Women is a digital platform that gives a voice to female Second Amendment advocates across the country.

On the other hand, a new keyword appears in the article that refers to the LGBTBI collective: vulnerability. This concept goes hand in hand with self-defense, and indeed new groups other than white, middle-class, rural, and conservative people appear in this scenario. They are profiles that belong to minorities that may feel unprotected, and firearms provide them with that sense of security. Does that mean that this archaic gun culture is making way for new identities? Indeed, the largest arms lobby, the NRA, has also noticed these trends and uses its tools to reach these new audiences.

Returning to vulnerability, we also find this word in articles that study the ethnic or racial component. Although in this case, crime measured and analyzed by neighborhood is a variable included in these articles. In this case, the increase in violent incidents with weapons in marginal neighborhoods with a high rate of drug trafficking is studied. Therefore, self-defense reappears again as a key concept. In this case, although the NRA sends messages about the importance of the protection that guns provide in troubled neighborhoods for African American people, they also use another message: African Americans need arms to protect themselves against the government. Message that can be directly related to the Black Lives Matter movement, in which the idea of lack of protection of black people against the authorities is spread, documented with several tragic events involving African Americans and the police. Therefore, another interesting line of research opens from this literature review: to study the reaction of this social movement to the promotion of gun culture and how the NRA uses the vulnerabilities of this movement for its main purpose: to promote the use and purchase of weapons. One of the examples would be the new campaign they did last June with the African American young activist, Colion Noir.

This is another sign that gun culture trends and gun ownership profiles are changing with society. But are these messages effective? A recent PEW survey found that 68 percent of black Americans support gun-control today while only 24 percent support unrestricted gun rights—the percentages were 42 percent and 51 percent for white Americans. Also, during the last NRA convention in Houston last May, the Black Lives Matter movement organized a protest calling for gun control.

In line with this, numerous articles that study patterns of violence also appear in this literature review. These articles are mainly divided into two currents: reflect on the danger caused by living in an environment where the domestic use of weapons is normalized or, on the contrary, if the immediate environment is so dangerous that it is necessary to have firearms at home to defend yourself. What makes retake the concept of self-defense, but in this case, there are studies that refute precisely that concept. In fact, they turn it on its head because they try to show that having guns at home is more dangerous than helpful to society. And this is one of the hot topics of the NRA, because every time there is a mediatic mass shooting, it opens the recurring debate about whether the lack of control is the trigger for these tragic events.

And this leads to another of the topics studied in this literature review: gun control. Indeed, one of the issues that most polarizes public opinion, not only in the United States, are the laws that allow this use of weapons and the lack of control over their possession by the population. As has already been studied, the American Constitution is one of the only ones in the world that regulates the right to have arms. At this point, gun culture plays a key role because in other countries with similar socio-cultural environments have a quite different generalized opinion about American legislation. In the media and social media platforms, we find many opinions after tragic events such as mass shootings in schools that question how it is possible that the legislation allows people to buy firearms in supermarkets. This is the point of return to the debate on gun control where precisely gun culture is the answer. These results show that it is not only a legal issue and a right, but that it is part of their culture and their way of understanding life. It is a powerful element of differentiation that also links political actions on both sides: gun advocates who see control as a disruptive element that wants to kill the American essence, and gun control defenders who accuse the government that these policies are leading to the death of innocent people. These two sides mark an important federal political agenda, but above all, a state one, since we find notoriously different legislation between states. And what is the role of the NRA in this important part? Well, effectively, to carry out active campaigns where gun control means for them the total control of the citizens and their lack of protection, and that it would take away that differentiation with other countries culturally. And this last point could be the key in normalizing this use of weapons compared to other similar socio-cultural environments, having strong cultural roots with firearms at a domestic, protection, sports, or exhibition level.

If we advance in how the studies, the methodology and the object have been elaborated, we also find interesting results. Although the studies are mostly theoretical, there are several interesting articles made through the observation of population segments, interest groups with different biases and through surveys. In fact, most of the studies analyzed have been done at the group level rather than massively. But what most fits with the initial hypotheses is the country under study: except in 3 articles, all the others have United States as their location. Which leads back to the starting point where the United States is considered as the only country with a strong

gun culture. Although there are other countries with permissive legislation on the use of weapons, for example, one of the most prominent cases is that of Switzerland, which allows the domestic possession of weapons for sports use, the cultural concept is different, it is not part of the identity of that country. However, that is the key to understanding the different perceptions between countries regarding weapons, especially with the violent incidents. Despite experiencing complicated situations derived from the domestic use of firearms and the bad habits that have led to tragic events, an important sector of American society will always defend the right to bear arms as part of their culture, their identity. And this review of literature focused on gun culture demonstrates, therefore, with this result, the uniqueness of this country with respect to this way of understanding lifestyle.

However, and with the intention of concluding, we cannot forget to mention one of the most relevant results: most of the studies are analyzed from the offline environment, that is, outside the digital space or the Internet. It is curious because the selected sample corresponds to the last decade (2011-2021), precisely the period of the proliferation of digital platforms that have conditioned personal relationships, freedom of expression and, therefore, public opinion. Both the NRA, as well as associations against weapons, as well as personal profiles of pro and anti-arms activists have a strong presence in these social media, moreover in recent years. So, why are there hardly any studies that address the digital perspective regarding the spread of gun culture? This is one of the most interesting lines that opens after this study and that could give rise to investigations that review accounts in networks of institutions, media, politicians and other influential profiles and their position regarding weapons. How often this question can be a trend in social networks, the sensitivity when talking about tragic events, the rigor on figures of mass shootings and how that public opinion receives them. In addition, these digital platforms provide us with an easily quantifiable level of interaction that can provide interesting data on public opinion and social position on these issues. It will also be interesting to evaluate the social conversation through key words or terms, the feeling generated in the analyzed groups and the possible unconscious memory that remains after this exposure. The possibilities that open from this perspective are numerous and relevant to continue understanding and comprehending that gun culture and its scope.

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# **Publication 2**

**8.2. “The evolution of women in the gun culture: a historical analysis of their role and relationship with the NRA”**



# **WOMEN AND GUNS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ON THE USES OF GENDER BY THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA) IN THE CONTEXTS OF CULTURE WARS**

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**Abstract:** The historical relationship between women, firearms, and the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the United States is a multifaceted narrative that has evolved over time. While women have been involved in gun culture from the early days of American history, the NRA's engagement with women has seen significant developments, especially in the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. This text explores the historical contributions of women within the NRA, encompassing their roles as advocates for Second Amendment rights, participants in shooting sports, and leaders within the organization. It examines the NRA's initiatives, such as NRA Women, designed to support and empower women in the firearms community. Additionally, the study delves into the challenges and controversies, including discussions around the construction of female agency and the instrumentalization of the feminist movement through the exaltation of stereotypical women. Understanding the historical context sheds light on the evolving dynamics of women's involvement in gun culture within the NRA, reflecting broader shifts in societal attitudes toward gender roles and the right to bear arms.

**Keywords:** gun culture; NRA Women; gender studies; women's agency; gender washing; social media.

## **1. Introduction**

The National Rifle Association (NRA) has a complex and changing historical evolution and its relationship with women has experienced different stages: from a more patriarchal and infantilized vision of the role of women in gun culture, to an empowerment and independence movement that has given the female public the relevance that they have also earned with their active interest in belonging to this group. In this text we will study how one of the greatest impulses to the concept of female agency has been the representation of relevant women in this firearms sector that has caused American women to claim their place in this gun culture.

Traditionally, the emblematic movement of the NRA focuses on the constitutional right of individuals to bear arms. The organization has been instrumental in shaping the narrative around the Second Amendment and mobilizing support for its interpretation as an individual right. The NRA has been actively involved in political movements that align with its mission to protect gun rights. This includes lobbying efforts, campaign contributions, and endorsements of political candidates who support a pro-Second Amendment agenda.

In recent decades, several social movements have burst into the most traditional America to demand the rights of various groups: women, LGBTBI people, racially discriminated groups, among others. Progressive movements and advocates of social justice have been the key actors in this culture war. In the context of American politics, the expression also has been used to describe disputes and tensions over issues such as identity, civil rights, morality, and diversity. Authors such as Hunter describe this concept as a source of conflict which constitutes nothing short of a struggle over the meaning of America and its identity as a nation (Hunter, 1991).

The culture war has had significant implications for women, influencing debates and shaping societal attitudes regarding gender roles, women's rights, reproductive rights, and other related issues. Movements like #MeToo, born out of the culture war, have highlighted issues of sexual harassment and assault. Women have spoken out against systemic abuses of power and have pushed for cultural changes to address and prevent harassment in various spheres of life. Discussions within the cultural war often touch on the representation of women in media, advertising, and popular culture. Advocates emphasize the need for diverse and empowering portrayals of women, challenging harmful stereotypes.

Scott Melzer supports the idea that the gun lobby's success since the 1970s can be tied to the way guns reinforce masculine identity in America (Melzer, 2009). But the NRA has always been backing certain social movements that emphasize the positive aspects of gun ownership, including hunting, sport shooting, and outdoor activities for women. Over the years, the organization also has sought to increase participation in its ranks and in gun culture. Women-specific initiatives and programs have been implemented, including events, training courses and competitions designed to attract and train women in firearms handling. In the case of this cultural war the association joined to participate more actively after shootings like Sandy Hook in 2013. The organization has strategically selected its positioning to gain the support of public opinion by developing actions in favor of vulnerable groups by promoting the use of firearms for their safety and it has emphasized the narrative of women's empowerment and autonomy through access to firearms. It is argued that gun ownership can be a means of self-defense and an equalizer of forces, especially for women. The NRA, as part of the culture war over gun rights, has participated in constructing narratives that highlight the importance of gun ownership as a fundamental element of American identity and personal freedom. For example, authors as Laura Browder defended that "most feminists have rejected the notion that gun ownership is or can be a meaningful part of women's empowerment" (Browder, 2008: 230). In addition, Angela Stroud maintained that women are proud to be operating in a traditionally men's world because guns are equalizers (Stroud, 2016).

However, the NRA's involvement in the culture war has also drawn criticism. Some authors in their studies argue that the promotion of firearms as a form of female empowerment can simplify and polarize the debate. Anti-gun scholars have described guns as a source of male domination and oppression (Bassin, 1997). And authors like Schwartz, who developed research analyzing NRA content in media as YouTube, concludes that the organization uses narratives that frame participation in the gun culture as both enjoyable and empowering for women to overcome barriers posed by masculinist norms. (Schwartz, 2021).

But are women more protected with firearms or is it an instrumentalization that could be interpreted as gender washing? According to Kelley the combination of victimization and feminist identity "demands action, and this individual agency can be expressed as gun-carrying, an embodiment of empowerment" (Kelley, 2021: 90). Taking this debate as a

reference point for this study, the main objective will be to carry out a critical historical review that will analyze the main female figures who have been references of the NRA for the promotion of specialized firearms for women. Promotions will be related to critical historical or social moments that mark a clear position of the advocacy group using cultural war and feminism as instruments.

## **2. Historical and contextual framework**

The National Rifle Association (NRA) was established on November 17, 1871, in New York City by Union Army veterans William C. Church and George Wingate. Its original purpose was to promote and encourage rifle shooting as a sport and to improve the marksmanship skills of American citizens. This society lives fully in gun culture justified by the Second Amendment ratified in 1791 along with nine other articles of the Bill of Rights: “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” (U.S. Const. amend. II, 1791). What is born as a need for personal defense, lives as an inherent part of a culture thanks to the key action of this lobby group that played a crucial role in the establishment of the Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP) in 1903. The CMP was created to ensure that civilians, particularly young people, had access to firearms training and marksmanship education.

The gun culture has, at times, been associated with traditional gender norms and stereotypes but although the perception of this group traditionally seemed exclusive to men, the involvement of women dates back to its early years. They were members of the NRA and they also participated in marksmanship training programs. The emphasis on marksmanship skills was seen as a valuable contribution to national defense, and women were encouraged to develop proficiency in handling firearms.

During World War II, the NRA in the United States played a significant role in supporting the war effort, and women, both as members and volunteers, were involved in various capacities and they also participated in marksmanship training programs. The emphasis was seen as a valuable contribution to national defense, and women were encouraged to develop proficiency in handling firearms. The experiences of women during World War II, including their involvement with the NRA, contributed to broader changes in societal perceptions of women's roles. The war effort opened new opportunities for women, and their contributions to marksmanship and other areas continued to be recognized in the post-war years.

In the 1970s, the association underwent a transformation, moving from primarily a sportsmen's organization to a more politically active entity. This shift was influenced by changes in leadership and a growing concern among members about gun control legislation. The NRA became increasingly involved in lobbying against gun control measures and endorsing political candidates who supported gun rights. These groups catalyze input aspirations (demands and support) in the political system as process of articulating interests with the objective to obtain favorable outputs (political decisions) (Easton, 1963). The NRA, as a prominent advocate for gun rights, has been involved in policy debates related to women's access to firearms. While the organization emphasizes the importance of empowering individuals, including women, with the right to bear arms, there are varying opinions within the broader gun community about the impact of specific policies on women's safety and rights.

The visibility of women gun owners contributes to changing the definitions of feminism and leads to physical and non-traditional feminist policies (McCaughy 1997; Schippers

2002). The concept of agency refers to the ability of women to make independent decisions, exercise control over their lives and actively participate in various social, cultural, and political aspects. In addition, it also involves the question of women to act and make decisions that generate benefits specific to their gender, as well as contribute to the transformation of social structures that may limit their options. This term begins to be used referring to the action of women to build their points of influence at the end of the 80s by authors like Carroll, who defines agency as the set of nonviolent direct actions understood very broadly to denote all forms of active struggle for rights or for justice through means which involve assertiveness, open confrontation of oppression or exploitation, and risk to those undertaking the action. (Carroll, 1989).

The NRA's recognition of women's contributions expanded notably in the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Initiatives like NRA Women, introduced in the late 1980s, aimed to specifically engage and support women in the firearms community. The NRA acknowledged the growing demographic of female gun owners and sought to provide resources, training, and a sense of community.

Therefore, what has worked the most in the construction and consolidation of this concept of agency has been the use of relevant women in the NRA's promotional actions. For its dissemination, the organization launched its own women's division, NRA Women, with its own social media channels and digital platforms that even include fictional content in series format such as 'Armed and Fabulous' or 'Love at First Shot'. The firearms industry has contributed its own marketing efforts through new product development, media advertising, and promotional events (Barrett, 2013; Blair & Hyatt, 1995; Diaz, 1999; Saylor et al., 2004).

### **3. Literature review**

We cannot separate the concepts of guns rights and Second Amendment, gun culture, advocacy and NRA. Most of the academic literature that covers the historical evolution of the NRA links it to its political and lobbying activities and the attention paid to the NRA has focused principally on its congressional and state-level lobbying efforts (Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009).

NRA membership is a reasonable proxy of gun culture, or anticontrol sentiment, in a given state (Goss, 2006, pp. 220-221). It is well documented that NRA members are extremely active politically and civically rejecting gun control measures and defending the right to bear them (Melzer, 2009). Lacombe and colleagues (2019) also proved that gun owners are very politically active because there is a collective social identity tied to gun ownership and therefore, they feel personally invested (Lacombe et al. 2019). These authors also argue that political identities and their corresponding ideologies have been used by gun rights organizations—particularly the NRA—to create strategically a politicized gun owner social identity. In fact, the greatest work of the organization has been to maintain gun culture as a centralizing element of American politics in that endless debate about guns, a term coined by several authors such as Carlson as Great Gun Debate (Carlson, 2014); or the Great American Gun Debate (Kates & Kleck, 1997). The NRA manages to keep the issue under its media control until tragic events such as mass shootings occur. Events like the Columbine Massacre in 1999, the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in 2012, Las Vegas strip shooting in 2017 or Uvalde School Shooting in 2022, have been the most covered by the media internationally and have revived the Great Debate against the NRA.

Due to the pressures of public debate around the new social movements and the culture war, the NRA recognizes the need to expand their base of supporters and bring women into the fold (Schwartz, 2019). The organization is changing the strategy and is working for disassociate the relationship between gun owners only with white power and militia movements (Melzer, 2009).

Regarding gun culture and women, we can find historical references from researchers Tom and Robert J. Smith, who evaluated changes in gun ownership among women between the years 1980 and 1994 based on reports from pro-gun groups and content from mass media. Study that concluded that the figures were boosted with the intention of encourage this female audience to buy guns (Smith & Smith, 1995). At the same time, researchers Blair and Hyatt researched about the promotion of gun-related products to women within the framework about problems that American women must solve, like their own safety (Blair & Hyatt, 1995).

In 2008, Laura Browder relates women's fascination with guns to empowerment through feminism: “gun ownership is or can be a meaningful part of women’s empowerment” (Browder 2008: 230). In addition, she exposes how for two centuries, women who pick up guns have disrupted the popular association of guns and masculinity, establishing the question of arms as a right to obtain their capacity for full citizenship. Also in 2015, Deborah Homsher wrote a book about contemporary American women ideologies trying to explain the fascination that they have for firearms based on personal experiences and their responses to the national public debates (Homsher, 2015). However, in 2017 Goss addresses a study on the influence of pro-gun rights groups on women who support firearms control laws and concludes that the persuasion strategies used by these groups do not have a great impact (Goss, 2017). Regarding gun control, Miller stated that women are more likely to support firearms regulation measures than men (Miller, 2019). Finally, authors like Kelley are capable of providing a vision of women’s gun ownership through the lens of feminism to study that transition from victimization to empowerment (Kelley, 2021).

#### **4. Methodology**

The study consists of a critical historical analysis to explore the NRA's representations of women's role in gun culture. We selected advertisements and commercial formats separating them by historical stages and comparing them with the canons of perfection associated with women to assess whether the NRA can adapt these representations to those social stereotypes. Examples of female members of the NRA will be taken as a reference. We will also include examples of women who, although they are not within the NRA as members, the organization uses them as advertising claims due to their relationship with gun culture. Several articles published by the women's division of the NRA and some advertising actions have been taken as an object of study to evaluate the differences and similarities between profiles, as well as the most notable characteristics of these women and their promotional discourse.

Four central dimensions of analysis have been chosen to compare these profiles: activism, victimization, empowerment, sexualization and motherhood.

#### **5. Results**

The NRA has played a multifaceted role, advocating for the protection and promotion of the right to bear arms. The organization engages in lobbying efforts, grassroots campaigns, and educational initiatives to influence legislation, defend gun owners' rights, and promote responsible firearm ownership. Women's involvement in NRA activism has

been a significant aspect of the broader discourse on gun rights and the Second Amendment in the United States.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the first women that the NRA marks as icons of its values were activists like Deborah Sampson (1760–1827). She was a remarkable figure in American history, known for her unconventional and courageous actions during the American Revolutionary War. Born in Plympton, Massachusetts, Sampson disguised herself as a man, adopting the name Robert Shurtleff, to enlist in the Continental Army in 1782. Serving for over a year, she demonstrated exceptional valor in various military engagements, even sustaining injuries. It was only after being wounded in 1783 that her true identity was discovered.

The emphasis on activism also leads the NRA to use figures such as Harriet Tubman (c. 1822–1913) and Mary Fields (1832–1914), both black women who fought for abolitionism and the rights of black people. Tubman was a courageous African American abolitionist and freedom fighter who escaped enslavement in the South, later becoming a key figure in the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses aiding enslaved individuals in their journey to freedom. Tubman's daring efforts, often referred to as the "Moses of her people," included multiple trips back into slave-holding states to guide others to liberty. Mary Fields, also known as "Stagecoach Mary", was a groundbreaking African American woman of the Old West. Born into slavery, she became one of the first African American women employed as a mail carrier in the United States and the second woman to work for the U.S. Postal Service. Renowned for her strength, resilience, and no-nonsense attitude, Mary Fields left an indelible mark as a frontier figure, contributing to the expansion of women's roles in historically male-dominated professions. Both Harriet Tubman and Mary Fields exemplify the resilience and courage of African American women who defied societal norms to make lasting contributions to American history and they are a perfect symbol to connect with the female audience, especially black women, again mentioning self-defense and activism.

Apart from activism and defense, the professionalization of the use of weapons for shooting sports is another of the strong points in the promotion of the NRA. For this reason, the organization highlights the figure of Annie Oakley, a legendary American sharpshooter renowned for her extraordinary marksmanship skills. Raised in poverty, she honed her shooting abilities as a means of providing for her family. Her life took a significant turn when she defeated renowned marksman Frank Butler in a shooting contest. Joining Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, Oakley became a national and international sensation, captivating audiences with her precision and earning the nickname "Little Sure Shot." A symbol of women's empowerment, she challenged societal norms and advocated for women's rights. Although her fame began before the NRA was consolidated, the organization used her repeatedly as a symbol of a professional and empowered woman within gun culture. In fact, in May 2023, the NRA made a commemorative report detailing the type of pistols she used and indirectly also promoted, because her figure was very influential.

Another of the famous references that the NRA used as a symbol of the protection of the Second Amendment was Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady to the 32nd President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, she was an influential American political figure and diplomat. As the longest serving First Lady of the United States (1933-1945), she redefined the role by actively engaging in social and political issues. According to an article published on the website of the women's division, NRA Women, to ensure the First Lady's safety, the director of the Secret Service at the time, William H. Moran, eventually offered her a revolver of her own to carry. Eleanor accepted the firearm and, once a Secret Service

agent taught her how to use it, carried it everywhere. Therefore, the NRA defined her as the First Lady who advocated for concealed carry.

Marion P. Hammer was also used for many NRA promotional content. She was born in 1939, and she is a prominent American gun rights advocate and the first female president of the National Rifle Association (NRA), serving from 1995 to 1998. A native of Florida, Hammer has been a leading figure in the state's gun rights movement and has played a significant role in shaping firearm legislation. She has been a staunch advocate for the Second Amendment and has worked on various initiatives to protect and expand gun rights. Hammer's influence extends beyond her tenure as NRA president; she has been actively involved in lobbying for pro-gun legislation at both the state and national levels. Her long-standing commitment to advancing the rights of gun owners has made her a polarizing figure in the ongoing debate over gun control in the United States.

Another important female figure within the lobby organization is Dana Loesch, a prominent conservative political commentator, radio host, and spokesperson for the NRA with almost two million followers on social media. Known for her articulate and impassioned advocacy for gun rights and conservative principles, Loesch has been a significant voice in American media. She gained prominence through her radio show, television appearances (Moms like me), and writings, expressing strong opinions on issues such as the Second Amendment, free speech, and limited government. As the former spokeswoman for the NRA, Loesch played a key role in defending gun rights and engaging in debates surrounding gun control measures. With a dynamic and often polarizing presence in the media landscape, Dana Loesch continues to be a leading conservative commentator shaping discussions on political and social issues in the United States. In this case there has been a lot of emphasis on motherhood coinciding with various promotional materials on gun ownership and family protection. We have found several materials where the NRA alludes to the importance of women being defenders of the family, breaking the patriarchal stereotype of the protective father.

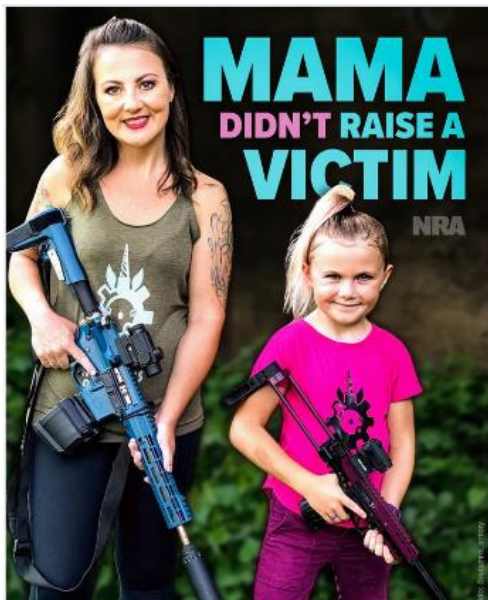


Figure 1. NRA Promotional Content for Mother's Day on X. Source: <https://x.com/NRA/status/1391428096214110212?s=20>

Continuing with the popularity of Dana Loesch, the NRA has also sought these types of profiles for promotion on social media: young-looking, normatively attractive women, extolling family and professional values in the firearms sector. The organization utilizes

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to share information about gun rights, promote its events, and engage in advocacy efforts. The group has actively connected with women through these social media platforms, recognizing the growing presence of female gun owners and enthusiasts. The accounts feature content tailored to women, including educational materials, stories of women in shooting sports, and information on firearm safety and self-defense. The organization has sought to empower and connect women in the firearms community through initiatives like NRA Women, which highlights female shooters, instructors, and advocates. By using social media to showcase diverse perspectives and experiences, the group aims to foster a supportive community for women interested in firearms, self-defense, and the broader Second Amendment discourse. The use of influencers allows the NRA to reach diverse audiences and leverage the influence of individuals with substantial followings in the digital space to support its mission and engage with supporters.

If we enter the NRA's Instagram account, we find profiles like Melissa Bachman, she is an accomplished hunter, television host, and outdoor personality known for her expertise in hunting and adventure sports. With a passion for the outdoors, she has hosted various hunting shows, including "Winchester Deadly Passion," where she shares her experiences and insights into the world of hunting. Beckie Yackley is also recognized as an accomplished competitive shooter and firearms instructor. Known for her proficiency in various shooting disciplines, Beckie, along with her husband, 3-Gun champion Mark Yackley, has been actively involved in the shooting sports community. Charissa Littlejohn is also on that list as an American model, social media influencer, and military veteran. She gained recognition for her service in the United States Army, where she served as a Military Police Officer. Charissa has since transitioned to a career in modeling and has been featured in various publications and campaigns. Her social media presence, particularly on platforms like Instagram, showcases a combination of her modeling work, fitness journey, and highlights from her military service. All of them have in common a very professional profile in relation to the use of firearms, they make very explanatory content about different models of guns and accessories for shooting sports or concealed carry. Furthermore, all three correspond to family profiles, all of them are mothers and their physical appearance is normatively attractive. Even within conservative thought, these influencers have championed the idea that gun ownership is not exclusive to any gender and that women have a significant role to play in shaping the narrative around the Second Amendment.

But the NRA has also used the image of famous people with no prior relationship with the firearms environment to gain popularity and promotion, such as the American star, Dolly Parton, a beloved American cultural icon celebrated for her multifaceted career as a singer, songwriter, actress, and philanthropist. With her distinctive voice and engaging stage presence, Dolly has become a country music legend. Beyond her musical contributions, she has left an indelible mark on popular culture, known for her flamboyant style, quick wit, and genuine warmth. In this case, the NRA maintains that Dolly Parton is a defender of concealed carry as a method of self-defense because she herself admitted that she had an incident with a man and needed to take out her gun as a means of protection. But it is important to note that Dolly Parton has never been a member of the organization but was used as an example of a person who defended the right to bear arms as a means of defense. We find very similar cases with other very famous people, such as actresses Angelina Jolie or Eva Longoria. In both cases the NRA has taken advantage of their public statements with favorable opinions about the use and possession of guns and has used them for self-interested promotion.



## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The historical contributions of women to gun culture within the context of the NRA reveal a complex and evolving narrative. Over the years, women have played crucial roles in shaping the NRA's outreach, advocacy, and educational efforts. From the early days of the NRA's founding in 1871, women participated in shooting sports and firearm education, but their formal involvement in leadership roles increased gradually. Women's involvement became increasingly visible, with female leaders emerging in key roles, advocating for Second Amendment rights, and participating in firearm education programs. The organization's focus on inclusivity sought to dispel stereotypes and challenge traditional gender norms related to firearms because influential women in the realm of guns are contributing to a more inclusive and diverse dialogue around firearms.

Although the range of years studied is wide and the social and cultural evolution of women is notable, there are many points in common between all those referenced. From the first activists of the Civil War to the most modern influencers, the NRA always looks for a point of admiration in these profiles with the representation of a completely perfect woman: hard-working, young, beautiful, mother of several children, good wife, and of course, armed. Many of them are also related to the military sector and veterans. They are all represented as super women capable of facing anything, and firearms are the extra accessory that makes them invincible because some research suggests that fear-based marketing has not led to higher rates of gun acquisition among women (Koeppl & Nobles, 2017). So, the role of victimization is used to achieve this empowerment and reject the need for external male protection, “the combination of victimization and feminist identity demands action, and this individual agency can be expressed as gun-carrying” (Kelley, 2021: 90). It is the purest representation of the American dream for a woman. Therefore, the NRA supports that “gun advertisements often highlight women’s vulnerability and promote guns as ‘woman’s best friend’” (Carlson, 2015: 23).

This search for admiration could be understood as an instrumentalized use of the feminist movement adapted to the changing trends of these social movements, including black women as activist references. Modern feminist authors include women of color as a representation of diverse groups capable of build a movement from the margins (Levenstein, 2020). Therefore, the NRA is changing the strategy to disassociate gun owners only with white power (Melzer, 2009) and they are making promotions including the roles closest to activism to join changing social movements. This rapid adaptability of the organization could respond to Bauman's theory of liquid modernity that is characterized by the rapid pace of social, economic, and technological changes, resulting in a society where individuals constantly navigate uncertainties and adapt to new circumstances (Bauman, 2000). If we observe how the NRA strategically adapts to profiles that arouse interest and admiration among the selected audience, in this case female, we can clearly see this concept of liquidity. That ability to match with women using representations appreciated and socially understood as activist but at the same time maintaining balance with the most conservative groups. They all have the common goal of defending the Second Amendment and patriotism through gun culture.



Figure 2. Frame of NRA Video of Firearm Training Group "Chicks With Triggers".  
Source: <https://www.nrawomen.com/content/nra-video-features-firearm-training-group-chicks-with-triggers/>

Finally, the discussion about influential women in the context of guns often centers on the intersection of women's empowerment, self-defense, and the broader debate on Second Amendment rights. Various women have emerged as influential figures, leveraging their platforms to promote responsible gun ownership through firearm safety and professionalization. Social media has played a pivotal role in amplifying their voices and creating communities where women share their experiences, expertise, and perspectives on gun-related issues. Precisely these virtual communities created around gun culture are the dynamic element that achieves the feeling of belonging and grouping. For example, initiatives as The NRA Women's Leadership Forum, one of the largest and most influential philanthropic groups, are sets of events promoted through social media with the participation of those influential profiles and the dissemination of these activities increases female membership for the organization. A real example of the inclusion of gun culture in female agency.

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# **Publication 3**

**8.3. “NRA Women: From Victimization to Branded Content as a Strategy to Attract Female Audience to Gun Culture through Instagram”**

## NRA Women: From Victimization to Branded Content as a Strategy to Attract Female Audience to Gun Culture on Instagram

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**Abstract.** The National Rifle Association (NRA) has created accounts for women on different social networks to attract them into gun culture using innovative advocacy strategies aiming not only to influence their audience but also to build a positive image of the group. Here we analyze the ways of attracting the NRA female target on Instagram, considering types of women representations and roles depicted and how followers engaged during the American Midterm elections of November 8, 2022, as a key moment when public debate about gun culture increased. For this, a quantitative and qualitative study of the official Instagram account @NRAWomen has been conducted, which includes data analysis on publications, interactions, and reactions. Also, we have performed a qualitative content analysis on the most popular posts. The results show clear advertising and brand centered profitable actions as well as the systematic use of recruitment strategies based on sponsored entertainment.

**Keywords:** Gun culture; NRA Women; Instagram; Gender Studies; US Midterm Elections.

[es] Mujeres de la NRA: De la victimización al *branded content* como estrategia para atraer al público femenino a la cultura de las armas en Instagram

**Resumen.** La Asociación Nacional del Rifle (NRA, por sus siglas en inglés) tiene cuentas enfocadas a mujeres en diferentes redes sociales con el fin de atraerlas a la cultura de armas mediante estrategias de promoción innovadoras cuyos objetivos son influir y construir una imagen positiva del grupo. Aquí analizamos las formas de atraer ese público femenino de la NRA en Instagram, considerando los tipos de representaciones y roles representados y cómo los seguidores interactúan. El período elegido está enmarcado por las midterm elections del 8 de noviembre de 2022, como un momento clave en el que aumentaron los debates públicos sobre la cultura de armas. Para ello, se ha realizado un estudio cuantitativo y cualitativo de la cuenta oficial de Instagram @NRAWomen, que incluye análisis de datos sobre publicaciones, interacciones y reacciones. Asimismo, se ha realizado un análisis de contenido cualitativo sobre los posts más populares. Los resultados muestran claras acciones centradas en la publicidad y rentabilidad de las marcas, así como el uso sistemático de estrategias de captación basadas en el entretenimiento patrocinado.

**Palabras clave:** Cultura de armas; Mujeres NRA; Instagram; Estudios de género; Midterm Elections, Estados Unidos.

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. Literature review. 2.1. Lobbying and social media. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Discussion and conclusions. 6. References.

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### 1. Introduction

In the recent history of the United States, the issue of firearms in electoral processes has been a trend, also in the last midterm elections in 2022 and it will be key for the following years. Events such as the latest mass shootings mean that gun control is always present on the media and political agenda with much controversy in public opinion (Olzak, 2023).

How the institutions like the National Rifle Association (NRA) lobbies to continue keeping gun culture alive is little studied, especially if we consider that it has been segmenting minorities for the last few years to achieve more effectiveness in its strategies. This allows them to instrumentalize social movements in favor of pro-guns ideology, some of the most prominent are feminism, the racial question or the LGT-BIQ+ community (Filindra, 2023).

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For this study, gender is taken as a point of reference to understand how the promotion of gun culture targets female public, especially by the NRA, which has a specific division for women with magazines, channels, audiovisual productions, and social media accounts just for them.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to assess the ways of attracting the female target by the NRA through social media, mainly Instagram, and reflect on their effectiveness. We will focus on analyzing what types of women are depicted and establish what representations are made of female roles on Instagram. To address this question, we need to know what types of social media accounts the NRA runs, who follows them and how interaction takes place. Collaborations with companies, brands and influential profiles and their impact on the audience will also be analyzed.

The period chosen is framed in the American Midterm elections of November 8, 2022, taking as a reference the pre-campaign, campaign, results, and post-campaign. In this event, the 435 positions of the United States House of Representatives were chosen, and 33 or 34 of the 100 of the United States Senate. In addition, in these elections, 34 of the 50 US states elected their governors for a four-year term.

We chose this event as a centralizer of the study to observe what changes may have occurred in the NRA's strategy directed at women during the electoral period because the issue of guns is once again very hot in public opinion after the mass shootings in Uvalde and Buffalo. These and other tragic events have made 2022 the year in which more children and young people died in shootings according to the NGO Gun Violence Archive (2023), which has collected this statistic since 2014. For this reason, the United States Congress approved a historic pact in June, which allows for increased control of firearms acquired by persons under 21 years of age.

In addition, data from The Violence Project (2023) show a gender disparity among the per-petrators of mass shootings: of the 172 studied since 1966 by that organization, only four were carried out by women. This data is important because when it comes to doing politics, pro-gun movements place women as victims who need to be trained in the use of weapons to protect themselves.

In recent years, Republican political campaigns have focused on highlighting independence of women as self-protectors (Wineinger, 2022). Dana Loesch, a former NRA spokeswoman, actively campaigned on the argument that women with firearms were less at risk of being mugged or as-saulted (Loesch, 2016). According to a survey carried out by the organizations All in Together and Echelon Insights (2023), guns are the first concern regarding the decision to vote among women. However contrary to Loesch's earlier position, this same study shows that Republican women's views on gun control are markedly different from Republican men and more like Dem-

ocratic women (Loesch, 2016). Specifically, there is a large 20-point difference between Republican men (41 percent) and women (61 percent) on the issue of restricting the ability to purchase certain types of firearms. Therefore, All in Together and Echelon Insights (2023) study could confirm that concerns about gun violence are helping to bring common ground between liberal and conservative women because a significant number of Republican women agree with Democratic proposals of possible legislative solutions. This same survey shows key data on young women who especially fear that gun violence affects their lives. Therefore, these two periods are interesting for studying the new strategies for attracting young women through Instagram.

According to NRA (2023), one of the largest increases in gun ownership by women took place in the mid-1990s, from 12 to 20 million women with guns. But the domestic use of firearms in the United States has been consolidated as a culture rooted in traditions. American society based this culture on the Second Amendment ratified in 1791 along with nine other articles of the Bill of Rights. What was born as a need for personal defense, lives as an inherent part of a culture thanks to the key action of a lobby group, the National Rifle Association (NRA). For decades, this organization has focused on a very specific audience, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2017) the overall demographic profile of who owns guns was well established: white, male, politically conservative, middle class, middle-aged, and living in rural areas. However, in the last decades many social movements have influenced the currents of public opinion through the influence of social media. More specifically, the female audience, traditionally dragged by family values of protection by the father figure, has experienced in recent years a movement for independence and self-protection. Mencken and Froese established that American gun owners vary widely in the symbolic meaning they find in firearms; some associate gun ownership with moral and emotional empowerment and others do not (Mencken & Froese, 2019). In fact, the NRA is changing the strategy to disassociate gun owners from white power and militia movements (Dawson, 2019; Melzer, 2009). They recognize that if the Second Amendment is to survive, they need to expand their base of supporters and bring women into the fold (Schwartz, 2019).

NRA Women is presented as the division that gives a voice to female Second Amendment advocates across the country. The association always devoted more attention to its male public, but after realizing that 40% of the gun sales are for women, the NRA directed its marketing resources to reinforce this target. In fact, the National Firearms Survey, designed by Deborah Azrael of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Matthew Miller of Northeastern University, estimates 3.5 million women became new gun owners from January 2019

through April of 2021. This survey also found that new gun owners were more diverse than the general population: among new women gun owners, 28% were Black (Miller & Azrael, 2022).

On the other hand, in 2012, according to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of women agreed that owning a gun is more likely to protect someone from crime than to put their safety at risk. By 2014 that number was 51 percent. In addition, in 2017, also the Pew Research Center reported that male and female gun owners are about equally likely to cite protection as a reason why they own guns. But far larger shares of women than men who own guns say protection is the only reason they own a gun: About a quarter of women who own guns (27%) are in this category, compared with just 8% of men (Pew Research Center, 2017).

In this regard, the latter could be connected to why NRA's communication policy impacts its NRA Women's division from the perspective of protection against male-on-female violence, and why social media contents of the NRA Women's division are conceived from the perspective of protecting women. In any case, women and guns are well connected these days especially after 9/11 attacks (Mason, 2013) in an effort of gender washing by the NRA as part of the culture wars that takes place in contemporary public sphere in the digital space. Understanding how institutions such as the NRA adapts to ideological debates in culture wars, especially about gender, will shed light on how political lobbying and corporate communication are being shaped by gender issues nowadays and vice versa.

## 2. Literature review

The relationship between women and guns was studied relatively little until the last decade when feminist social movements gained special relevance in social networks. We began to find references in 1995, when researchers Tom and Robert J. Smith evaluated changes in gun ownership among women between 1980 and 1994. The authors studied reports from pro-gun groups and mass media about firearm ownership by women concluding that all of them exaggerated the rate with the intention of encouraging this female audience to buy guns (Smith & Smith, 1995). Also in that same year, the researchers M. Elizabeth Blair and Eva M. Hyatt, examined factors that influenced women's attitudes toward guns (Blair & Hyatt, 1995).

In 2000, two scholars, Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster, self-defined "gun women", launched a book relating feminism to the right of women as citizens to bear arms and the positive impact that gun ownership has on their lives. According to the authors, most of the feminist literature on firearms, positioned them as something destructive and they wanted with their work to open the debate towards

other points of view, recognizing the need for some control but without opposing the citizens' right under the second amendment (Stange & Oyster, 2000).

Laura Browder (2009) explained in her book several points of fascination that American women can experience with firearms. Browder made a complete review of the different representations of armed women and their roles. In addition, the author exposes how for two centuries, women who pick up guns have disrupted the popular association of guns and masculinity, establishing the question of arms as a right to obtain their capacity for full citizenship. On the other hand, Deborah Homsher (2015), focused on contemporary American women ideologies trying to explain the fascination that they have for firearms based on personal experiences and their responses to the national public debates.

In 2017, a study on the influence of pro-gun rights groups on women who support firearms control law, concluded that the persuasion strategies used by these groups do not have a great impact (Goss, 2017). Regarding gun control, in 2019 it was stated that women are more likely to support firearms regulation measures than men (Miller, 2019). In addition, in that same year, a study was developed, based on data from the Pew Research Center (2017) that conclude that "gun-owning women exhibit levels of political participation about gun policy and a greater willingness to engage in political discussions about gun control than non-owning women" (Middlewood *et al.*, 2019).

Already in 2020, researchers Wolfson, Azrael and Miller developed a study based on a 2015 survey answered by 3949 adults with interesting conclusions: "Male and female gun owners in the USA are demographically similar, cite similar reasons for owning guns and, despite males owning more guns, are equally likely to store at least one gun loaded and unlocked" (Wolfson *et al.*, 2020). In 2021, Noah S. Schwartz developed research analyzing three NRATV programs and the "narratives that frame participation in the gun culture as both enjoyable and empowering for women in order to overcome barriers posed by masculinist norms" (Schwartz, 2021).

### 2.1. Lobbying and social media

The associations created within civil society are key to maintaining citizen pressure on issues of interest. This concept defined and studied by Habermas places the focus of the action in cooperation between subjects: "civil society is made up of those associations, organizations and movements that emerged more or less spontaneously that collect the resonance of the spheres of private life, condense it and transmit it to the space of political public opinion" (Habermas *et al.*, 1981). Some of these associations have evolved into what we know today as a lobby. According to the Center for Effective Government (CEG) the origin of the term comes from the lobbying in England in the



eighteenth century by groups of people who crowded at the entrance of the British Parliament to make their demands on politicians (in Oliver González, 2018). Authors such as Francés (2013) define the concept of lobby as the defense of particular interests against the different powers established, carried out directly by companies or organizations affected, or through intermediaries. In this regard, the professionalization of lobbyist associations has been defined as an organized defense of interests against public authorities that can include the paid intervention of professionals, specialized or communication agencies, as well as lawyers and consultants (Hernández, 2019). Lobby and advocacy are directly related terms since the function of pressure groups is to make statements about public opinion. In fact, authors like Van Wessel and others maintain that “governments commonly recognize the advocacy role of civil society organizations in development on the basis of civil society having an independent part to play, advocating for the perspectives and interests of social groupings” (Van Wessel et al, 2019). Therefore, the NRA is within those lobbies paid by its associates with a large business structure to cover all the political and social pressures for their cause. In these organizations, the role of communication management is key, and it is necessary to adapt to the evolution of the channels.

The rise of social media as an expression for civil society has made an important difference in the interaction with users. In the first place, it seeks to define what social media are and their key role in the evolution of marketing focused on content creation. In fact, content marketing is focused on attracting and retaining customers through the constant creation of relevant and valuable content for people (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009). Digital revolution has transformed the relationship between supply and demand. Users now control the entire process of information. In addition, companies have adopted the Internet as a new means of communication, platforms that allow you to personalize your message and interact more individually with each user (Oviedo *et al.*, 2015). According to Barreto (2012), social network sites have three main functions: personal, social and infomercial. They have encouraged the creation of common interest groups, virtual communities that share a common project between people who are not close physically (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009).

However, the way to communicate the messages must be clearly established. There are companies that put their content on social media without considering the difference that exists between both communicative methods: advertising is the message that the brand wants to convey and content marketing is information that users demand to achieve their own goals (Kotler *et al.*, 2017).

Social media can be grouped by generalists, professionals or specialized (Celaya, 2008), but currently there are other criteria to catalog them: horizontal or without a defined theme, aimed at all types of

users, or vertical, where users gather around a specific theme, activity, or content (Martínez-Guerrero, 2018). The classic horizontal social networks are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or WhatsApp. On the contrary, LinkedIn, Spotify or Tinder are perfect examples of vertical networks. Although we can find specialized influential profiles on all social networks, the most famous influencers usually move on horizontal social networks, especially Instagram.

Social media celebrities refer to individuals who became famous via their social media presence, as opposed to traditional celebrities who are famous from film, music, and TV shows (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). In addition, influencers are defined as “people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Instagram has positioned itself as the social network with the most presence of influential profiles in the fashion, lifestyle, travel, and beauty sectors. These influencers can be considered micro-celebrities because they have relatively high recognizability, and they use it for social influence and monetization. Social media influencers enjoy this unique identity of both being famous and ordinary person (Jin *et al.*, 2019).

Delving deeper into the case of firearms and their culture perpetuated over the years, we also found a strong social media presence from the NRA, gun manufacturing companies, and influential figures using their digital media leadership to promote the domestic use of guns. That type of content that they post on social media can be understood from the mentioned perspective of Mencken and Froese (2019) about the relationship of gun ownership with moral and emotional empowerment which establishes the need to connect directly with emotions. According to Guo and Saxton, new organizational practices and forms of communication emerged thanks to the use of social media to engage in advocacy work (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Seelig and colleagues also conducted their study about the new culture of advocacy through digital media and they state that “in this participatory, co-operative media culture, people were actively engaged and shared digital content that inspired others to care about important issues” (Seelig *et al.*, 2018).

### 3. Methodology

The study has been divided into three phases: a review of the literature, an exploratory part to obtain all data from Instagram public content and a more reflective part to address the topic in a critical perspective to obtain conclusive results on the recruitment trends of women to gun culture. We have used both quantitative and qualitative methods. This mixed approach is typical in modern social research as addressed by authors like Hernández Sampieri (2018) or Ramirez and Lugo (2020) with their systematic review about mixed methods used in educational research and so-

cial sciences during the 2010-2020 decade (Ramirez & Lugo, 2020).

We decided to set Instagram as the object of study for a quantitative and qualitative analysis of NRA main account on this platform: NRA Women (@NRAWomen) that counts on 46,600 followers. Currently this female division also has accounts on Facebook, X (previously Twitter) and YouTube, which have been discarded from this study for different reasons: In the case of Facebook, NRA Women has a community of almost 100,000 followers and they have an active posting level, but their main activity is not based on the mention of other profiles and gun brands to analyze the use of influencer marketing. Regarding X, they have almost 30,000 followers but they base their actions on retweeting content from other accounts, mostly the main NRA account (@NRA) and do not prioritize their own content creation directly to the account's target. This is just the opposite of the case of Youtube, where they have 2,560 subscribers, but have produced audiovisual content such as fictional series: Love at First Shot and Armed & Fabulous, both with many seasons. However, in the last three years that channel has remained without new content, only functioning as a repository.

The content selected from Instagram accounts are only from the NRA Women profile, which is public and open, including all graphic material. No image has been analyzed from any personal account, all have been published by @NRAWomen that are accessible to all people, even if they are not registered on this social network. Therefore, it has not been necessary to obtain permission from public subjects because they are taken from a public platform and correctly cited and treated pre-serving private data.

The quantitative analysis will be carried out from the Instagram platform studying how NRA uses influence marketing and how they relate it to promoting brands. For this purpose, its activity of the last quarter of 2022 and the first of 2023 has been analyzed acquiring data such as: number of publications, medium reach per-post, number of interactions per publication, engagement rate of each publication, number of mentioned profiles, differentiating between personal or corporate accounts, average number of followers of those mentioned accounts and probability of exponential reach.

We have considered as publication, the discourse where we post the photographs, videos, or designs to share them with our community permanently unless it is deleted by our own decision or in violation of the rules from the platform. Interactions on Instagram are the actions that the user does with your content, such as commenting, liking, sharing the post, saving it, going to your profile, or clicking your link. The reach is the people who view that content, and the en-

agement rate is the equation that comes out between the number of people who see the content and those who interact with it.

Two periods of similar duration have been chosen in two different but consecutive years to see the evolution of the digital strategy and the results obtained in quantitative terms, the last quarter of 2022 and the first quarter of 2023. These two periods of equal duration -4 months- were framed in the American Midterm elections of November 8, 2022, taking as a reference the pre-campaign, campaign, results, and post-campaign. For this stage, we have used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to facilitate the assessment.

To give more context and reflective insight to the research, we added a qualitative analysis about the discourses that have generated more interactions on the 5 images with the greatest impact on interactions from the @NRAWomen account. We decided to use Halliday's model from 2004 to identify in photographic and/or audiovisual content the different modal structures that encode the basic illocutionary forces: Declarative, Imperative and Interrogative/Reflexive. This allows us to make content classifications based on whether they address the audience in an aseptic, imperative, interrogative, or reflective way (Halliday, 2004). In addition, we also include the multimodalities of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) that seek relationships in audiovisual elements, producers, receivers, and subjects represented. The authors point out different elements that can interact with receptors, such as the image, distance, and different angles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Finally, we analyze the message and the elements of each post to identify the persuasion principles described by Cialdini and Goldstein (2002) and Witkowski (2023) and their use in re-recruiting women through advertising techniques. According to the authors, we can classify persuasion techniques within 6 basic principles: authority, reciprocity, scarcity, liking, commitment and consistency, and social approval or consensus.

#### 4. Results

Regarding the quantitative part, the first is to know the number of publications that have been made in one period and in another. In the last quarter of 2022, we found 35 publications compared to 17 in the first quarter of 2023. However, in the last quarter of 2022, 37 accounts were mentioned in the publications, which makes an average of 1.05 per publication compared to the 24 accounts mentioned in the 17 Q1 2023 posts, an average of 1.4 per post.

Table 1. Sample of data extracted from the @NRAWomen account in the selected periods, the last quarter of 2022 and the first of 2023.

	Q4 2022	Q1 2023
Publications	35	17
Accounts mentioned	37	24
Brands mentioned	26	20
Personal accounts mentioned (influencers)	11	4
Generated interactions	8792	8529

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Of the accounts mentioned, in the last quarter of 2022, 26 are brands of weapons or accessories to carry them and 11 would correspond to influencers. A similar proportion in the first quarter of 2023, with 20 brand accounts and 4 influencers. If we talk about interactions generated, in the last quarter of 2022 the publications had 8,529 likes and 263 comments, making a total of 8,792 reactions. Regarding the first quarter of 2023, we found 8,267 likes and 316 comments, a total of 8,583 interactions. However, to make a fair comparison, we must take the average number of interactions per publication in both periods, where in the last quarter of 2022 we found 251 per publication while in the first quarter of 2023 we found an average of 504, more than double.

Regarding the topics addressed, we found in both periods analyzed most publications based on adver-

tising new models of weapons or accessories for concealed carry. In the last quarter of 2022, the new models of firearms were mentioned in 12 publications and accessories for concealed carry in 10. In the first quarter of 2023 we found 8 and 6 publications on each of those topics respectively. Other topics that we have been able to classify but with much less representation are hunting or shooting sports. Another fact that stands out is that in the last quarter of 2022 self-defense is mentioned in 11 publications, while in the first quarter of 2023 no mention is made of said topic.

For the qualitative analysis we have selected the 5 images with the greatest impact on interactions from the @NRAWomen account to analyze the different variables and compare the content of the image, the message, and the followers' comments.

Table 2. Sample of the 5 posts with the most interactions from the @NRAWomen account.

	Description of the post	Interactions
1	NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, January 13) @sigsauerusa's new brand for women is more than a gun (although it is that, too). [Picture]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CnXDdh2O3Ip/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CnXDdh2O3Ip/</a>	3366
2	NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, March 30). New for 2023: If you have difficulty operating a semi-automatic pistol, EAA's .380-cal. Girsan MC 14 T's Tip-Up design eliminates the need to rack the slide altogether. @eaacorp #concealedcarry. [Picture]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqa_PnKObKu/">https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqa_PnKObKu/</a>	1200
3	NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2022, Dec 15). Unlike many micro-compact .380 pistols, the new #Ruger Security-380 Lite Rack will accommodate a full capacity, 10-round flush-fit magazine [Picture]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CmNTJfcblI/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CmNTJfcblI/</a>	1129
4	NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2022, Dec 12). If you plan to carry concealed, participating in practical shooting competitions will teach you much more about shooting and gun safety than just standing in an indoor shooting lane. #concealedcarry #CCW [Video]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CmEy3QmAUP6/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CmEy3QmAUP6/</a>	794
5	NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, Jan 10). @mossbergcorp offers a variety of managed-recoil options for small-frame home defenders—and those who just don't want to get beat up by their shotguns. [Picture]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CnPXWQDuSWc/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CnPXWQDuSWc/</a>	381

Based on Haliday's model, we can sustain that the 5 publications are declarative, because they are reduced to presenting the pistol models with a clearly advertising function but without using the imperative. Only in the second and fourth post we can see a lit-

tle more reflective intention, on the one hand, through recommendations to select a specific advertised model for women regarding the difficulties that they can experience and on the other hand, they recommend preparatory courses, but without using the imperative

as a demand for an action. Analyzing the publications in depth according to the variables studied by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) we observe that the entire selection has several in common. Of the 5 published images, the first 3 have a very considerable difference with the other 2, for example, the first photo has 10

times more interactions than the last. What do those 3 images have in common? The design and production of the images are identical - the presentation of a gun on a white background, in close-up to observe all the details.

Image 1. Comparison of the first three images ordered from largest to smallest by interaction.



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnXDdh2O3Ip/>  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqa\\_PnKObKu/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqa_PnKObKu/)  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CmNTJfcplLI/>

Evaluating the 3 images, a close-up photograph is observed that, according to the author, conveys closeness and complicity with the viewer. The meaning could even be interpreted as accessibility to the product, more specifically, an invitation to use the gun. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the horizontal angle determines emotional involvement but if a frontal angle is used, direct contact is intended with the public, while if you opt for a profile angle, you establish oblique contact. Therefore, in this case, this emotional involvement of the subjects is established but the angle is presented in profile because if it were frontal, the emotional appeal could be interpreted as an attack. The authors also talk about the position of the object in the image, high angle expresses control relationship and subjugation; the normal angle,

at eye level, indicates relationship of closeness and equality; and the low angle, manifests a relationship of dependency and submission. In this case, the three are placed at eye level, although the last one would be at a slightly low angle, potentially appealing to the viewer's dependence on the pistol.

Regarding the fourth publication, the shots of the video are mostly lateral, or the camera is placed behind the female shooter's back. Furthermore, the shots in this case are not so close, the social distance is a little greater, although not much, so the close relationship would be maintained although with more intimacy. It is really an appealing resource for women to join these concealed carry training courses, it is about transmitting accessibility and a direct team message: any woman can join.

<sup>4</sup> NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, January 13) @sigsauerusa's new brand for women is more than a gun (although it is that, too).  
<sup>5</sup> NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, March 30). New for 2023: If you have difficulty operating a semi-automatic pistol, EAA's .380-cal. Girsan MC 14 T's Tip-Up design eliminates the need to rack the slide altogether. @eaacorp #concealedcarry.  
<sup>6</sup> NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2022, Dec 15). Unlike many micro-compact .380 pistols, the new #Ruger Security-380 Lite Rack will accommodate a full capacity, 10-round flush-fit magazine.

Image 2. Two sequences of shots from the fourth publication analyzed by interaction.

(1)<sup>7</sup>(2)<sup>8</sup>Source: NRA Women [@NRAWomen]: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmEy3QmAUP6/> 9

Finally, in the fifth post a woman is also included, with a semi lateral angle, once again avoiding a frontal perspective that could be interpreted as an attack. As in the first three images analyzed, the shot is very close, alluding to intimacy and closeness with the audience. In that close and detailed shot, the firearm model with all the specifications is perfectly observed.



nrawomen @mossbergcorp offers a variety of managed-recoil options for small-frame home defenders—and those who just don't want to get beat up by their shotguns. Read full story in link in bio! #mossberg #homedefense

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnPXWQDuSwc/><sup>10</sup>

We also find patriotic elements such as the American flag on the cap, representing a very specific role of a woman, white, blonde, young, and patriotic. As in the rest of the compilation, the image is at eye level to express closeness, sympathy to appeal aspirationality.

Of the 5 publications analyzed for being the ones that have had the most interaction and therefore can

be considered the most successful we can easily identify the six principles of persuasion (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2002) taken as a reference to theoretically analyze the audience acquisition on this Instagram account. If we start with reciprocity, we must mention the channel used, which is Instagram, so all social networks imply a bidirectional relationship with interaction. However, that same reciprocity is sensed through the images, the elements and the discourse used, which constantly encourages participation, especially those that include appeal to testing models or taking courses, they want a reciprocal relationship based on the creation of a comfort zone where the audience gets involved.

However, scarcity understood as exclusivity also plays a key role in these five publications. In this account based on branded content, they present certain brands with exclusive models for women that especially take care of that audience and differentiate themselves from the rest of the manufacturers. And with the use of influential profiles presented as a claim, they are differentiated personalities to create that aspirational feeling. That close relationship is worked with the elements used, but it is always based on membership in an exclusive club.

Another of the principles clearly stated is authority. According to authors, people put more trust in expert and reputable figures. In this case, this account is based on the mention of other profiles specialized in this field. Four of the referenced accounts include mentions of specific brands of firearms and two of them also mention two influential women in the sector, specifically athletes and shooting champions.

<sup>7</sup> Lateral plane captured at 6<sup>h</sup>30<sup>m</sup> of the video.

<sup>8</sup> Dorsal plane captured at second 18<sup>h</sup>30<sup>m</sup> of the video.

<sup>9</sup> NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2022, Dec 12). If you plan to carry concealed, participating in practical shooting competitions will teach you much more about shooting and gun safety than just standing in an indoor shooting lane. #concealedcarry #CCW [Video]. Instagram.

<sup>10</sup> NRA Women [@NRAWomen]. (2023, Jan 10). @mossbergcorp offers a variety of managed-recoil options for small-frame home defenders—and those who just don't want to get beat up by their shotguns.

So, we can establish that it is an account based on specialization whose content is based on premises perceived reliably by the audience. This perception of authority links directly to the principle of liking because this content is created for female fans within gun culture and these 5 publications are based on the use of marketing on stereotypical tastes. The clearest example is the first publication that has a very notable difference in interaction and likes with respect to the previous ones. This model is sold exclusively for women and includes pink, gold and flowery elements specially designed to appeal to the female audience and stereotypical classic tastes. That previously analyzed presentation of the elements showing detailed photographic shots responds to content created for people very interested in that product.

We can also relate the last two principles because they are commitment and social approval. Firearms represent a danger and have been causing a lot of controversy among public opinion. Many people have expressed their aversion to weapons and reject domestic use. However, the communication strategies of these advocacy groups like the NRA have consisted of turning that concept upside down, positioning themselves as an organization that fights for the rights of American society and ensures security. In these five publications it is true that we do not find a victimizing use of women as objects of protection, but we do observe a commitment to the female sector of equality and empowerment regarding the recreational use of guns. The best example of this commitment in the sample analyzed is the video that encourages women to take the concealed carry course to guarantee correct and safe use of weapons.

Based on the comments received in these publications to assess the quality of the interaction, we can establish great involvement from participants. Many successful social media posts have very brief comments, with only icons that simply represent approval of the content, however, on the NRA Women account, we find several examples of women involved with that content and who value the objects presented, especially the first three posts with new pistol models. In fact, in the second publication mentioned in Table 2 that shows a model that is easier to use for women we can find comments like these examples: "That is great especially for us without the strength to rack the slide" or "this is perfect it's gonna [sic] reduce the stress of racking". Which demonstrates knowledge of the topic and the involvement of the audience.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

We can observe how the same digital marketing strategies work with the NRA Women account as in other sectors and the use of influential accounts with good numbers to improve notoriety. There are three types of media in the digital environment: owned, paid, and earned. The first correspond to the tools used for the

diffusion owned by the brand or company (website, social media accounts or publications), the second are those that we pay to appear in advertising on different platforms and the last are those that we get thanks to the mentions of the other agents. Here we find examples of all three types: first, the NRA's own account as the main broadcaster, second, paid media are the commercial agreements between brands and the NRA to appear on the account, since this association is a means of authority for its members, and finally, when the NRA takes out an influential brand or account in its publications it gets extra mentions from that brand, which corresponds to earned media. In fact, the promoted accounts have a large number of followers and by reposting the content, the NRA gains diffusion and interaction thanks to this, which benefits it on two sides, on the one hand it is a paid media for the brand announced and gives economic benefit to the NRA and on the other hand it serves as earned media when the brand shares that it has appeared on the official account of the NRA, thus making this strategy a win-win both ways: money and diffusion.

Focusing on the quantitative data, several trends can be established. The publications have been reduced but their effectiveness has increased mentioning more accounts to increase dissemination with less activity. In fact, in the first quarter of 2023 the publications have had more than double the interactions on average than in the third of 2022. The promotion of models of firearms and their accessories have been the most used themes for Instagram by the NRA in both periods. There is a content trend among the most successful publications - the exposure of new models mentioning brands. These models are designed for the female public with some differentiating stereotypical elements, nothing too out of the ordinary for a gun, but just enough to set it apart and make women feel it for themselves.

However, posts about hunting or shooting sports have continued but posts about self-defense have completely disappeared in the first quarter of 2023. If we analyze the content more carefully of the 5 publications with the highest interaction, we found little remains of the strategy of using personal defense and fear as a claim for women. For example, three posts from February 4, April 29, and September, 26 of 2022 respectively mention the NRA magazine *Armed Citizen* and give examples of women defending themselves against attacks by men (including their own husbands) by using their firearm for protection. Another post from November 14, 2022, mentions a simulation of a dangerous situation in a parking lot at dawn and asks if we would be able to defend ourselves. However, when looking for their most visible publications, we did not find any of these appealing to fear. This could connect us directly with what Laura Browder exposed in her book where she relates that many American women are also fascinated by weapons, by the models and usability of each

one, the interest of women should not necessarily be related to the need for defense, but rather to empowerment and the desire for knowledge about firearms. This same theory also coincides with the results of the survey developed by Wolfson and Azrael (2020) in their study that reveals similar interests between women and men when it comes to wanting to have weapons. We can make direct connections to those previous studies whose conclusions equalize men and women in their decision to carry firearms. This brings us to the question of whether it is effective to continue to disassociate content between men and women on NRA social media.

In addition, considering the detailed analysis of the communicative elements of the publications according to the variables presented by authors such as Haliday (2004) or Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) we can observe several common approaches that confirm the Instagram account's tendency towards branded content. The declarative nature of the messages, angles and resources are used to create closeness, trust, and accessibility. They spread very specialized content for gun culture fans and the most successful publications exhaustively detail the gun models and

receive comments from women who value those details, so they are fans.

If we study again the 2023 Annual Report of We Are Social, we observe that the formats with the greatest engagement on Instagram are photo carousels followed by reels, short videos with ambient sound or added music that combine micro videos or photographs to give dynamism. However, @NRAWomen does not have any carousel of several photographs in its collection, although they have a video post but only one published in 2022 and the previous one was from March 2020. This shows very little optimization of the usability that Instagram offers its users. But if we compare it with the official account of the association (@NRA) the situation is absolutely the opposite. In this main account, every day they put volatile content in stories and combine video and photo posts. This notable difference in dedication and resources between its general account and the women's division may be due to visibility and impact. While @NRA has 2.3 million followers, @NRAWomen has only 46,600 which marks a significant differentiation. That can be understood as a lack of dedication and importance with female audience.

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# **Publication 4**

**8.4. “Gender washing and digital marketing in United States: How influential female profiles define the concept of women agency and instrumentalize empowerment to encourage gun culture”**

# **Gender washing and digital marketing in United States: How influential female profiles define the concept of women agency and instrumentalize empowerment to encourage gun culture**

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## **Abstract**

The global success of digital platforms has motivated the emergence of new advertising channels based on influence marketing. Content creators or 'influencers' are people who have many followers and a great reach on their social networks. For this reason, many brands choose these figures to enhance their advertising actions. This trend arose mainly in the fashion industry, but these strategies quickly move to all sectors: tourism, decoration, cooking, video games and even science or history. These accounts directly influence the representations of different social roles and sometimes contribute to changing perceptions and breaking stereotypes. That is the case of gun culture in the United States, an industry with a masculine tradition. Therefore, the following article analyzes a series of influential women in the firearms sector to study their profiles, figures and performance indicators (KPIs), and also their own autobiographical representation in these digital environments to offer a qualitative and quantitative analysis that assess the use of these profiles as a advertising object by brands and advocacy channels by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Instagram has been taken as a reference because it is the most representative at this time in influence marketing and one of the main channels that the NRA uses to promote these influential women. The main results demonstrate that the 5 profiles analyzed follow common patterns: white women, young, normatively attractive, upper middle class, residents of conservative states, with family values and specialized in shooting sports. As a conclusion, we can establish that this concept of women agency is built based on a biased representation of the female population, which is presented as an aspirational value and could be defined as an instrumentalized and interested feminism that can be understood as gender wash.

## **Keywords**

Gun culture; NRA Women; Women Agency; Gender Washing, Social Media.

## Resumen

El éxito global de las plataformas digitales ha motivado la aparición de nuevos canales publicitarios basados en el marketing de influencia. Los creadores de contenido o ‘*influencers*’ son personas que tienen un buen número de seguidores y un alcance potente en sus redes sociales. Por esta razón, muchas marcas eligen estas figuras para impulsar sus acciones publicitarias. Esta tendencia surgió principalmente en el sector de la moda., pero rápidamente estas estrategias también se han aplicado en todos los sectores: turismo, decoración, cocina, videojuegos y hasta en Ciencia o Historia. Estas cuentas influyen directamente en las representaciones de los distintos roles sociales y contribuyen al cambio en las percepciones y estereotipos. Ese es el caso de la cultura de armas en Estados Unidos, una industria de tradición mayoritariamente masculina. Por ello, este artículo analiza una serie de mujeres influyentes en el sector de armas de fuego para estudiar sus perfiles, cifras e indicadores de rendimiento (KPIs por sus siglas en inglés), así como su representación autobiográfica en estas plataformas digitales para ofrecer un análisis cualitativo y cuantitativo que evalúe el uso de estos perfiles como objetivo publicitario por marcas, y como canales de promoción por la Asociación Nacional del Rifle (NRA, por sus siglas en inglés). Instagram se toma como red social de referencia porque hasta la fecha es la plataforma más representativa en marketing de influencia y uno de los principales canales que usa la NRA para promocionar esas mujeres influyentes. Los principales resultados muestran que estos 5 perfiles siguen patrones comunes: mujeres blancas, jóvenes, normativamente atractivas, clase media alta, residentes en estados conservadores, y profesionales de deportes de tiro. Como conclusión, podemos establecer que este concepto de agencia se construye a partir de una representación sesgada de la población femenina ya que estos perfiles se utilizan como un valor aspiracional y podría definirse como un feminismo instrumentalizado e interesado que puede entenderse bajo el concepto de *gender wash*.

**Palabras clave:** Cultura de armas, NRA Women; *Women Agency*; *Gender Washing*, Redes Sociales.

## 1. Introduction

The new trends in communication and promotion go through the digital sphere and influence marketing. The ultra-segmentation of audiences has led to a specialization of content categorized into different business sectors. Analyses focusing on demographic and geographic variables restrict insights into the types of people (education status, gender, income levels) and the places lived; all of which are directly observable (Kintunen et al, 2019). On the other hand, business markets are changing rapidly due to new technology and a more complex business environment (Brostpies & Weinstein, 2019). This scenario has been the key facilitator in the emergence of influencers or creators as great advertising channels. It began heading strongly into the world of fashion, retail and lifestyle but it quickly spread to all business sectors, including the firearms sector. All this content emerged naturally on social networks like Instagram without any type of control or the obligation to mark the advertising actions. But obviously, there is more delicate content that can appeal to health or, as in the case of guns, there is an inseparable background that is violence. To protect users, large social media platforms such as Instagram have been implementing control mechanisms. Regarding violence, the company has several measures within the regulatory proceed and artificial intelligence tools to detect incitement to violent acts or display of sensitive explicit content. But specifically in the case of firearms Instagram “does not allow advertisements that promote the sale or use of guns, ammunition, or explosives. This includes weapon modification accessories”. However, this social platform allows publications where guns appear if private sales or exchange between users are not promoted. So, this is the perfect breeding ground to apply influence marketing in this sector.

According to *Influencer Marketing Hub* (2022), there is a consistent trend across age brackets of women choosing to follow influencers more than their male counterparts. Which explains the emergence of these figures that respond to patterns such as young women with a representative number of female followers on social networks and who are the perfect representation of the buyer persona.

What we seek in this article is to analyze these influential profiles to look for patterns of representation of the female sector in the firearms sector. For this study, 5 influential profiles have been selected that appear recurrently in the profiles of the National Rifle Association in its women's division, NRA Women, in addition to collaborating with many

firearms brands. For each profile, a descriptive analysis will be carried out to establish common patterns of behavior between these influential figures and the representation of armed women in society in addition to a quantitative count to expose the figures, dimensions, scope and audiences. To do this we will use the theory of ethical testimony developed by Oliver (2001; 2004) who proposes the need to consider the communicative act as a relational process capable of accounting for the link ethical relationship between the subject who issues the testimony, the witness of said testimony and the testimony or narrative itself. We will reflect about the possibilities of political agency present in the representation of those influential profiles that allow the articulation of representative patterns in which we must analyze the responsibility of users in the construction of these identities.

## **2. Theoretical background**

The concept of agency applied to the action of women to build their points of influence in political, civic and social actions began to be coined at the end of the 80s. Authors such as Carroll describe this concept as “nonviolent direct actions understood very broadly to denote all forms of active nonviolent struggle for rights or for justice through means which involve assertiveness, open confrontation of oppression or exploitation, and risk to those undertaking the action” (Carroll, 1989). Also, this author highlights that efforts can be individual but are necessarily focused on collective actions to improve the social positioning of women. A little later, in the 90s, the author Eduards narrowed the concept further by adding a more explicit notion of agency, as a transformative and transcending capacity, into feminist political theory and practice (Eduards, 1994). More recently, in 2016, we also find references to the concept of women agency by authors such as Goetz and Jenkins who review international policy and practices to engage women in formal peace talks, post-conflict elections, and economic recovery, and finds a combination of factors contributing to poor performance in promoting women's agency. In addition, they also analyze the systematic exclusion of women's groups from the categories considered most important to involve in decision-making (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016).

To study the concept of agency and the role of social media, we must establish the theoretical bases to talk about influence marketing, discipline that combines classic sales and promotion techniques with an adaptation to the digital sphere and ultra-segmentation of audiences. Segmentation comprises of three main parts: first, finding homogenous segments within a bigger heterogeneous group, second, assessing and choosing one or

several segment(s), and finally developing a program, service or communication strategy matched to the target segment(s) unique needs, wants and characteristics (Donovan et al. 1999). This division of audiences is allowed because the feedback received from digital tools is very precise to know exactly who is susceptible to each advertising action. The emergence of the Internet in the second half of the 20th century produced notorious changes in lifestyle, creating a new form of communication that allowed users to communicate instantly breaking the space-time barrier. Digital revolution has transformed the relationship between supply and demand. Users now control the entire process information about the brands since they are increasingly demanding and are better trained. In addition, companies have adopted the Internet as a new means of communication, platforms that allow you to personalize your message and interact more individually with each user (Oviedo et al., 2015). According to Barreto (2012), social network sites have three main functions: personal, social and infomercial. Social networks have given way to the creation of common interest groups that no longer need to share a common physical space. What are known as virtual communities that share a common project between people who are not close physically (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). However, for such corporate-created content to capture people's attention, the way to communicate the messages must be clearly established. There are companies that put their content on social media without adapting it, considering it a reduced version of a traditional advertisement. They don't consider the difference that exists between both communicative methods: advertising is the message that the brand wants to convey and content marketing is information that users demand to achieve their own goals (Kotler et al., 2017).

The great diversity of formats that come under the umbrella of social media makes it necessary to classify them. Among the different types of social networks with the greatest growth today, we find Microblogging, which consists of short blogs where the information is brief (Twitter), VideoSharing, users can upload and comment on videos (YouTube or TikTok) and PhotoSharing, where users can upload and comment on photos (Instagram), among others (Oviedo et al., 2015).

Social media can be classified in different ways. Traditionally they have been grouped based on if they were generalists, professionals or specialized (Celaya, 2008). But currently there are other criteria to catalog them: horizontal or without a defined theme, aimed at all types of users, or verticals, where users gather around a specific theme,

activity or content (Martínez-Guerrero, 2018). The classic horizontal social networks are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or WhatsApp. On the contrary, LinkedIn, Spotify or Tinder are perfect examples of vertical networks. Although we can find specialized influential profiles on all social networks, the most famous influencers usually move on horizontal social networks, especially Instagram.

Influencers or social media celebrities refer to individuals who became famous via their social media presence, as opposed to traditional celebrities who are famous from film, music, and TV shows (Khamis et al., 2017). In addition, Influencers are defined as “people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” (De Veirman et al., 2017). According to the reports of the last 5 years by Hootsuite and We are Social, Instagram has positioned itself as the social network with the most presence of influential profiles in the fashion, lifestyle, travel and beauty sectors. An Instagram influencer is considered a popular Instagram account with a high number of followers, who has a high taste in fashion and lifestyle, which enables them to monetize their appearance. These influencers can be considered micro-celebrities because they have relatively high recognizability, and they use it for social influence and monetization. Social media influencers enjoy this unique identity of both being famous and ordinary person (Jin et al., 2019). A high number of followers could thus be advantageous to the exertion of opinion leadership as ideas are spread more widely and rapidly and consequently, interpersonal influence is enhanced (Cha et al., 2010) and opinion leaders have the intention to build large groups of followers (Hwang, 2021).

This rise of social media has also favored a surge in the defense of social causes such as feminism. Authors such as Crossley prove in their studies how the feminist movement takes a new direction thanks to social media and the massive pressure that these platforms allow to confront problems of systematic violence suffered by women (Crossley, 2015). In addition, McLean and Maalsen also mentioned the revitalization of interest in feminist through digital platforms (McLean & Maalsen, 2013). But this boom has also caused a kind of trend in which many organizations, companies or even famous people have wanted to enter to gain reputation. In many cases, we find agents who become interested in these social movements for their own interests, which is known as gender wash, term developed by authors such as Gerard who talks about the construction of empowerment through the economic independence of women, creating a false sense of self-sufficiency (Gerard, 2019). And Walters, who presents seven varieties of gender wash: “selective



disclosure, empty gender claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, ineffective public voluntary programs, misleading narrative and discourse, and misleading branding” (Walters, 2022).

### **3. Literature Review**

In 1991 researchers Dobray and Waldrop studied the drastic change towards aggressive marketing of guns to certain demographic groups such as women (Dobray & Waldrop, 1991). Also, in 1994 Glick and Lavrakas investigated how the gun market was beginning to actively target the female audience and what relationship was developing between women and guns. They conclude that the possession of a firearm creates the feeling of security and personal empowerment, this is an element of masculine mythology in American culture. “Recent efforts to present this myth to women constitute a real problem that makes matters worse, not better” (Glick and Lavrakas, 1994).

Authors like Blair and Hyatt examined factors that influenced women's attitudes toward guns. They investigated the promotion of guns and gun-related products to women within the framework about problems that American women must solve, like their own safety (Blair & Hyatt, 1995). In 1997, Burke and colleagues studied the language and code of sales and promotion of weapons, with a part dedicated to advertising actions aimed at women (Burke et al., 1997).

In 2017 Koeppel and Nobles published a study titled understanding gun ownership reviewing the evolution of the role of women with firearms in the period from 1973 to 2010 using a representative General Social Survey data to compare rates for male and female gun ownership. They conclude that there was a link between fear of crime and female gun ownership but also they found that hobbies and lifestyle factors are key to encourage women’s interests in firearms (Koeppel & Nobles, 2017).

Already in 2020, researchers Wolfson and Azrael developed a study based on a 2015 survey answered by 3949 adults with interesting conclusions: “Male and female gun owners in the USA are demographically similar, cite similar reasons for owning guns and, despite males owning more guns, are equally likely to store at least one gun loaded and unlocked” (Wolfson et al., 2020). In 2021, Noah S. Schwartz developed research analyzing three NRATV programs and the “narratives that frame participation in the gun culture as both enjoyable and empowering for women in order to overcome barriers posed by masculinist norms” (Schwartz, 2021).

#### 4. Methodology

For this study, three work phases have been established. First, we did a bibliographic and documentary review of concepts to define the term women agency and its growth through social media and we evaluated the literature based on the relationship between women, marketing and firearms. Then we carefully compared the autobiographical content and the representation of the 5 most influential Instagram profiles in the firearms environment used by the NRA as a reference for female empowerment in its women's division. Instagram is selected as the reference social network because it is the flagship platform for influence marketing according to the analytics of Personality Media and We Are Social (2023), which prepare periodic reports on the use of social media. In addition, both reports, in their latest edition of 2022, highlight the preference for using Instagram to carry out the advertising actions through influencers. The selection was made from the profiles of influencer girls that the NRA mentions the most on its own Instagram account, @NRAWomen. And finally, we've monitored the figures of each profile to be able to compare them with each other and evaluate the following and scope of each account. We've used both quantitative and qualitative methods. This mixed approach is typical in nowadays social research addressed by authors like Hernández Sampieri (2018).

#### 5. Results

For this study of biographies, we have reviewed the information that the girls give in their profiles about themselves in their Instagram and in their publications posted at the beginning of the profile as a presentation of the account and its content.

1. **Charissa Littlejohn.** She was born in California in 1988. Model nicknamed "Miss Gat" who has become popular among firearms enthusiasts for her gun-laden modeling photo shoots, which she shares with her more than 350,000 followers on Instagram. She is an Air Force veteran who served as a protocol specialist and EMT medic while stationed in Tokyo, Japan. She defines herself as a feminist and although her profile focuses a lot on her motherhood, she likes to highlight in her publications all her other facets and her profession as a military doctor. She alternates photos of her motherhood with photos in which she appears posing with firearms with mentions and tags of the companies she is promoting.
2. **Lena Miculek.** From Texas, she is one of the most influential women in the firearms sector and her career as professional shooter include eight world titles. Also, she works with big brands and is the image of a women's weapons section

of the Sig Sauer brand, the Rose program, which includes customized pistols with feminized elements. In her autobiographical Instagram post she explain that she was literally born in 1995 into the firearms industry; her parents are world-champion professional shooters and especially, her feminine reference in arms was her own mother, who founded one of the original programs to teach women shooting sports. She admits that use her independence and masculinity as a shield, because femininity makes her feel helpless and vulnerable.

3. **Melissa Bachman.** From Minnesota, she is a professional hunter and host of a television show Winchester Deadly Passion in Sportsman Channel, dedicated to preserving America's hallowed outdoor traditions, its lands, and its waters. The program is now in its tenth season and even has its own line of clothing and accessories. She also describes herself as a mother of a large family and shares little stories about her personal and family life to give that value of family so traditionally American. Most of her content in social media is promoted through hunting accessory brands.
4. **Julia Stallings.** She is a Tennessee native and graduated from Lindenwood University. Also, she joins a growing roster of outstanding Remington ambassadors and influencers across various social media platforms, including Instagram. Stallings is a former USA Shooting athlete, representing the United States in women's trap competition. In one of her presentation videos posted on her profile, she defines her femininity linked to firearms, admitting that her best Valentine's gift is not perfume but guns, and appears shooting her high-heeled shoes.
5. **Becky Yackley.** She also grew up around guns. Her father was a gunsmith for Krieger Barrels for 30 years. Becky started participating in shooting competitions in 1989. She holds the Ladies Metallic Division national record on all 4 Bianchi pistol events. Becky is the 2020 IPSC Rifle World Shoot Ladies' Open winner. She has represented the US on the world stage in rifle and shotgun. Also, a mother of 3 children and from a military family, as she indicates in her biography on her Instagram profile. She actively participates with the NRA, is the most mentioned influential profile on the @NRAWomen account and defines herself as a defender of the second amendment.

All the girls have in common that they have settled in pro-gun states such as Texas or Tennessee and they live in rural areas. The representation of their profile of armed women involves professionalization, they are shooting champions or hunters and the majority have been raised in a pro-gun environment, which implies a normalized view of the possession and handling of firearms. Firearms are another part of their life that is completely integrated with normality and that is what they transmit to their audience through narrating their daily lives in that routine.

They are women who present themselves in their profiles as empowered and independent, all of them normatively physically attractive, white and Caucasian. Which represents an aspirational point for their audience and makes them an effective advertising medium. Curiously, its audience, although mostly female, also includes men and of course, weapons manufacturing companies. Although, looking at the comments, their audience is very adept at the firearms business and knowledgeable about the product because they ask questions about the technical specifications of the models they show.

Regarding the figures, we have added monitoring that includes number of followers, publications, average of likes and comments and engagement rate, a measure of how much of the audience actively engages with the content through the amount of interaction of a piece of content (or a campaign, or a whole account) gets compared to reach or followers or audience size (Hootsuite, 2023).

*Table 1. Analysis of the Instagram profiles of the influencers selected for the sample. Source: Authors own elaboration*

Name	Profile	Followers	Publications	Average Likes	Average Comments	Engagement rate	Growth (last 4 weeks)
<b>Charissa Littlejohn</b>	charissa_littlejohn	350K	5157	3000	32	0,85%	- 1057 followers (-0,03%)
<b>Lena Miculek</b>	Lena_Miculek	283.7K	995	5500	71	1,97%	+ 667 followers (+0,24%)
<b>Melissa Bachman</b>	melissa_bachman	104k	2467	880	22	0,85%	+118 followers (+0,11%)

<b>Julia Stallings</b>	jstallings11	63K	686	4400	16	7%	- 119 followers (-0,18%)
<b>Becky Yackley</b>	beckyyackley	28.2K	2695	259	11	0,94%	+ 3 followers (+0,01%)

Comparing the figures, we find disparate profiles. With the largest number of followers, we have Charissa Littlejohn and Lena Miculek, the first with more than 350,000 and the second almost 300,000, which makes them macro influencers according to *Influencer Marketing Hub* (2022), an agency that classifies influencers taking into account the number of followers: Nano influencers (1K–10K followers), micro influencers (10K–100K followers), macro influencers (100K–1M followers), mega or celebrity influencers (1M+ followers). Melissa Bachman is also included in Macro influencers category with more than 100.000 but the others two, Julia Stallings and Becky Yackley are micro influencers. However, the number of followers is not as key when it comes to measuring success in campaigns as the engagement rate, which measures quality following and a more established relationship with your audience. Taking this last indicator into account, Julia Stallings would be the influencer with the greatest advertising potential and impact on her audience. Precisely this profile makes a lot of content alluding to female empowerment, independence from men, and self-determination.

Once the data is presented, our objective is to analyze the production and circulation of these women's speeches about guns of Oliver's (2001) categories of ethical witnessing that Gámez Fuentes, Gómez Nicolau and Maseda García (2016) have operationalized. This will allow us investigate whether the representation of gun culture through influencer marketing is capable of determinate agency capacity. The common enunciator of these women's speeches is feminism; they represent themselves as empowered, independent and confident in their own defense and determination. It is a movement that bears witness to the violence that women suffer for the mere fact of being women and how the NRA instrumentalizes this feminist movement through the personal defense that is obtained by carrying firearms. But they are women who produce this speech, who assume responsibility for the emergence of stigmatizing discourse, who seek to make gun culture visible as something empowering.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the activist discourse of the NRA through influencers following the model based on the concept of ethical testimony of Oliver, has allowed us to reveal the possibilities of representation present in a type of discourse that makes visible the plurality contained in the concept of female empowerment. Firstly, we see the NRA using the concept of authority defined by Robert Cialdini, which points out that for effective persuasion you must use expert figures to establish trust (Cialdini, 2001) and precisely the influencers mentioned in the @NRAWomen account, as we have seen, are firearms professionals in their different sectors. Furthermore, the women they use as a reference are successful, normatively attractive, white, Caucasian and upper middle class. Which implies an aspiration for women who are not within that social group and directly contributes to the establishment of a relationship between success and gun ownership, with that representation of a complete woman who is capable of being a mother, a professional, taking care of her physical appearance and a professional shooter and firearms specialist.

The narratives developed by these influencers with the support of the brands and the NRA, built as a praxis of digital activism, they move the focus away from victimization which allows, at the same time, to subvert the victim's space as a place of power and agency. Those digital narratives promoted by the NRA generate a new subject identified as contrary to dependency and vulnerability which falls squarely into the concept of gender washing defined as the instrumental use of the feminist movement in favor of its own interests as promoters of the use and sale of firearms. It is about avoiding revictimization and promoting the agency of the female subject who builds her own representation through those influencers who are used in feminist discourse. We have verified that these profiles do not have exorbitant numbers of millions of followers, but they can achieve sufficient reach and engagement in audiences that actively respond to these impacts.

This use of communication tools through the instrumentalization of the feminist movement contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the understanding of empowerment with biased perspectives. The reality is that these representations are fictitious, they obviously represent armed women who exist, but they fail to encompass a diverse society where the women most vulnerable to violence are not precisely those who appear in this influence marketing. Connecting with the ideas that Walters presents and

his seven varieties of doing gender wash, we can find in this study several of them such as selective disclosure, empty gender claims, misleading narrative, discourse and branding, based on selective representations that do not correspond to an equitable society.

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