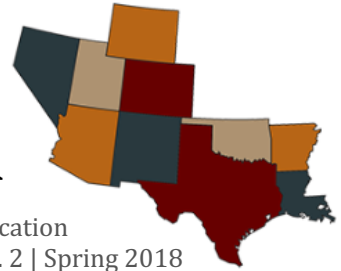


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Girls of the Gunosphere

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Abstract:

We selected five representative images of young (infant to pre-teen) girls from a corpus of over 20,000 images posted to Instagram with hashtags related to guns and gun culture. These images served as a springboard for in-depth visual and vernacular analysis, to explore manifestations of girlhood in online gun culture. By combining images, text, technical affordances such as up to 30 hashtags per post with no character limit, and social networking and community building, Instagram offers a rich and as yet understudied platform for cultural analysis. Our analyses permitted an original exploration of notions of empowerment and agency as conceived at the intersection of a distinct subculture and the constraints of social media. Girls—or, more commonly, their parents—in the online “gunosphere” explore their identities within a contested space characterized by themes of traditional femininity, family values, safe environments, education and socialization, and commodification. These findings point to larger themes within US gun culture, which inhabits a unique intersection between consumer culture/marketing logics, affective historic/patriotic themes, political lobby and social movement, strongly characterized by masculinist notions of power that square uneasily with nuanced approaches to gender.

Girls of the Gunosphere

The Greek goddess Artemis represented both hunting and childbirth, a duality that in current popular imagination has been cleaved along gender lines (Stange, 1997). Artemis wielded a bow and arrow rather than a firearm, but the notion that women can wield weapons while still maintaining traditional feminine roles has deep roots in Western culture. In a putative post-feminist society, where women are assumed to be empowered to make individual choices unconstrained by gender concerns (McRobbie, 2008), one might expect to see women and men on equal footing with regard to firearms as in any other segment of contemporary culture.

Women today are indeed encouraged, within gun culture and by advocacy organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), to learn to shoot for self-defense and recreation, and to exercise their Second Amendment rights. Burbick (2006) points out that in many ways, “the gun culture has not changed much since the 1880s, when women’s shooting clubs were in vogue and white women who could afford the expense of a handgun or rifle were encouraged to know how to shoot and defend themselves against real and imagined enemies” (p. xviii). Even young girls were given guns on the American frontier, “as recreational toys and necessary tools in everyday life” (Twine, 2013, p. 1). Shooting and hunting were promoted as healthy outdoor activities for everyone, beginning at a tender age. Browder (2006) described an 1891 promotional calendar for Union Metallic Cartridge Company that “shows a girl, who cannot be more than four or five

years old, surrounded by eight hunting dogs and carrying a rifle” (p. 5) Even today, for American families embedded in gun culture, these practices are valued and believed to impart “patience, cooperation, responsibility, and respect for nature” in children, and carry on treasured traditions (Homsher, 2001, p. 52). However, on closer examination, the socialization of young girls within gun culture is conditioned by notions of the locus of power that detract from the ideals of equality.

Perhaps the most famous armed woman in U.S. history was Annie Oakley, born Phoebe Ann Moses, who toured with Buffalo Bill to demonstrate her sharpshooting prowess and became wildly popular among middle-class audiences of all ages during the Victorian era (Browder, 2006; Twine, 2013). Oakley negotiated the potential contradictions of her composite figure by presenting herself as a properly married, economically comfortable woman who simply enjoyed practicing and demonstrating her exceptional skills, without threatening any disruption of the social or economic order; she was anti-suffrage and never wore bloomers. As such, Annie Oakley might be seen as an early precursor of today’s postfeminist gun enthusiast.

Post-feminism in Media & Culture

In this post-feminist era, the default assumption is that girls and women have already achieved equality, and that the path toward personal empowerment is through a neoliberal model of individual choices, enacted with few or no structural constraints based on gender (McRobbie, 2008; Zaslow & Schoenberg, 2012). Media and market messages are often framed in the context of “girl power,” which “focuses on style as a mark of one’s autonomy, on sexual expression as a symbol of one’s connection with the self, on independence from men rather than from patriarchal systems and relations of power, and on the individual as independent resister rather than as member of collective social change movement” (Zaslow & Schoenberg, 2012, p. 158). Fudge (1999) observed that “girl power” formulations in mass media and marketing are often a reductive means of sidestepping messy issues of real empowerment in favor of simple slogans, pointing out that “[I]t’s a lot easier to wear a ‘girls kick ass’ T-shirt than to learn how to defend yourself physically.” However, her statement belies yet another oversimplification: that of female power as equivalent to defense, and self-defense. This conceptual conflation is common in gun culture as well, and ties into what media scholars Godfrey and Hamad (2012) termed “a pronounced resurgence in a gendered sociopolitical rhetoric of protective paternalism” (p. 157) in the wake of 9/11. If power and defense are equivalent, then these “paternalized fictions [that] allow for a dominant trope of postfeminist masculinity to renegotiate the cultural viability of the manly action hero via narratives of fatherhood” (p. 158) can be read as contemporary feminist in popular discourse, obviating the need for more tangible forms of female power. All of which raises the question of what, exactly, is meant by empowerment.

Empowerment & Agency

“Empowerment” has been defined and explicated in numerous ways, as both process and outcome of individuals actively seeking access to and personal wielding of power. Scholars working with the processual model have typically sought to identify subprocesses or stages. For example, Kieffer (1984) offered a life-cycle model that traced “maturity” from sociopolitical “infancy” to “adulthood,” a framing that Carr (2003) identified as “unwittingly paternalistic” (p.

12). Seeking to build upon prior research while avoiding the pitfalls of paternalism, Carr incorporated feminist thinking to reconceptualize empowerment as “an inherently interpersonal process in which individuals collectively define and activate strategies to gain access to knowledge and power” (p. 18). Carr (2003) proposed a nonlinear model of empowerment, rooted in developmental feminist theories, in which contextual positions (including socioeconomic class, age, race, and other factors that produce a relative state of powerlessness) interact with individual disposition and experiences (including mediated experiences) leading to identity building, or conscientization, and eventually mobilization. Carr thus mapped these processes as operating not only as a function of the individual, but also dependent on “social, historical, and political context” (p. 9).

Within this model, Carr (2003) cited “powerlessness” as the originating **position** of empowerment, a point of awareness. Powerlessness may take the form of tangible socioeconomic disenfranchisement or awareness of unfavorable imbalances in contextual power dynamics. Powerlessness can also manifest as difficulty managing emotions, skills, relationships, and material resources that signify or enact power within a given context. While conceiving of empowerment in strictly developmental terms per Kieffer (1984) may be problematic when describing adults, this kind of powerlessness is an objective reality for children such as those examined here. **Conscientization** is then the process of building identity, conceived not as an essentialist truth to be uncovered but as a perpetually emerging consciousness in which one’s personal history is interpreted and reinterpreted. Carr (2003) argued that “identity and interpretation, often considered to be affairs of the individual, are inherently interactional” (p. 18) and highly situated processes. Finally, **mobilization** is productive action for personal and/or social change, which “emerges through the very dialectic of interpretation and identity building that constitute conscientization” (p. 18). Within this nonlinear and roughly cyclical model, there is no point at which an individual may be declared as definitively “empowered”: there will likely be multiple moments of powerlessness positioning throughout a person’s lifetime, which will be interpreted contextually and contribute to reshaping her identity and, potentially, future actions.

One critical element that Carr (2003) neglected to address explicitly in her model is the notion of agency. Coffey and Farrugia (2014) noted that this term has been used widely in youth studies research, yet without much clarity, and often prescriptively according to the political or theoretical orientation of the researchers. It has been conceptualized as both a quality that individuals possess, one that is bestowed upon them by circumstance, or one they can acquire through effort. Agency may also be used synonymously with “free will” or “to discuss choices or decision-making and forms of self-expression” (p. 462). Although it is frequently suggested that agency lies in opposition or resistance to institutionalized structures, Coffey and Farrugia argued that it should instead be conceived “as a generative process not located within the individual subject, but comprised in intra-action with relations of force—the outcomes of which cannot be known in advance” (p. 470), a view more in keeping with poststructural models of power.

This poststructural approach to agency has other benefits to those pursuing gender research, since “the application of any discourse-analytic framework to questions of gender brings along a set of theoretical assumptions about the interrelationship of discourse, identity, and power,” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 44). Regarding girls in particular, Gonick et al. (2009) argued the need, specifically, for approaches to agency that can be

...theorized as articulated and evidenced within the logic of the production of gender, the body, and sexual, racial, cultural (etc.) differences. This presents a complex, embodied equation of gendered subjectivity that is less about balances of agency (girl power) and compliance (girl victims) than it is about contingent and ambiguous practices of identity. (p. 6)

In examining the ways in which young girls are presented through posts by family members, others, or themselves on visual social media platforms, we can thus also explore various modes of agency within the peculiar production logics of these platforms, as intrinsic to the conscientization and mobilization dimensions of empowerment.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Despite the existence of a solid vein of research and writings about women and firearms from a number of perspectives over the past two decades (see for example Browder, 2006; Homsher, 2001; Stange, 1997; Twine, 2013), very little has been written about young girls in contemporary gun culture. We have therefore decided to concentrate our present analysis on girls from infancy to pre-adolescence. We sought to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways are girls, from infancy to pre-adolescence, presented within Instagram gun cultures?

RQ2: What do these images suggest about the empowerment of young girls within Instagram gun cultures?

To address these questions, we selected five representative images of young girls from a corpus of over 20,000 images posted to Instagram with gun culture hashtags such as #2A, #NRA, and #gungirl. The posts were made between September 2016 and June 2017, a time of heightened sociopolitical attention to gun issues surrounding the U.S. elections, transition to a new administration, and episodes of gun violence around the country, exacerbated by high-profile incidents of police brutality and racial tensions. These images served as a springboard for in-depth visual and vernacular analysis as set forth below. The choice of Instagram as the site of inquiry was propelled by its global popularity, the primacy of the image in its operation and use, and its ability to distribute broadly and to many interest groups from a single post. While the range of popularity varied, from posts in the millions (#daddysgirl with 8.7 million) to relatively small totals (#gungirl with 48,660), all of the feeds evidenced active engagement.

The qualitative visual/textual approach draws on analytic methods developed by Lester (2017) and Rose (2016), both of whom stress the importance of considering image and accompanying text as a whole. The posts were explored in terms that included, but were not limited to, composition, visual cues, semiotic codes, symbolism, cognitive elements such as salience and purpose, and written material in the captions. The hashtags were treated as both social and organizational tools, essentially directing publication of the image to specific communities and interest groups while simultaneously serving as identity markers. Analysis followed stages that began in immersion, then went through a granular process of close attention that resulted in a broader contextual understanding.

FINDINGS

We identified several common threads among the images in how the girls were presented, considering images, hashtags, and captions as constitutive of each. These threads may be succinctly labeled as *femininity*, *safe environment*, *family values*, *education & socialization*, and *commodification*.

The thread of *femininity* identifies gender role expressions that can be described as mainstream or traditional, such as the color pink or fashion embellishments. While the term *family values* may have sociopolitical implications, here we are using it to describe the ways in which the Instagram photos are inscribed with evidence of beliefs and principles held by the subject's own family. A *safe environment* is one that is not characterized by any implied direct or immediate threat, and in which the subject of the photograph is protected from harm, even from the spectator. The theme of *education & socialization* refers to the ways in which those values are transmitted, along with relevant skills and traditions. Finally, *commodification* may describe overtly commercial appeals, such as brand names or tagging of business enterprises, as well as the act of display intrinsic to all Instagram posts.

These threads are woven throughout the photographs, manifested in different ways, as fundamental to the presentation and empowerment of the girls depicted.

Presentation

Femininity. Markers of femininity are evident in all five images. The baby girl in Figure 1, for example, is wearing a soft, pastel top with white polka dots. Softness is the pervading quality of most of this photograph, from the blanket to her wispy hair and smooth skin, with the sole exception of the gun. The caption refers to her as “my angel,” and hashtags include #gungirl and #cowgirl (and variants #cowgirls and #cowgirlup) to textually highlight her gender.

Figure 1. Image posted by user shadowvalleyweapons.



shadowvalleyweapons My Angel with dads BIG IRON! Just shipped this one off (revolver-not the child) to the master @dark_alliance_firearms. Can't wait to get this one done up! #ruger #44magnum #vaquero #gungirl #minimilitia #parentingdoneright #wheelgun #cowgirl #cowgirls #cowgirlup #iqguns #iqmilitia #guns #2a #revolver #custom



5 hours ago (Jun 29 2017 07:46:18) | Photo Filter: Normal | [translate](#)

The toddler girl in Figure 2 is even more overtly feminine, with pink and red hair bows, pigtails, and pink tasseled moccasins. Her camisole and bloomers are pure white, with a decorative knot at the shoulder. The only gendered tag used here is #gungirl; the image conveys femininity even without additional labeling.

Figure 2. Image posted by user californiagunguy.



californiagunguy Getting started early
 #Californiagunguy #gunguy #gungirl #qunlife
 #gunporn #gun #pewpewlife #sickgunsallday
 #igmilitia #goodmorning #coffeeplease #2a
 #runyourgunnotyourmouth #gunsdaily #dailybadass
 #edc #glock19 #pistol #steelwaiting #glock #glocklife
 #glockperfection #igguns #qunlifestyle #qunchannel
 #springfieldarmory #notairsoft #gunsofinstagram
 #s3fsolution

2 days ago (Jun 27 2017 18:45:24) | Photo Filter:
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The most exaggeratedly feminine of the girls is shown in Figure 3. The princess ball gown and sparkly tiara mark her not only as female, but one who enjoys strong expressions of traditional girliness. The caption explicitly calls out these elements, and adds the hashtags #girlswithguns and even #girlsandglam to highlight the centrality of style in this image.

Figure 3. Image posted by user ccreyes3.



40 Likes

0 Comments



ccreyes3: Doesn't every girl wear a crown and ball gown when she's oiling her gun? #[lyladoes](#) #[nra](#) #[itsheryear](#) #[daddysgirl](#) #[girlswithguns](#) #[gunsandglam](#)

The image in Figure 4 is unique in the set, with two subjects, and the girl's femininity is exacerbated by the juxtaposition with her hypermasculine father. Her pink tank top stands in contrast to his red shirt, and her vulnerability is heightened by her bare arms and legs and long, uncovered hair, while her knees are held demurely close together. The caption refers to the user's "#beautiful little girl," and there are multiple gendered tags (including but not limited to #girlsandguns, #sheshoots, and #girlswhoshoot).

Figure 4. Image posted by user ryanlee.bos




ryanlee.boss #throwbackthursday #tbt with my #beautiful little girl.
#girlsandguns #sheshoots #daddydaughter #moments #guns #ak47 #ar15
#badasses #backyardfun #ninlineapparel @ninlineapparel @magpul #texas
#wedontdie911 #countrylife #family #loveher #angel #teachtheyoung
#tactical #girlshoshoot #futureshooter #red #remembereveryone deployed
#freedomgirl #murica


150 days ago (Mar 02 2017 09:05:40) | Photo Filter: Valencia | [translate](#)




Finally, despite the more active stance of the girl in Figure 5, she marks her femininity with sparkly stud earrings and a polka-dot fleece. She self-identifies with girliness beginning with her username, @snipergirlintraining, and adds hashtags #girlswhoshoot and even just #girl to drive home the point.


Figure 5. Image posted by user snipergirlintraining



 @snipergirlintraining

 **snipergirlintraining** I had a chance to shoot a bit with my old Crosman NP rifle. I must say it was a real challenge. Not nearly as accurate as my Air Arms S400F. It was fun to shoot and has a real kick that I missed plus super loud, I guess I'm just used to shooting with a silencer now. #girlswhoshoot #airgun #love #tagforlikes #followforfollow #me #S400 #outdoors #hunting #gun #fun #rifle #shootingrange #girl #instafollow #hunter #field #target #daddysgirl #summer @air_arms @Hawke @leapers_utg @crosmancorp

68 days ago (May 06 2017 16:11:36) | Photo Filter: Clarendon | [translate](#) | [Cape Town, Western Cape](#)



Family values. Several of the photos included hashtags that refer to parental roles, especially fathers. Figures 3 and 5 are tagged #daddysgirl, although no father is present in the photo, and Figure 4 (which does show the father) uses the tag #daddydaughter; Figure 1 is tagged #parentingdoneright.

The hashtag for Figure 1 merits some note, as it describes the gun the baby is holding as “dads [*sic*] BIG IRON!” Although the image is not overtly sexualized nor seemingly coded in sexual terms, it is impossible to ignore the phallic implications of this phrasing. However, in context the suggestion is more one of a father’s pride in his “angel” being able to lift the heavy weapon, a suggestion that she will one day follow in his footsteps.

Parental pride and familial ties are values woven through other images as well. The photographer of the image in Figure 3 is the account holder @ccreyes3, who is the mother of the little princess. From the opposite perspective, the sniper girl in Figure 5 is proud of her expertise, as evidenced in her caption discussing technical features of the gun and her growth as a shooter, but she still self-identifies as #daddysgirl.

Many of these images are presented as nostalgic memories or treasured future mementos. The father in Figure 4 uses the hashtags #throwbackthursday and #tbt to identify the photo as a memory, along with the overexposed filter and vignetting reminiscent of old Instamatic or Polaroid photographs. Figure 3 is tagged #itsheryear, and has almost a timeless quality thanks to its black and white coloring and the styling of the princess featured. The lighting and color saturation of Figure 1 evoke a studio portrait, where both the firearm and the baby are captured in a future memory.

Safe environment. Most of the images represent domestic settings, and the one that is not (Figure 3) shows a commercial establishment dedicated at least in part to law enforcement. Overall, there is a sense of safety, despite—or perhaps, because of—the inclusion of firearms. The first photo, with the baby, is the most intimate, as it appears to be taken on or near a bed, where one might keep a gun for home protection. The princess in Figure 3 seems to be caring for her rifle in the living or dining room, and Figures 4 and 5 show a yard just outside the home, with the house still visible.

Beyond the setting itself, all the girls bar the sniper in Figure 5 are under parental supervision. In the one image that shows a parent, Figure 4, the father’s bulging bicep and defensive stance imply protectiveness, and the open spaces between homes suggest an overall sense of security, or at least the ability to defend one’s property if necessary. The toddler in Figure 2 is kept safely away from the guns by a physical barrier. The lone unsupervised girl, in Figure 5, indicates a level of knowledge and experience that makes interacting alone with a tactical weapon a suitably safe pastime.

Education & socialization. While all of the images can be said to represent girls socialized into gun culture, some make explicit visual and/or textual reference to passing on these values and skills. In Figure 3, the hashtags #teachtheyoung and #futureshooter reinforce the visual, where

the girl mirrors her father's stance and hold on the rifle to reflect her training as well as their connection. Four of the images show the girls handling the gun, with Figure 2 the sole exception—where, notably, she (and the viewer, by extension) is forbidden to handle the guns by the warning signs on the case. However, the caption reads, “Getting started early,” suggesting that gun education lies in the toddler's future.

Education does not simply refer to skills training, but also the passing on of broader values and ideologies. For example, American patriotism is evident in several images. The colors in Figure 1 are very stark, but strongly coded as red (the blanket), white (the girl's skin and blonde hair, the polka dots), and baby blue (her top). The dad in Figure 4 is wearing a T-shirt branded Nine Line Apparel, also called out in both the hashtags and an explicit @mention to notify the brand—a company that self-describes as “relentlessly patriotic,” adding, “we don't apologize for our love of country. We are America's next Greatest Generation” (“Nine Line Apparel,” n.d.) This image also uses the hashtags #murica and #freedomgirl to express conservative patriotism.

Second Amendment enthusiasts rely on multiple hashtags to self-identify and connect with other like-minded Instagram users, several of which are in evidence in the photos examined: #2A (Figures 1 and 2), #igmilitia (Figures 1 and 2), #minimilitia, (Figure 1), #pewpewlife (Figure 2), #nra (Figure 3). Figure 4 also embeds a message of support for military troops (#remembereveryonedeployed), which fits with overall themes of conservative values.

Commodification. Four of the five posts include tags or @mentions of brands or types of guns, indirectly commodifying the girls depicted. The princess in Figure 3, while not associated with any particular make of weapon, through her dress clearly exemplifies a consumer culture and symbolizes material entitlement. The most overtly commercial image is Figure 2, which is set in a store, showing rows of semiautomatic handguns complete with price tags. One of the most prominent visual elements in Figure 5 is the girl's bright orange “Jeep”-branded hat.

Despite the studio-portrait quality of Figure 1, and the post's emphasis on family, the account belongs to a small family gun manufacturing business. The baby girl is therefore also being commodified in order to humanize the business to current and potential customers. The user @snipergirlintraining, the only one of the girls posting on her own behalf, also actively engages in self-branding by tagging numerous companies and encouraging other users to follow her (#tagforlikes, #followforfollow).

On a more conceptual level, all of the girls in these images are on public display, associated with guns and gun culture through both visual and textual elements. The younger children, whose image is posted by parents, become part of the family's public image and their likeness exposed to searching and copying. Their likeness thus becomes part of the “brand” of Instagram itself, the various communities that intersect on its platform, and the visual internet at large. As we discuss in the next section, this has implications for their relative empowerment status and agency above and beyond what the images themselves represent.

Empowerment

We can now turn our attention to the empowerment model described above, based on Carr (2003) and poststructural feminist theories of agency, to address the question posed in RQ2. Since the model is nonlinear, any given image may represent multiple dimensions. However, due to space limitations and for the sake of clarity, we have chosen to focus on how certain images best exemplify specific dimensions of empowerment.

Positionality. Empowerment can only begin from a state of relative and perceived powerlessness (Carr, 2003), and thus a moment of initial awareness. While the baby in Figure 1 is too young to conceive of the world in formal terms of power, she seems to be experiencing a moment of discovery. Her gaze is happy and a bit awe-struck as she looks outside the frame. The large revolver occupies the center of the photograph, while she provides the framing device. The combined message of the image and context suggests that she is discovering her birthright: born into a gunmaking family, this is her first metaphorical step into a future centered around firearms.

At the same time, she is not the author of the post. Her parents are choosing to celebrate this moment to mark the beginning of her journey. The girl's public and private identities are already intimately intertwined with guns, a power relationship embedded in her family's values. Her empowerment, however, does not (yet, at least) imply her active agency—not merely because of her tender age, but also because of the choice made on her behalf to publicize and commodify this moment. The image is posted to enhance the family business through relationships with current and potential customers and business partners on Instagram, and beyond.

Another, quite different example of positionality is Figure 2, where we as spectators find ourselves looking at a display case alongside the toddler. The signs on the case state that the weapons are reserved solely for law enforcement, so she (like us) can look but not touch. As the only nonwhite girl in the set, the visual impact of her standing before rows of guns, all aimed in her direction, cannot help but evoke current sociopolitical tensions and iconic images from Black Lives Matter protests. This toddler is learning that firearms are a normal part of daily life (hashtags include #gunlife, #goodmorning, #gunslifestyle, #gunsdaily and #edc, a common abbreviation for “everyday carry”), but also that there are rules circumscribing her access to them.

Conscientization. The most immediately striking feature of Figure 3 is the girl's dress and tiara. She is actively exploring her identity through commodified princess culture, but is also comfortable caring for her rifle. The caretaking aspect of her role is amplified by the way she is cradling the rifle, similarly to how one might hold an infant. The girl is negotiating these seemingly contradictory identity positions with no apparent effort. The girl's finger is clearly on the trigger, but her agency is limited to the cleaning function while her photographer/mother watches with apparent amusement and affection.

Figure 4 is distinctive because both individuals are exploring their identity, which is explicitly relational. The girl is standing in the protective shadow of her father, mimicking his serious expression and his stance but without taking any direct action. In the caption and hashtags, the father reinforces his own self-image as a father and family man, and characterizes them both as #badasses. He also expresses values on her behalf, through hashtags such as #wedontdial911 and

tags of commercial brands, bringing her along as he engages in the commodification of their combined image.

Mobilization. Finally, the girl in Figure 5 appears to be the oldest and most independent, posting from her own account. She has chosen her own gun, and has enough contextual knowledge to compare it to others. The photo appears to be a selfie, the post a means of self-expression (she even uses the hashtag #me) as well as connecting to others. Her use of Instagram conventions like offering like/tag exchanges identifies her as a savvy user, solidly embedded in the platform's communities and familiar with self-marketing practices. Everything about this image is indicative of mobilization within both gun and Instagram cultures. Within the constraints posed by both, and by her individual circumstances, she is exercising a high degree of agency.

CONCLUSION

No single set of images can be considered wholly representative of a complex and diverse population such as the user base of a popular social media platform. We therefore make no claims that the five images examined here reflect every nuance of Instagram gun cultures. However, their commonalities and intersections are indicative of certain patterns that exist within these cultures on the platform, and which merit investigation by those of us seeking to understand the complex nexus of gender identities and visual social media as situated within subcultures. The through lines of femininity, family values, safe environment, education & socialization, and commodification can be used for future research into aspects of online gun cultures, including on other social media platforms and focusing on different age groups or other categories.

The technical affordances of Instagram, which combines visual images, captions, hashtags, and the ability to follow and tag other users, create multiple entry points for experiencing posts, which complicates analysis. A user who encounters the image in Figure 1 because they follow the account to which it is posted, a small family gun manufacturer, may respond very differently than one who comes across it by searching the #parentingdoneright hashtag, for example. Given that gun ownership is a fraught and volatile issue in the United States—which in turn has a very distinctive gun culture compared to other countries around the world—the view of a happy baby brandishing a large revolver may prove quite jarring to some, even shocking. Within the “native” context of the post, however, vernacular analysis indicates that it is intended to be a pleasant, even joyful image.

This referential aspect of online photo sharing serves a number of potential cultural, social, and identity functions. The archival nature of these platforms turns them into a form of electronic family album, that can be consulted and shared with family, friends, and strangers. Doing so, especially in conjunction with selected hashtags, reinforces identity positions and community bonds. In a world where image altering is commonplace and simple, these images are notably unaltered beyond the level of an Instagram filter to enhance light or color. As such, they have standing as honest representations of values, culture, and accepted norms, all of which can be seen as valuable within a political climate that increasingly appeals to tribal markers. As part of the larger social media ecology, Instagram posts can also feed into other platforms for wider

distribution, contributing to broader normalization of those community norms and affording them even more enduring impact.

Homsher (2001) observed that the composite figure of “woman-with-a-firearm” can be startling to modern sensibilities because the two elements have become disjointed in popular culture. Thus, when confronted with such an image, the observer is forced “to reassess which qualities are inherent in the firearm and which are really associative or metaphorical,” as well as “which qualities in the shooter are inherent and which are culturally assigned” (p. 31). Young girls—or, more commonly, their parents—in the online “gunosphere” explore their identities and empowerment within a contested space characterized by themes of traditional femininity, family values, safe environments, education and socialization, and commodification. These findings point to larger themes within US gun culture, which inhabits a unique intersection between consumer culture/marketing logics, affective historic/patriotic themes, political lobby and social movement, strongly characterized by masculinist notions of power that square uneasily with nuanced approaches to gender.

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