

# Black Women Gun Enthusiasts

## Computational Propaganda in the United States

**The effects of propaganda on marginal  
members of social and issue groups**



### ABSTRACT

Theories of propaganda and misinformation have assumed that the effectiveness of such messages lies with the characteristics of the message or the messenger.

However, theories of social identity in psychology and of audience reception and interpretive communities in media studies suggest that audience characteristics are equally important in determining whether untruthful messages will be accepted and further disseminated by group members. Position within a social group and identity salience can be important factors that mediate the effect of disinformation. We provide a preliminary qualitative test of this theory by studying Black women gun enthusiasts. These women are participating members within a group but, given their intersectional identities, their position within the gun rights community is at the margins. Our qualitative data (drawn from closed-ended interviews and focus group transcripts) reveal a selective and critical community of women providing their own interpretations based on their lived experiences, who are not passive recipients of propaganda messages disseminated by the National Rifle Association (NRA) about the media and about firearms. We argue that the study of social group members based on their role and position within the group can have important implications for both theory and practice.

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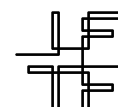
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### ABOUT THESE PAPERS

This case study series explores the social implications of computational propaganda. Each report outlines how tools and tactics, including bots, disinformation and political harassment, were used over social media in attempts to silence social and issue-focused groups prior to the 2018 US midterm elections.



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# introduction

Research across disciplines has shown that a substantial number of American adults are susceptible to false information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018; Allcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019). However, susceptibility to misinformation shows significant heterogeneity across social groups (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). One explanation for higher rates of susceptibility within particular communities is the use of targeted misinformation campaigns. These campaigns have used political bots to inundate social networks with messages promoting specific interpretations and meanings and invoking strong emotional responses among members (Shao et al., 2017; Howard & Woolley, 2016). Thus, in this view, heterogeneity in group response is the result of the frequency with which members encounter a message, as well as the fit of the message with a community's pre-existing beliefs.

Research from psychology shows that groups vary in terms of homogeneity. No social group is completely homogeneous and not all group members have the same level of group attachment (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Lambert & Wyer, 1990). Also, people can hold multiple identities (e.g., mother, Republican, black, New Yorker), each of which can differentially affect attitudes and behavior (Klar, 2013). Such identities intersect in nuanced ways resulting in complex and sometimes unlikely responses to information (Collins, 1993). In media studies, audience reception theory argues that how people interpret a message does not depend solely on the characteristics of the message and the messenger, but also on the identities and lived experiences of the receiver (Means-Coleman, 2000; Bobo, 2002).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that there may be significant heterogeneity in acceptance of false information even within social groups. Furthermore, how audiences interact with propaganda and misinformation may be not only a function of the message or the group, but also of one's position in the group. Yet, little is known as to whether and under what circumstances propaganda may influence or not influence more

peripheral group members who are not well integrated into the core of a group's identity. Studying such group members may help us better understand the limits of propaganda influence within social groups. In other words, this examination may allow us to consider the active engagement of individuals with propaganda rather than simply assessing the message itself and taking for granted its "powerful effects" (McQuail, 2010).

We aim to fill this gap in the literature by examining the impact of targeted misinformation—specifically propaganda messages about the role of guns in society (e.g., "guns don't kill people") and the role of media as an "enemy" of gun rights on a marginalized community that is situated within a larger community. This community is Black women gun enthusiasts. The gun rights network is a predominantly white male community and its dominant narratives emphasize masculinity and whiteness (Melzer, 2009; Kaplan & Filindra, 2018; Filindra & Kaplan, 2016).

Gun rights activists, including the NRA have used propaganda techniques for decades (Davidson, 1998; Sugarmann, 1992), including in recent elections (Melzer, 2019). This propaganda has two central foci: (1) exposing perceived "extreme" media bias against gun owners, with media believed to be pursuing an undemocratic agenda of cultural and institutional change (Niven, 2002; Heston, 2000; LaPierre, 2011[1994]); and (2) portraying guns as the means of protection from crime and as irrelevant to the gun violence epidemic (Lott, 2000; Stroud, 2016). The NRA has effectively used group identity threat messages to promote a certain strand of racialized conservatism and to motivate and politicize its core members (Lacombe, 2018; Melzer, 2009, 2019; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018).

Despite concerted efforts going back to the 1980s to attract women and minorities to gun rights and the NRA, the number of Black women gun enthusiasts is very small, and Black women tend to be the strongest proponents of gun control (Browder, 2006; Burbick, 2006; Douglas & Leinbach, 2016; Filindra & Kaplan, 2017). In this study we seek to explore whether and to

## background

what extent Black women gun enthusiasts (individuals whose experiences in gun culture are influenced by gender, race, and other intersecting identities) reflect the propagandistic messages prevalent in the gun space.

Seeking to provide a preliminary picture of how marginal group members respond to prominent propagandistic messages, our analysis leverages data from a focus group with Black women gun enthusiasts. Qualitative results suggest that our study participants act as an interpretive community within the gun rights space when interacting with pro-gun propaganda. Participants' intersectional identities, which include gun enthusiast and also race and gender, enable them to acknowledge and also complicate, oversimplified arguments about firearms, criminals, and media.

This study is divided into a theoretical and a data analysis section. We begin by providing an overview of the relevant literature on misinformation, audience reception, gun culture, Black reception of media, and key propaganda narratives in the gun space. Our findings are relayed in two parts. First, we explain participants' level of embeddedness in gun culture through their perceptions of common pro-gun narratives and media coverage of guns and gun violence. Second, we explore respondents' beliefs in relation to how the role of firearms in crime has been reported by the gun industry and mainstream media. Our study concludes with limitations and implications for future research and practice.

### **Misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda**

Propaganda and misinformation have always been part of the American information environment, often with grave implications as they have led to race riots and other expressions of political and social violence and disunity (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004; Hofstadter, 2008 [1952]). In recent years, we have seen evidence that propaganda motivated a mass shooting in an African-American church and a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville that led to the death of a counter-protester (Noble, 2018). The advent of mass media (more recently social media and the resulting fragmentation of the information environment) yielded an exponential increase in the mechanisms through which misinformation and propaganda can be disseminated and influence people. The proliferation of information dissemination platforms that operate at minimal cost to the participants and connect them to a global information space also means that misinformation can reach a lot more people today than it could when propaganda was spread through pamphlets and newspapers (Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017; Rushkoff, Pescovitz, & Dunagan, 2018).

Scholars define disinformation as the systematic and intentional use of deceitful or untruthful messages and symbols for the purpose of manipulating people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. By contrast, misinformation is defined as content that is unintentionally inaccurate (Jack, 2017). A prominent form of disinformation is propaganda, which is generally understood to be "the leverage of social and psychological biases to promote a particular point of view" (Rushkoff et al., 2018). Propagandistic information is deliberately and systematically deployed by organized groups in order to change attitudes and actions on a mass scale (Snow, 2014), and it is most often conveyed through mass media (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Propaganda can be difficult to identify because it delivers "a mixture of facts and interpretations that aim to link brands, people, products, or nations with certain feelings, ideas, and attitudes . . . It can be difficult to distinguish facts from interpretations (indeed, the point of the campaign may be precisely to blur them),

and political perspectives or worldviews can color any assessment of factual or interpretive accuracy” (Jack, 2017, p.4). Decades of research on propaganda have found that this form of communication is the most abusive form of manipulative information, largely due to the fact that it is a tactic used to conceal rather than reveal (Snow, 2014).

The strategic use of ideologies, values, narratives, and visions to manufacture consensus is by no means new, and this practice is not always negative (Gorbach, 2018). Propaganda can be used either as a mechanism of persuasion that still operates within intellectual and democratic traditions or “as an exercise in manipulation that goes against basic democratic precepts” (Reilly, 2018, p.142). Because propaganda seeks to bring together disparate communities, it can be used to mobilize citizens for a common good or engender passive compliance (Jensen, 2016).

Scholars of misinformation have shown propaganda to be increasingly insidious in the new media environment (Shao et al., 2017; Allcott et al., 2019). Regulation, competition, and the free press were established to maintain credibility and accuracy in public information, but new technologies—including political bots, computational propaganda, and surveillance—have challenged how we have traditionally understood media content (Rushkoff et al., 2018). Computational propaganda refers to “the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion” (Woolley & Howard, 2016, p. 4886). Using computational propaganda, media manipulators can send customized, nuanced messages to groups and individuals through the use of big data, computing, individualized news feeds, databases, and computational media (Rushkoff et al., 2018). Technology has provided propagandists—including political campaigns and agents of state-sponsored manipulation—with extremely sophisticated tools that have been and will continue to be utilized on an unprecedented scale in election cycles (Rushkoff et al., 2018).

Research on misinformation and propaganda has shown that such untruthful information spreads through homogeneous but polarized social groups (Del Vicario

et al., 2016). Homogeneous groups tend to have shared systems of meaning—that is, ways to make sense of the world around them (Fish, 1980). Shared meanings make it easier for propaganda and misinformation to be spread and accepted within communities as the message is generally consistent with the worldview of the group (Mocanu et al., 2015). Misinformation is most successful when its emotional content threatens individuals’ identity or sense of their social world (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Weeks, 2015). Our study aims to assess whether and how interpretation of propagandistic messages is complicated by heterogeneity within communities.

### **Multidimensionality of identity and audience reception**

Misinformation scholars’ general concern with the existence of differing interpretations of the same content across individuals has long been a topic of interest to scholars of audience reception (Zaid, 2014). The audience reception paradigm arose in part as a response to perspectives that conceptualized audience members as a “mass” that passively received media messages. From this perspective, the audience did not discriminate across messages, and the effects of media-produced information were equally significant on all members of society (Mendelsohn, 1973; Tannenbaum & Zillmann, 1975; Berlo, 1977). In other words, early media effects research framed audiences as “culturally duped” by media (McQuail, 2010).

Scholars of audience reception argue that meaning does not reside in the text itself but in the interpretation of the text. Message interpretation can vary across groups as well as individuals within groups because people engage their identities, everyday experiences, and the broader social context (Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984; Bobo, 1995). Social psychologists have confirmed that people can hold multiple identities concurrently. These identities can be more or less dominant, or subordinate and superordinate. People’s responses to information can change based on which identity is threatened and the relative importance of that identity (Sherif, 1966; Gaertner et al., 1993; Klar, 2013;). Therefore, we need to think of individuals as active and dynamic interpreters of media content, not as passive recipients of information.



Groups of like-minded people, that is individuals who share an identity or a worldview, also share similar strategies in their interpretation of media content. Literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) labeled such groups “interpretive communities.” The concept of interpretive communities is rooted in the premise that groups of media audiences may be constituted not only by demographics and social roles but also by the interpretive frames used to approach media content (Jensen, 1996). In this context, the meaning of “community” is not a geographic one but rather a social psychological one (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). More specifically: “similarities (or differences) in response are not due to monolithic properties of the text, but to the beliefs and assumptions shared by identifiable communities of readers... readers who belong to the same interpretive community at a particular point in time are likely to see the text through a similar filter, or to respond to the text in the same way” (Dorfman, 1996, p. 457). Although the construct of the interpretive community suggests such a group is likely to understand information in a similar manner through a similar process, it also allows for individuals within the community to diverge from the others in some cases due to the diversity even within communities of shared identities (Báez, 2018).

Hall’s (2006) model of encoding and decoding is often utilized alongside the interpretive community concept as it is also useful for understanding how a media text evokes wildly different viewer reactions (Báez, 2018; Means-Coleman, 2002). Hall argued that the producer of a media text has an intended meaning they desire the audience to receive (encoding). However, audience members decode media texts in diverse ways because of their identities, experience, and social context. According to Hall, audience members, depending on their individual and social characteristics, may accept the meaning of the message as the author intended it (a dominant or preferred reading), reject the intended meaning and read it in a way that diverges from the author’s intention (an oppositional reading), or partially accepting and partially rejecting the original meaning (a negotiated reading).

Scholars have utilized audience reception and the construct of the interpretive community to understand the media engagement of a variety of social groups,

including women romance readers (Radway, 1984), Latinas living in Chicago (Báez, 2018), and African American comedy viewers (Means-Coleman, 2002). The interpretive community framework has been extensively used in journalism research (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Gutsche, 2014; Robinson & DeShano, 2011).

## **The Black community and the media**

A rich literature on Black audience reception of commercial media has enhanced scholarly understanding of Black audience members as interpretive communities (Bobo, 1995; Means-Coleman, 2000, 2002; Worsley, 2009; Ward, 2004; Cornwell & Orbe, 2002). For many decades, African-Americans have lived within a media environment that has rarely portrayed Blacks in positive or multidimensional ways (Bonilla & Jonathan, 2015). Rather, the most frequent representation of Blacks in mainstream media is as dangerous criminals (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002; Collier Jr., 2016). Almost as frequently, Blacks are portrayed as physically imposing and strong in ways that can be threatening, and as intellectually inferior and less success- and achievement-oriented (Gordon, 2016; Arnett, 2015). Black women have typically been portrayed either as domestic workers, “welfare queens”, or oversexualized objects (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Miller, 2008). These patterns have substantial negative effects on Blacks’ judgment of the self, sense of efficacy, political involvement, and trust in political and media institutions (Mastin, 2000; Fujioka, 2005; Gordon, 2008; Nie & Waltenburg, 2017; Vercellotti & Brewer, 2006).

Not surprisingly, studies of African-Americans’ views of the media document substantial levels of ambivalence and cynicism: although Black people consume large amounts of media content, they tend to be skeptical of the media and its role in their lives. In general, Blacks are aware of biases in mainstream media against their group and that is reflected in the level of trust that they accord to such news sources (Mastin, 2000; Brodie et al., 1999). Consumption of Black media tends to be higher among Blacks who are more alienated by mainstream media and American politics (Vercellotti & Brewer, 2006). This is also evidenced in behavioral studies that document stronger preference among Blacks for sites that cater to their racial group (Appiah 2003). Unlike mainstream media, Black media narratives

provide Black audiences with scripts that help them both identify the complex structural forces that influence their lives and develop agency and coping mechanisms (Bobo, 1995). Taken together, the literature suggests that African-Americans tend to be ambivalent about mainstream media and often reject dominant frames as a source of political meaning and understanding of the political and social world. Using audience reception and encoding/decoding, our examination can help to build theory on whether, under what circumstances, and why a unique community of Black women (gun enthusiasts) interprets particular media content (gun propaganda) in an oppositional, negotiated, or entirely different manner than what the NRA intended.

### The contours of American gun culture

Before delving into the specifics of Black women gun enthusiasts, it is important to provide an overview of American gun culture. Traditionally, gun ownership in America has been a male activity. Gun ownership in the United States increased substantially in the post-WWII era as men returned from the front with experience in arms and an interest in hunting and shooting sports. The NRA encouraged these developments through the 1950s and 1960s (National Rifle Association, 1967). However, by the 1980s, urbanization and cultural change started to lead to a decline of both interest in firearms and gun ownership rates. In response, the NRA sought to cultivate new markets, primarily among women and minorities. A marketing campaign with the slogan “I am the NRA” portrayed individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and ages, both men and women (Vercellotti & Brewer, 2006).

Given the high crime rates of the 1980s and 1990s, the NRA developed another new campaign that focused on women empowerment through self-defense. The “Refuse to Be a Victim” campaign utilized pro-gun women’s violent experiences to strengthen and broaden the appeal of armed self-defense for women (Stroud, 2016). The *American Rifleman* also hosted a regular “Women’s Corner” column that consistently presented the view that women should be fearful of crime (especially sexual crime) and the way to make themselves less vulnerable would be through carrying a firearm. The notion of constant danger, especially in the form of racialized men, clashed conceptually with the idea of empowerment because women were portrayed

as weak and vulnerable who needed protection (Browder, 2006). Yet this portrayal may have held some appeal to conservative women who prescribed to traditional gender roles. Contemporary popular women’s pro-gun groups such as The Well Armed Woman (TAWW) suggest the campaigns may have held salience (Schreiber, 2008).

There are historical and cultural reasons why men (especially white men) more so than women (white or otherwise) have been eager participants of the dominant gun culture. In American political culture, guns are signifiers of “good citizenship” and entangled with deep-seated traditions of honor and chivalry (Filindra & Kaplan, 2016; Carlson, 2015; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). As Goss (2013) put it, “gun politics is about what it means to be a good American. It’s personal. Even gun owners that don’t belong to the NRA believe, as my dad did, that gun ownership is a civic virtue, a hallmark of American self-reliance and duty. ... For gun owners, ownership is evidence of their civic spirit.” This has especially been the case for white men who were historically the bearers of political rights (Filindra & Kaplan, 2016).

Through its publications and gun training programs, the NRA has taught participants in the gun culture what it means to be a “good guy with a gun” and how to recognize the “bad guy with a gun.” The gun owner, as portrayed in dominant gun culture narratives, is rational, decisive, aggressive—a man who is ready to offer protection to family and country through violence. These good guys live in a Manichean world with sharp and clear boundaries between “Good” and “Evil” (Stroud, 2016). Gun ownership signals the ability to easily make these distinctions and the ability to differentiate between good and evil is also dependent on a man’s facility with arms (Carlson, 2015; Stroud, 2012; Squires, 2019).

Although the gun narratives rarely make use of explicit racial language, columns such as the “Armed Citizen” teach gun culture participants key lessons about the identity of the heroic gun owner who defends his property and family with a firearm, and that of the always anonymous but exceedingly threatening “criminal” who serves as a warning of a menacing social world (O’Neill, 2007). Sociologists explain gun ownership as an embodied social practice that enables

culture participants to both express an identity learned through engagement with guns and provide rationales for the need of gun ownership (Shapira & Simon, 2018; McCaughey, 1997).

The social meaning of firearms is decidedly positive among whites, in part because whites are less likely to experience many of the negative externalities of extensive gun ownership, such as violent crime (James, 2018). Furthermore, whites are on average more affluent than are minorities and can afford the economic cost of engaging in gun culture. Also, gun ownership is associated with rural subcultures that are dominated by whites; whites represent 80% of the population in rural counties but only a plurality in urban centers (Igielnik, 2017, Parker et al., 2018). Given the historical, legal and social context, it is not surprising that 88% of gun owners are white (Smith & Son, 2015).

African-Americans have a more ambivalent relationship with firearms. For most of American history, African-Americans were statutorily excluded from gun ownership out of fear of slave rebellions and armed challenges to Jim Crow (Higginbotham, 1980; Morgan, 2003 [1975]). For Black people, the bearing of arms became emblematic of inclusion to political citizenship. Black abolitionists saw in the use of force the promise of freedom and equality (Jackson, 2019). Frederick Douglass saw nobility in arms and urged freedmen to enlist in the Union Army as a way to prove their deservingness for political rights (Emberton, 2013; Singletary, 2011 [1957]). During the Civil Rights movement, the ideal of armed citizenship as a symbol of full political membership reemerged among Black nationalist groups such as the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement (Williams, 1998 [1962]; Newton, 1980; Seale, 1991).

From a social perspective, there are several economic and social reasons why fewer African-Americans than whites own firearms today and even fewer engage in gun culture. African-Americans are far more likely than whites to be the victims of violent crime. This is especially true for younger Black males in their teens and early twenties (Cook & Goss, 2014). Furthermore, African-Americans inhabit lower socioeconomic strata than whites; participation in the gun culture is quite

costly and for many people prohibitively so. Last but not least, since the Great Migration (1930-1960), African-Americans have lived in urban centers where both culture and laws tend to be less embracing of gun ownership.

### **Black women in gun culture**

The 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) includes a question on how many firearms there are in the respondent's home. One-third of all respondents (32%) indicated that there was at least one firearm in the home. Among women, 31% indicated that there was a firearm in their home, compared to 37% of men. This question does not measure gun ownership precisely: a person may report firearms in the home but might not own the firearms. Conversely, there is possible underreporting both because people may be reluctant to report gun ownership due to social desirability concerns and because they may not be aware of the presence of a firearm in the household (Ludwig, Cook, & Smith, 1998; Urbatsch, 2018).

According to the ANES, women gun owners are an exceedingly white population (83%). Only 6% of women gun owners are African-Americans. The population is almost evenly split in terms of age, with 42% younger than 44 years old; and one-third hold college degrees. Furthermore, the women gun owners skew conservative. Only 28% of women gun owners identify as Democrats. Conversely, the typical Black woman is very different from the typical gun-owning woman. According to US Census information, the median age of Black women is 35 years of age and only 22% hold a college degree. The median income for Black women is \$30,780. Almost a third of Black women (29%) are heads of household.

Black women gun enthusiasts are participants in a community that in many ways is hostile to their identity, both as women and as Black. The key pro-gun narratives of patriotic heroism and armed citizenship do not readily apply to them. The appeal to political conservatism and the movement's alliance with the Republican Party (Lacombe, 2018) are also inconsistent with most Black women's political identities, as this group constitutes the very core of the Democratic Party (Perry, 2019).

At the same time, Black women are disproportionately vulnerable to criminal victimization and many have interpersonal, familial, and community experiences with gun violence (Long & Ullman, 2013). One-in-five Black women experiences rape; more than 40% are exposed to domestic violence. Also, Black women are 2.5 times more likely to be murdered than are white women (DuMonthier, Childers, & Milli, 2017). According to Angela Stroud, “particularly in underserved urban areas, Black women who are subjected to violence cannot afford to adopt the role of the ‘passive victim,’ as using violence is sometimes a necessary strategy for survival” (Stroud, 2016, p. 57).

Furthermore, marginal as it may be, there is a longstanding tradition of arms within the Black culture (Johnson, 2014). Politically, this tradition goes back to the abolitionist movement (Jackson 2019); from the perspective of physical safety, it goes back to the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction (Johnson, 2014). Radical Black abolitionists rejected incrementalism and persuasion as the solutions to ending slavery; instead, they embraced violence as the means to freedom, pointing to the American Revolution as a justification (Jackson, 2019). After Emancipation, white violence against Blacks increased and, in many instances, the Black community felt obliged to maintain firearm ownership for self-defense against white assaults (Johnson, 2014).

### **Two key propaganda narratives in gun culture: media elites and the role of guns**

We have identified two key propaganda narratives that are prominent within gun culture and that have received both media and scholarly attention. First, there is a long-standing belief (propagated via anecdote, assumptions, and manipulated facts) that the news media are hostile to the NRA and gun culture and the hostility is motivated by a desire for cultural and political change. Second, proponents of gun rights often use the logic that “guns don’t kill people, criminals kill people” alongside “more guns less crime” to promote firearm ownership and concealed carry as the ideal form of citizenship (Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2019; Stroud, 2016).

### **MEDIA ELITES**

Since the battles over the enactment of the Gun Control Act of 1968, the NRA has developed a narrative that portrays the media as extremely hostile and biased against gun owners. The dominant gun rights narrative, developed in the 1990s in the context of the “culture wars,” portrays politics in binary terms. Society is divided between a “majority” (exemplified by gun owners) that believes in “traditional” social values and a “minority” (exemplified by “media elites,” “Hollywood,” and “liberals”) that seeks to undermine American culture by preventing citizens from owning guns. The media are portrayed as an almost omnipotent agent that silences and ridicules participants in gun culture.

In this narrative, the media is an especially insidious adversary because they can set the agenda rather than “simply telling the facts” (Heston 2000, p. 16). Thus the media has systematically “twisted, tangled, and reinterpreted” American history and especially the Founding Fathers (LaPierre, 2011[1994], p. 10). It also can distract and desensitize citizens making them passive recipients of propaganda messages. “Modern media fills the cultural airwaves with a mist of anesthesia, so that principles and values are slowly desensitized to the coming onslaught” (Heston, 2000, p. 19). In summary, gun rights elites argue that the media use their control over information dissemination to muzzle the honorable gun owner community while providing a microphone for opponents of gun rights specifically and of conservative values more broadly.

### **GUNS DON’T KILL PEOPLE AND MORE GUNS, LESS CRIME**

The twin gun narratives “guns don’t kill people, criminals kill people” and “more guns, less crime” rely upon the simplified logic that a firearm is a mode of delivery for violence; therefore, it is only dangerous when the person using it has violent intentions. The intent of the individual in possession of the firearm reflects the notion that only criminals use guns for violence and there will always be criminals. Proponents of this view believe that human nature is fixed and criminality is inherent in personality or biologically driven. Structural and contextual causes of crime are completely ignored. Given this logic, the ban of firearms would not affect the rate of violent crime, it would only change the type of weapons used to deliver it (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, 1999; Stroud, 2016).



From this perspective, criminals are rational individuals who use violence as a means to a desired end. The objective may be morally reprehensible, but that does not say anything about the moral worth of the instruments used to achieve such socially proscribed goals. More importantly, there is no causal relationship between criminal intent and use of firearms, and certainly not one that can be studied because such a study would require quantification of a counterfactual (i.e., number of homicides that would occur in the absence of firearms) (Wolfgang, 1958; Wright, Rossi, & Daly, 1983).

The next step in this logic is that criminals are fully aware of the power of firearms and have come to respect them. As rational individuals they want to ensure their own safety while committing crimes—otherwise the cost exceeds the benefit. If criminals have good reason to believe that their target is a gun owner, they are unlikely to pursue the crime out of fear for their own safety. Therefore, the more armed civilians in a population, especially if they carry concealed weapons, the less crime there should be as all these firearms will deter criminal activity (Lott, 2000).

Public health experts and criminologists have developed rigorous studies to show that the proliferation of firearms among the civilian population has contributed significantly to the rise in gun violence in the United States (Webster et al., 2012; Webster & Vernick, 2013; Webster & Ludwig, 2000). These studies and others have debunked the “more guns, less crime” thesis (Lott, 2000, for critique of this thesis, see: Lambert, 2003). There is substantial evidence both from the United States and other countries that the prevalence of suicides and lethal crime would be much lower if gun ownership was tightly regulated (Vernick, Hodge, & Webster, 2007; Webster and Vernick, 2013). Researchers have also put holes in arguments related to the prevalence of defensive use of firearms (Cook, Ludwig, & Hemenway, 1997; Webster & Ludwig, 2000; Hemenway, 1997; Hemenway & Solnick, 2015).

Gun rights activists have ignored both the scientific evidence and the intended purpose of firearms, which is to destroy life. Instead, they have made extensive use of anecdotal pseudo-evidence along with manipulated statistics to argue that more guns lead to less crime. Interviews with offenders in jail, faulty data from obscure cases, and anecdotes are also used to bolster the argument. Stories about rapists, stalkers, and home invaders who were stopped in their tracks by gun-owning citizens are central to NRA propaganda (LaPierre & Baker, 2002; LaPierre, 2003, 2011[1994]).

*American Rifleman*, the organization’s official monthly publication, features “The Armed Citizen,” a column dedicated to short anecdotes of successful defensive use of arms that prevent robbery, rape, and a host of other crimes. As O’Neill (2007) has argued, through such devices the NRA indoctrinates members to be constantly vigilant and fosters beliefs in a dangerous world where individual gun ownership—not collective security, i.e., policing—is the only reliable defense against crimes. Stories of violent crime that the police failed to stop further serve to underscore the point that one can only depend on oneself for physical protection. Wayne LaPierre offers the example of Linda Riss, who was being stalked and threatened by a jealous ex-boyfriend. Linda appealed to the police for protection but the ex-boyfriend threw lye in her face the next day. In another example, a victim of domestic abuse appealed to the police multiple times for protection but they only intervened once. The woman called the police one final time to ask for help, but before the officers arrived, her husband stabbed her to death (LaPierre 2003, p. 52). The message that follows these terrifying stories is that “if only” the victim had a firearm she would have survived the attack or the attacker would have been deterred. Thus “more guns, less crime.”

# methods

## Hypotheses

Based on the theory outlined previously, we hypothesize that:

Black women gun enthusiasts will express ambivalence about the media, but their views will not necessarily be framed in accordance with gun rights propaganda messaging (a negotiated reading). Study participants would operate as an interpretive community and weave in their own meanings and explanations for media bias that are not necessarily related to the NRA frame of armed citizenship.

Black women gun enthusiasts, given their vulnerability to crime, are more likely to express beliefs that are closely aligned to the NRA's messaging: "more guns, less crime" and "guns don't kill people, people kill people."

## Study design

Study participants were recruited from a Midwestern gun club organized by and for Black women. We made initial contact with the group leaders, explaining our interest in how non-white women gun enthusiasts engage with misinformation in the gun rights space. The group organizer agreed to forward our request for participants to group members. Twenty-two individuals expressed their interest via e-mail and were ultimately included in the study.

It is important to note that the gun owners in our sample are members of groups organized for self-defense and weapons training. As such, they are not necessarily members or affiliates of the NRA. Many of these women do not necessarily view themselves as activists in the gun rights movement. However, their participation in this space exposes them to ideas and beliefs that are prevalent among gun rights organizations.

Participants were first asked to complete a closed-ended survey questionnaire (approximately 10 minutes) with demographic questions but also with a series of questions about trust in media and political institutions, prevalence and sources of misinformation in the news, and beliefs about conspiracy theories related to guns. After completing the online survey, respondents entered an online focus group. The online focus groups were conducted over three days. Each day, they were offered a set of questions to respond to and were also instructed to comment on the thoughts of other participants. This research design not only allowed us to gain a general idea of participants' understanding of the prevalence of guns and gun violence (and its relation to misinformation about both), but also encouraged participants to discuss their experiences and questions in a safe environment. Upon completion of the focus group, respondents were offered a \$100 incentive for their participation.

The women in our sample deviate from the typical woman gun owner as described by the ANES (see earlier discussion) and also from the average Black woman as portrayed in US Census statistics. There is no way to determine whether they are typical of Black women gun owners. First, our participants were college educated (n=18), and most earned more than \$50,000 per year (n=18). Also, our gun enthusiasts tended to be older than the typical woman gun owner (mean age=52). Finally, 19 of our gun rights group members identified as Democrats and not one as a Republican. This diverges substantially from the women gun-owning population.

# findings

## Level of embeddedness in gun culture

Our results suggest that these women are indeed on the margins of the gun culture—interacting with guns but not necessarily deriving key aspects of identity from this engagement. First, only four of our respondents said that the term “gun owner” describes them either “extremely well” or “very well.” This was an item designed to measure social identity salience (Huddy, Mason, & Aaroe, 2015); these results suggest that these women do not feel well integrated in the traditional gun rights space and that enthusiasm for guns may be more of an activity rather than a social identity.

More evidence that our participants do not share the attachment to firearms that many white people do came from an item that asked them to rank order key rights and guarantees provided by the government. The list included: (1) freedom of speech; (2) the right to bear arms; (3) freedom from discrimination; (4) the right to vote; (5) freedom of religion; and (6) right to privacy. Respondents were asked to rank the three “most important rights.” Data from a nationally representative survey conducted in 2015 show that 86% of white Americans rank “the right to bear arms” as one of the top-3 most important rights. However, not one of our study participants ranked the right to bear arms as “1.” Seven people (31%) ranked it as either “2” or “3,” and another third (n=8) ranked it as “6.” By comparison, 17 individuals ranked “the right to vote,” 16 selected “freedom from discrimination,” 12 chose “right to privacy,” and 11 ranked “freedom of speech” as a top-3 right. These selections are more likely to be driven by these women’s racial and gender identities and experiences rather than their attachment to firearms.

Another set of questions to indicate perceptions of identity threat was a measure asking respondents to assess the political influence of various groups in terms

of being “too much,” “about right,” or “too little.” People who feel that their group is marginal and powerless tend to think that their group has not enough political influence. All of our respondents believe that Blacks have too little political influence, and 19 participants said that women also have too little influence. However, when it comes to gun owners, only three stated that they have too little influence. These findings further suggest that it is unlikely that these women are susceptible to NRA propaganda about the group’s vulnerability to the assault from the all-powerful media.

## Black women gun enthusiasts perceptions of the media

If Black women who are engaged with gun culture were influenced by the propaganda that prevails in this space, we would expect them to express high levels of trust in NRATV and low levels of trust in mainstream media that is purported to be hostile to the gun rights agenda (Melzer, 2019). Furthermore, we would expect them to express mistrust in university researchers which the NRA has also branded as “anti-gun elites” determined to destroy gun rights (e.g., America’s 1st Freedom, October, 2017; November, 2016).

When it comes to trust in media and institutions, the majority of our study participants expressed high levels of trust in mainstream media, with broadcast news and MSNBC receiving the most votes of confidence (Table 1, page 12). This is not unexpected from Democratic women, but it is inconsistent with a strong gun enthusiast identity. More than three-fourths of participants expressed low levels of trust in NRATV while trust in the Brady Center, an organization that promotes gun control policy, is three times as high. This suggests that this group of gun enthusiasts is not well-integrated in the gun rights movement and views its main leader with some apprehension.

Our participants also showed high levels of trust in university researchers, which is inconsistent with what would be expected from people influenced by gun rights propaganda narratives. However, there was evidence of ambivalence about government agencies, as only half of our respondents expressed high levels of trust in government. This may be influenced by exposure to NRA narratives, but it is more likely the result of these women’s experience with government as Black women. There is strong evidence of low levels of trust in government among Blacks that goes back several decades as this group has traditionally felt alienated from and has been discriminated against by government (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Avery, 2007, 2009; Johnson, 2014).

Qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts suggested participants’ trust in mainstream media is more complicated than the quantitative findings indicate. Given space to elaborate on their perceptions of news media, participants expressed frustration over the political and economic “agendas” that influence how mainstream media operates and ultimately decrease these outlets’ credibility and reliability. However, participants’ discussions of the

role of government agencies and the gun industry in spreading misinformation and propaganda supported the quantitative data, which showed a low level of trust in these two institutions. Respondents understood both the government and gun industry to intentionally distribute false information for the purpose of controlling citizens and impacting public opinion.

One area where Black women gun enthusiasts seem to be influenced by the propaganda about media that prevails in the gun space is in terms of the perception that media agendas are shaped by profit motives and political motives of the owners, and these two are not necessarily distinct. For example, according to Haley, “ownership of the publications plays a part [in political bias] ... if the owners are known supporters of whatever group, there will likely be biased reporting.” Respondents commonly used the word “agenda” to identify this problem. Zeroing in on the interrelationship between wealth and politics, Arlene explained that “news outlets are owned by rich persons or organizations with their own political affiliation or agenda.” While commenting on a post identifying the influence of money on news content, Kiara wrote “I agree with the theory on money [influencing news media]. We live in a largely capitalistic society. Whomever can have pockets lined will put out the information to line them even more.” Participants also understood that creating social discord may be part of the intentions of media that spread misinformation. As Chloe stated, “I think people who publish false information have a specific agenda and want to incite division that benefits their view.” Arlene was even more specific in stating that “I think that to some degree, all mainstream news puts out a lot of half or partial truths, to skew stories towards their desired agenda.”

The perception that the media have their own political agenda that they pursue through biased coverage of news is consistent with the NRA messaging; however, our participants did not link the perception of media bias specifically to guns, nor did they express beliefs that linked the media to tyranny through biased reporting of gun crime. In sum, our participants did not seem to share the conspiratorial belief that the media emphasize gun crime in order to scare people into supporting gun bans and confiscation of arms that would then lead to the establishment of a tyrannical regime by the “elites.”

**Table 1. Trust in Media Sources & Institutions**

|                                    | Very/Somewhat Trust (N=22) |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Broadcast news                     | 19                         |
| <i>MSNBC</i>                       | 19                         |
| <i>New York Times</i>              | 18                         |
| <i>CNN</i>                         | 17                         |
| <i>Washington Post</i>             | 17                         |
| <i>Huffington Post</i>             | 16                         |
| <i>Fox News</i>                    | 5                          |
| <i>NRATV</i>                       | 5                          |
| <i>InfoWars</i>                    | 2                          |
| <b>Trust in Other Institutions</b> |                            |
| University researchers             | 20                         |
| Brady Center                       | 15                         |
| Government agencies                | 12                         |



Participants perceived the role of the gun industry and the government in disseminating false information to be more fraudulent and manipulative than the mainstream media. One reason why participants interpreted the gun industry as being intentionally deceptive was because these organizations benefit from misinformation about guns. Brooklyn asserted that “at the end of the day, I think money rules the day with organizations, the NRA for example.” Paula lamented, “I don’t believe gun control will ever gain enough revenue to compete with the powerful NRA.” Phoebe provided a more detailed explanation:

Money, which equals control, or should I say continued control, is what motivates [fake news]. The NRA is currently a very powerful lobbyist spreading tons of money amongst politicians to maintain control through government and regulations on the gun industry. This ultimately means more money for gun manufacturers, dealers, etc. and thus, continued control.

Ayanna also identified the gun industry and the government when she identified “lobbyists, wealthy business owners/manufacturers and the Department of Defense” as entities that gain from misinformation on guns. Only one participant questioned the idea that the NRA influences media coverage of guns. Jamie stated, “The media narrative about the NRA is that their lobbyists are controlling the gun conversation. I have always wondered if their influence is reality or more perception based on how they advertise their cause.” Here, Jamie, who is the leader of the gun club and an NRA-certified instructor, did not accept or dismiss the idea that the NRA has influence on media and politics, which suggests a cautious approach to the information distributed by both the NRA and the media.

One participant, Phoebe, offered a take similar to the NRA narrative but turned on its head to focus on conservative rather than liberal media. The NRA argues that the media, pursuing a liberal agenda, publicize false information about gun rights. Phoebe told us the opposite: “Those who have control of the media outlets are the ones most likely to post false and/or misleading information regarding gun control.” Another participant, Leah, explained that “they [the media] also have the control to kill or neutralize any stories that question or find fault with their views and opinions. Ultimately, I would have to say [the production of misinformation] falls on the white male conservative media!”

Participants overwhelmingly understood the government to have a hand in the proliferation of misinformation. Arlene stated, “the government disseminates false information when they don’t have the answers. They’re not twisting the arms of news outlets, but they’re intentionally leaking info—true or false—through their confidential informants... that is likely how they sway the news.” Leah provided an explanation that condemned not only the government but also others who pick up on the information: “The government does have their hand in [fake news production] ... but once the information is out it gets told in many different ways.”

Consistent with NRA propaganda, many participants felt that the government’s role in misinformation was especially prevalent regarding guns and gun violence. Arlene wrote, “the government produces and disseminates false information about firearms and gun violence . . . this is part of the reason they will not permit research on gun violence prevention.” Arlene further explained, “I believe problems are worse than we’re aware of them to be, and the government is hiding it because of NRA lobbyists and their financial stake in the government and economy.” The following quote from Brenda identified her beliefs about government researchers, although she was the only participant to mention researchers whatsoever:

I think the government sometimes disseminates false information about political issues not so much to confuse or mislead people, but it is because government researchers are often out of touch with how life actually works outside government bureaucracy.

Most participants cited government involvement in disinformation when discussing mass shootings, particularly “false flag events,” or the conspiracy theory that some mass shootings were staged to mobilize support for gun control. Ayanna provided the following detailed interpretation:

I think some people believe that some mass shootings are false because the government is not above instilling fear into citizens as a means of controlling the masses. With that said, I can understand why people may agree with not believing all mass shootings are actual events. Terrorism occurs in this world by criminals, thieves, dictators, charismatic extremists, etc., but governments also use strategic plots of terrorism or fear to fuel their agendas...I believe corruption is present in

all governments, whether its public knowledge or not because everyone has an agenda; although I typically use caution with using the word “all.”

While Ayanna considers the veracity of some claims of “false flag events,” she does so because of her understanding of the government as deceitful and willing to take drastic measures to control citizens—a key component of NRA propaganda. Although some participants held complicated understandings about conspiracy theories, the government, and mainstream media, none of the respondents fully accepted the “false flag event” theory and found the reporting of mass shootings to be necessary. Jamie noted that the sheer number of mass shootings that have occurred in recent years means “the media should provide nonstop coverage of the shootings. As a sensible firearm AND gun control advocate, the media is required to report gun related topics as they occur and allow the public to form their own opinions.”

One participant added an additional context—historical racism—to her perception of the government’s role in spreading misinformation. This is another point that the NRA has tried to link to contemporary politics (Coulter, 2012; Real Clear Politics, 2012). Kiara explained, “[The government has] a history of [spreading misinformation] especially in relation to Black people and fear of unrest. They did it all throughout the civil rights and black power movement. Why would they not do it today?” Kiara went on, “C.O.I.N.T.E.L.P.R.O. is one such example. It was formed to break up and undermine black rights movements. The infiltration and the creation of false information was very prevalent in their movement.”

Although Kiara was the only participant to discuss racism in relation to the government’s dissemination of false information, additional participants cited this factor in the general distribution of false information. Leah stated, “Emotions and racism makes people [share] ‘fake news.’” She provided the following hypothetical scenario as an example: “If you don’t look like me, I automatically do not trust you. Since I do not trust you, I disagree with your position on matters. In fact, I might take the opposite view just because we are different.” For Teagan, a prevalent example of racism in the media occurs in a different context:

I tend to think mainstream press is a little racist as well. For example, if an African American does something illegal his name picture etc. is up immediately, if a white person does something illegal you may get a name, but it is days before an actual picture or something along those lines is put out on the channel.

Considering these notions together, it is clear that participants understand race to play a role in how media frames and covers information, yet this factor is not as clearly related to misinformation and propaganda as money, politics, and government control.

This analysis suggests that participants’ perceptions of mainstream media are colored by their concerns over political and economic influence. While participants condemn the gun industry and the government for their role in producing propaganda and misinformation, respondents do not as clearly fault particular journalists or media outlets for this crisis. We might understand participants’ concerns with the mainstream media to be over the contemporary information environment, or what scholars deem the “media ecology” (Postman, 2000). Participants’ perceptions are akin to the belief that the present media landscape “is a cacophony of dissenting visions, targeted misinformation, weaponized persuasion, and other attempts to change our minds and our behavior (for helpful, trivial, and sinister reasons)” (Rushkoff et al., 2018, 13). Like the aforementioned scholars and many others (e.g., Reilly, 2018; Phillips, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), the participants in this study cited intersecting political and economic factors for creating the contemporary crisis of misinformation and propaganda. However, participants’ marginalized identities within the larger gun culture led them to be most critical of the gun industry and the government as actors in this problem. Therefore, in regard to audience reception theory, participants acted as an interpretive community that operates within the gun rights space but not as a fully integrated unit. In their interpretations of misinformation and propaganda, the participants demonstrated negotiated readings of such messages.

## Black women gun enthusiasts beliefs about guns and crime

National data show that African-American women are subjected to the highest rates of victimization in terms of all types of crime, including sexual crimes and partner abuse. Our data confirm this trend. The level of exposure to crime among these women is simply staggering (Table 2). Almost half (n=9) have had family members victimized by violent crime, while one-third (n=7) report having close friends who experienced such victimization. Half of the women (n=10) experienced property crime, and similar proportions report relatives and friends who have had similar experiences. Four women reported having been the victim of either sexual assault or domestic abuse, while about half have friends and family members who were victims of intimate partner violence. Given these experiences, it is no surprise that 15 of the study participants reported being either “very” or “somewhat” worried that “you or a family member may become a victim of a serious crime.”

The intimate experience that these women have had with crime also makes them vulnerable to the type of propaganda that seeks to provide a simple solution to the problem of physical safety: firearms. For people who have already experienced the failure of collective security in the form of effective policing and other communal and institutional norms that deter crime, the myth that “guns don’t kill people” is appealing because it provides the illusion of control over a threatening situation. Thus, it is not surprising that our study participants endorsed this narrative often verbatim. For example, Jamie stated that “you often

hear that firearms kill people when in fact they do not. We know that people kill people and the delivery system may be a firearm... guns don’t just jump off of the table. Irresponsible gun owners and criminals are the root cause.” Following the NRA narrative, violence is attributed to individual not social causes and to explicit choice (“irresponsibility”) not structural forces such as poverty, exposure to violence, and other such factors. Ayanna expressed the exact same sentiment: “Myths about firearms are that they kill people. People kill people, not firearms. Firearms can be used responsibly.”

Participants complemented the focus on personal responsibility by bringing up another key NRA narrative: gun safety. According to Arlene, “I do feel safer owning a gun...but not just owning it...knowing how to safely and appropriately use it.” The responsible gun owner has been trained in firearm use and safety and this has made her capable of discerning the type of occasion that would warrant firing her gun. This sets her apart from “irresponsible gun owners” (who have neglected to get proper training in safety and use) and from the “criminal” (who may be properly trained in gun safety and usage but employs his weapon for ill). Commenting on Arlene’s response, Phoebe echoes the same element of “responsible ownership” prominent in the propaganda narrative: “I agree that guns don’t make you safer, particularly if you are not properly trained in the usage of said gun. Without proper training, licensed or not, that gun is another senseless violent incident waiting to happen!” Responsible gun ownership is evident in Tiana’s thoughts: “if not handled correctly the firearm could harm not only the person but others.”

**Table 2. Experience with Criminal Victimization**

|                | Self | Family | Close Friend |
|----------------|------|--------|--------------|
| Violent crime  | 2    | 9      | 7            |
| Property crime | 10   | 12     | 12           |
| Sexual assault | 4    | 3      | 7            |
| Domestic abuse | 4    | 10     | 10           |

Given that criminality resides in an individual's "nature," complete prevention of crime is impossible, but also people recognize the superior power of firearms to destroy. Arlene acknowledges this when she says, "I know that it won't prevent a crime, but I'm more assured knowing that my last resort won't be grabbing a bat...I have a greater chance of defending myself."

Although these Black women gun enthusiasts are strong believers in the power of gun ownership to deter crime or offer protection in the event of an assault, there is evidence that they are empathetic toward other perspectives that are dominant within the Black community, specifically the fear of guns as a cause of not just a means to violence. For example, Sherri noted that "the weight and the knowledge that [a gun] can be used to take a life or otherwise cause physical harm can be deterrent to ownership and/or gun use." Chloe relayed a similar perspective: "because of so much violence in the world and the power of a gun to end life so quickly, that might create a sense of fear for some people and cause them not to want to be around guns." Such observations suggest that although the powerful simplicity of the NRA propaganda messaging has convinced them, these women are not so deeply embedded in the culture; alternatively, their other identities guide them in the way they respond to those who do not share their beliefs about guns.

On many occasions, participants acknowledged fear as a reasonable rather than ignorant response that is often due to past experience. "I believe fear of firearms is due to a number of factors: A past victim of crime may be very fearful of them," explained Kiara. Phoebe wrote that "the 'unknown' both draws people to and explains people's fear of firearms: everyone knows and has seen the destruction and devastation that can come as a result of a misuse of firearms which makes individuals fearful of them." Thus, these participants recognized that there are multiple possible responses to experiences with crime: they chose to embrace firearms and empower themselves in this manner, while others learned the opposite lesson. Both approaches come across as valid, not as antithetical.

Given their own experiences with crime, respondents especially understood why women might fear firearms—further deviating from the absolutist stance of gun rights propaganda. Participants situated such fears in women's

experience with crime and in social roles of women in the gun world. As Tori noted, "Some women may still be fearful of such a powerful tool...women may be intimidated because of the perception that firearms are a male-dominated tool." According to Kiara, "those who were once in domestic or abusive relationships where they were threatened with a firearm, [may be fearful of them]."

Some study participants even confessed their own sense of awe and unease about firearms, even as participants in the gun culture and members of a gun club. For example, Denise explained that she does not yet own a gun "because I haven't overcome my fear of firearms and I want to make sure I have a safe location to store the firearm." Echoing experience with similar emotions, Kiara advised that "I highly suggest taking your time purchasing a firearm. I too had a bit of fear... I was INTIMIDATED by guns. There is a lot of power in the weapon. Not just firing power but the power of taking a life."

Our participants were aware that the world they sought to inhabit is male-dominated, and they even presented that as a rationale for why many women are resistant to firearms ownership. Jamie was most explicit in her critique of the gun space, acknowledging that it was dominated by very traditionalist perceptions of gender roles: "The firearm industry has historically been a male dominated field. In some households, the male is still considered the protector. Therefore, the woman was not encouraged to learn how to use a firearm in the event she was widowed, divorced or simply needing to protect her family in the absence of her man. In recent years, women are the fastest growing segment in the firearm industry...Women who own guns are more likely to seek training and education prior to purchasing a gun. The path to gun ownership is much more methodical for women than men." Such responses show that even though they are accepting of NRA propaganda messages as they relate to guns and crime, these women at the same time hold far more complex and critical views than such a narrative allows.

In some ways, not only did our participants reject the traditional social roles that are central to the gun world, but actually asserted that women are better equipped than men to act as responsible gun owners: a stark departure from the gun industry's long history



of connecting firearm ownership to masculinity (Stroud, 2012; O'Neill, 2007). Firearms instructor Jamie argued that "I have found that women are much more likely to seek out proper training before they purchase a firearm and the exact opposite occurs with men. Men will claim they already know a great deal about firearms and will never claim to fear a firearm. In fact, the men who have taken our classes have admitted that they never learned some of the basic fundamentals about guns." Ayanna expressed a similar view emphasizing responsible ownership: "women are becoming more comfortable with handling firearms... Women who own guns are innovative, creative, strong, from diverse backgrounds and responsible."

Although they played back the message that criminality is innate, these women are also very cognizant that criminality is also heavily racialized in the American gun world. As a result, they often made clear that there is a distinction between "Black" and "criminal." As Arlene explained, "there are myths that only criminals, especially Black criminals, and rednecks own firearms." Playing back a different dimension of the gun rights propaganda, one that focuses on the pre-civil rights statutory exclusion of Blacks from gun ownership but applies it to the contemporary context, Arlene attested that there is an instrumental purpose to the mythology of guns as instruments of crime because "white people can continue to perpetuate their narrative that most criminals are Black or of color. This in turns feeds misconceptions that aide their gains politically and socially." This is not far from Ann Coulter's ahistorical argument that Democrats pursue gun control out of fear of Blacks with guns (Coulter, 2012); yet Arlene acknowledged the racial dimension of this narrative but did not seem to engage with its partisan aspect.

Others exhibit similar sensitivity about the perceived link between gun ownership and black criminality and attributing to racism and misunderstanding of guns this resistance by whites (presumably) to black gun ownership. According to Jamie, there is a misperception that "there are too many firearms in the Black community" and "if more people in the Black community become legal gun owners, crime may increase... The above ideas exist due to ignorance and a lack of basic firearm education. When people take a firearm education class, the myths will be dispelled immediately. Legal gun owners are not likely to contribute to an increase in

crime." In this argument, firearms education contributes to creating not only responsible gun owners but also enlightened citizens who can recognize the difference between the responsible gun owner and the criminal whether black or white. This is a powerful testament to how the social effects of firearms training and especially the indoctrination into gun rights propaganda go far beyond what Shapira and Simon (2018) have discussed.

Although our study participants appear to have generally incorporated the "guns don't kill people" propaganda, their understanding of the relationships between guns and crime is nuanced by their embeddedness in their racial and gender identities and by their lived experiences with crime and violence. To these women, guns represent safety and empowerment, but these attitudes reflect instrumental concerns rather than political or social identities: they all own guns, but only a few identified strongly with the term "gun owner." In this community, gun ownership is not a political identity in the way described by Lacombe (2018). Although they are influenced by the propaganda, they are also flexible and sympathetic to alternative perspectives and they even express their own fears and apprehensions related to firearms. Therefore, acting as an interpretive community, they again interpreted this gun narrative in a negotiated manner.

## Limitations

This is a qualitative study based on a non-representative sample of African-American women gun enthusiasts. Given the lack of nationally representative data on this group, it is not possible to know whether our study participants represent a robust cross-section of Black women gun owners or if they are far from the prototypical category member. However, the views of these women are suggestive of future lines of research in this domain.

One way to further this research agenda into marginal members of relatively homogeneous social groups would be through network analysis of social media data. Research that both identifies the race and gender of participants in the gun rights space and studies their active responses to and dissemination of misinformation and disinformation related to guns could help us quantify differences in how the level of social integration into a group affects susceptibility to noxious information cues.

# conclusion

## Implications for research and practice

Our analyses show that it is not only the characteristics of the message and the messenger that play a role in terms of the impact of misinformation and propaganda. The position of an individual within a network or community and the salience of one's identification with a group may also be important factors in shaping the way people interact with propaganda. Theory shows that individuals have agency, and they use their identities and lived experiences to interpret and engage with the information environment. Individuals who are participants in a social network but are not core identifiers—people whose cross-cutting identities are not a great “fit” for the network—may be less influenced by disinformation campaigns.

Our study of Black women gun enthusiasts suggests that these women are more likely to accept messages viewed as consistent with their personal experiences and interpreted through the intersections of their identities. In this case, criminal victimization and the desire to have control of their situation and environment make these individuals more susceptible to propaganda that presents guns as innocent objects whose lethality is determined by the character of the human operator. At the same time, as Black women, our study participants have a complex understanding of government and authority that makes their perception of media bias far more nuanced than the absolutist position of the NRA that the media have a secret plan of cultural and political change through gun control. Ultimately, our study suggests two things: (1) further analysis is needed on how people with different positions within cultural and political communities interact with misinformation and propaganda, and (2) the belief that American citizens are undiscerning consumers of information is overly simplistic.

Our study has important implications for both theory and practice. First, our work highlights the importance of identity strength and identity centrality in the process of propaganda decoding and acceptance. More research is needed by quantitative scholars to explore (both experimentally and with observational data) how individuals' position within a network and their strength of identity can influence acceptance and further dissemination of propaganda both within the original network and through cross-cutting networks to which they belong. Second, combating misinformation in homogeneous networks may depend on our ability to reach these more marginal members and through them promote correctives. These individuals have credibility within a given community because they are participating members. Research also suggests that battling disinformation and effectively introducing correctives may depend on the source of the correction: in-group members' may be in a better position to persuade other network participants. However, this also needs to be tested empirically because marginal network participants may not have the same level of perceived credibility as core members. Our study suggests this may be an important line of future research that has the potential to unearth some processes and mechanisms for combating misinformation within online networks.

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