Women's Images of Guns: an Exploratory Study

Laura M. Milner, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska
Dale Fodness, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska
Joy Morrison, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15566/gender/v01/GCB-01

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Women's Images of Guns: 
An Exploratory Study 

Laura M. Milner, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska  
Dale Fodness, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska  
Joy Morrison, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska  

The present study is an exploration of the relationship between women and firearms. The timeliness and relevance of this study is documented by current developments in the marketplace and the ensuing controversy in the popular media. Recently, a major firearms manufacturer has undertaken to actively pursue the female market. This marketing action has proved to be controversial and has elicited a variety of responses from women. The purpose of this study is to begin to examine what it means when a product almost entirely associated with men is marketed to and used by women. Following a review of gender research and the literature of female gun-ownership, results from an early qualitative study of the meaning of guns for women are reported. This article concludes with an overview of the insights gained from the qualitative research.

GENDER RESEARCH

Gender is a variable of primary importance to marketers in positioning goods and services. Of such importance is gender that Milner (in press) insists, "Indeed, gender may properly be considered the 'alpha' segmentation variable. Before all else, marketers must decide the relevance of gender to their product or service. This will dictate whether they will position their product a masculine, feminine, both, or neither" (p. 1).

Within the marketing literature, research relating to gender positioning or the relationship of gender and products, be they goods or services, can be categorized in three ways (Bellizzi and Milner, in press): the gender of promotion, the perceived gender of products, and the influence of gender on attitudes toward products and brands.

The first category of research focuses on variables relevant to the gender of promotion, such as voice-overs and role-models used in advertisements. This category features research on sex-role portrayal, as well as experimental research manipulating variables relevant to effective appeals aimed at men and women (Bellizzi and Milner, in press; Busby, 1975; Caballero, Lumpkin, and Chonko, 1986; Debevec and Iyer, 1986; Gilly, 1988; Kanungo and Pang, 1973; Kanungo and Johar, 1975; Lyonski, 1983; Poe, 1976; Razzouk and Harmon, 1986; Robbins and Paksoy, 1989; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Scheibe, 1979; Venkatesan and Losco, 1975; Whipple and Courtney, 1980; Wolheter and Lammers, 1980).

The second category of gender research focuses on the perceived gender of products and brands (Iyer and Debevec, 1986, 1989; Milner, Speece, and Anderson, (1990). This stream of research investigates the extent to which products are perceived as masculine and/or feminine, and often relies on survey methodology. The third category of research also typically relies on paper and pencil measures and is concerned with the influence of individual difference variables (such as attitudes toward women, career orientation, country/culture), as well as gender on attitudes towards products and ads (Alreck, Settle, and Belch, 1982; Bartos, 1989; Barry, Gilly, and Doran, 1985; Bellizzi and Milner, in press; Debevec and Iyer, 1986; Ducker and Tucker, 1977; Langer, 1987; McCall, 1977; Whipple and Courtney, 1980).

Thus far, the products used in gender positioning research have been relatively commonplace, e.g., furniture (Kanungo and Pang, 1973) and soap (Debevec and Iyer, 1986). The research has often focused on "cross-over" appeal advertising to secondary markets based on gender. Examples include ads promoting dish soap to mean, beer to women, and car-care services to women (Bellizzi and Milner, in press; Debevec and Iyer, 1986). The research has shown that each of these products tends to be more closely identified with
one gender than the other. There are, however, products which are almost exclusively identified with a single gender, and to date there has been no academically-reported investigation on extreme gender-identified products in the marketing literature.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

There exists little research relevant to the relationship of women and guns, perhaps due to the long history of priapic theorizing associated with guns. Freud (1919) is a classic example of this school of thought "Nor is there any doubt that all weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male organ: e.g. ploughs, hammers, rifles, revolvers, daggers, sabres, etc." (p. 356). This connection between penises and firearms has been made elsewhere more recently (Tanay, 1976) although this interpretation is controversial (Kates and Varzos, 1987). Whether firearms are priapic or not, the fact that female gun ownership or use is at most, a societal taboo, and at least, negatively sanctioned, is exhibited by the controversy elicited with explicit overt attempts to connect women and guns.

Consider the recent debate created by the manufacturing and promoting of guns made for women (Gibbs, 1988; Glamour, 1986, 1989; Harrison, 1989; Newsweek, 1989; Pogrebin, 1989; Quigley, 1989; Torrey, 1989). Smith and Wesson commissioned a Gallup poll study and found female gun ownership had increased over 53% between 1983 and 1986, with many other women considering first-time purchases (Gibbs, 1988). In response, manufacturers, such as Smith and Wesson as well as Mossberg began to design pistols and shotguns with the female physique in mind. For instance, the Lady Smith .38 revolver has a smaller grip. The Mossburg Home Security 410 features a hand grip on the forearm pump. Others have created designer weapons and accessories such as guns disguised as jewelry and handbags for the guns. The ads promoting the Lady Smith were created to appear as home security ads, rather than blatant firearms ads. *Better Homes and Gardens, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, Mademoiselle,* and *Self* refused to carry the ads once they realized that the ads promoted firearms rather than home security.

Popular media articles on the subject have included discussions of the traditional debates about American society and guns. For instance, whether guns bought for self-protection really do protect; whether handguns ought to be legal. The added dimension of targeting gun ads to women usually entails a discussion of whether women have the "killer instinct" and whether they can/should be taught to kill at all. For example, Gloria Steinem was quoted as saying, "If we buy a gun, we're standing up for existing values -- but not for ourselves" (p. 345, *Glamour*, 1989).

Academic studies of gun ownership typically revolve around two motivations, sport and protection (Bankston and Thompson, 1989; Lizotte and Bordua, 1980; Lizotte, Bordua, and White, 1981; Young, 1986). Literature on the sport motivation for women is virtually nonexistent. Schontzler (1990) cites U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data suggesting, "Some 9 percent of U.S. hunters were women in 1985, up from only 6 percent in 1965" (p. 22).

The most well-developed line of research on the relationship between women and guns is on protection. For instance, Young (1986) found that Southern women are more likely to own guns than non-Southern women while non-Southern women are more likely to own guns for protection from crime. Young's results seemed to reflect the fact that Southern women are more familiar with guns (Marks and Stokes, 1976) due to the greater frequency of overall gun ownership in the South than in other regions of the United States (Newton and Zimring, 1969; Reed, 1971; Stinchcombe, Adams, Heimer, Schepple, Smith, and Taylor; 1980).

To the best of our knowledge, however, studies of the previous type tend to be based on secondary research utilizing large data bases, such as the NORC General Social Survey. Further, these studies do not differentiate gun owners from gun users. For instance, Young (1986) notes that "within the South, however, where firearms are more prevalent and women tend to be familiar with them, ownership is more likely to be the result of having friends who own guns, moving away from home or changing residences, or receiving guns as gifts, even in the absence of an inordinate fear of crime" (p. 172). Later, he mentions inheritance and collecting as motivations for owning guns. Indeed, to the best of our
knowledge, there has been no research to actually examine the "meaning" of guns for women.

METHOD

Purpose and Procedure

In this introductory stage of research on the images some hold of guns, the guiding premise might be paraphrased as "Ask the woman who owns one." Future research will include gun non-owners as well, but for the purposes of an initial inquiry into a relatively unstudied market, it was determined by the researchers that this study would focus on women who were already familiar with and interested in the product.

Toward this end, a two-phase study was undertaken to explore the images of three distinct and relatively non-overlapping segments of female gun ownership. These are hunting, protection, and competition. In the first phase, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with persons highly knowledgeable of women's uses of guns in each segment. The in-depth individual interviews consisted of one interview with a female hunting guide, one interview with a female Olympic gold medalist competitive shooter, and one interview with a male instructor of a basic pistol class for women.

In the second stage, focus group interviews were conducted with groups of women within two of the segments. The two focus groups included one group of college-aged women who were members of a university rifle team and a group of women enrolled in a National Rifle Association-sponsored basic pistol class.

All of the individuals who took part in this study were at the present time active gun owners. They were relatively frequent users of firearms. The competitive shooters were the most active, practicing several hours every day. The members of the basic pistol class met weekly at a local pistol range. The hunters were active during the various hunting seasons for their preferred prey.

All interviews were conducted during the fall of 1990 in Fairbanks, Alaska. Each group was audio tape-recorded. Moderator guides for each group are available from the researchers. The questions presented to the women in the interviews were structured and centered around the following topics: how they were introduced to guns; how they feel about guns and their purposes for using guns in interactions with firearms; their perceptions of how others feel about their involvement with guns, as well as reactions to a Smith and Wesson promotional piece for the Lady Smith Handgun.

RESULTS

The findings reported in this study represent the exploratory phase of a larger, evolving stream of research. The results are reported in a descriptive word format rather than a numerical quantitative style. These qualitative results will serve to develop insights for more quantitatively-driven research in the future. With these cautions in mind, the findings are presented in the following sections.

Introduction to Guns

In general, most of the women interviewed were introduced to guns at an early age in the home. Male family members, most frequently fathers, were often mentioned as sources of information concerning guns and as models of how to use guns.

"I've always been around guns. My dad, grandfather, and brothers were all hunters."

"My father was a great hunter of bear and moose and such."

"We had guns all over the house when I was growing up."

"My dad was active in the local rifle club and he would load up my three brothers and sisters and me and take us out to the gun range."

"I was always a tomboy. One day I just said, 'Dad, I want to shoot.'"

Some interviewees reported an initial resistance on the part of their mothers to their interest in guns. For example, the individual who made the last quote above also observed:

"My mother was dead set against it (her interest in guns)."

Those women who had not been exposed to guns
early in life most often attributed their recent interest in firearms to situational factors:

"The guy I married is really into guns and I would like to be able to share that interest with him."

"I'm in training to be a gunsmith."

"I've been in two near life-or-death situations in the last year and I want a handgun for personal defense."

Reactions of Family and Others

When interviewees were asked about how their families and other people in their life felt about their firearm-related activities, most reported supportive environments.

"My mom has always been a pusher. She wants me to be the best."

"My grandfather always supported me."

"My brother is highly supportive - he shoots too."

"My family has always been really supportive."

There were exceptions, typically mothers, to the broad family support felt by most of the interviewees.

"My mom doesn't like the idea."

"At times I get real frustrated with my mom because she doesn't understand, but I'm getting used to it."

Reactions of people outside of the family to the firearms-related activities of the women interviewed varied, particularly for self-defense purposes.

"I've been getting a lot of negative feedback. They say, 'I wouldn't have a gun around. What if the kids get hold of it?'"

"People are always telling me that they don't think a gun is a good way to protect yourself. But nothing has ever happened to them."

The competition shooters were able to provide a perspective on how the men they met or dated viewed their facility with firearms.

"A lot of guys think it's pretty funny. They say, 'I'm a pretty good shot. I bet I could beat you.' So I challenge them."

"I have a lot of guys ask me if I'll go hunting with them."

"Men admire you, because they know that they couldn't do it."

Regarding how other women react, the competitive shooters reported:

"When you say, I'm on the rifle team, other women say, that's really neat, I would like to do that. I run across that a lot."

"Some will say that you should see more women doing something like that and others will ask if you're a member of the NRA."

Differences between Men and Women

Focus group participants were asked a number of questions designed to explore their feelings toward being a woman in a traditionally male endeavor. Women seemed to pay lip service to the ideal of the equality of the sexes.

"Men and women are so much equal now, it doesn't make much difference."

"There are no problems in competitive shooting because of gender."

"We compete at the same level as the guys."

"As far as the team goes, we're just one of the guys."

Proving uncovered some interesting differences, however. The male pistol instructor stated that women were, in general, better shots than men. This idea seemed to be common knowledge among the competitive shooters.

"Women are naturally better shooters than men."

"Girls are better shooters because they're more mature, more willing to listen to new ideas, and they know how to deal with people."

Gender conflicts on the rifle team were denied at first. But, under proving it was revealed that:
"There is most definitely competition between the sexes."

"A lot of times college guys are pretty high and mighty and they hate to lose to girls."

"Sometimes men have problems when girls beat them. It can cause grief on the team."

**Descriptions of Guns**

When asked to describe their guns, the women interviewed responded in both instrumental and symbolic terms. Members of the rifle team and hunters were able to provide a great deal of detail regarding the mechanics of their firearms. What was most striking, however, were symbolic or expressive descriptions women provided of their firearms. Members of the rifle team focused on the fact that their guns were an essential part of their sport.

"It's just like a pair of running shoes."

"A gun is a piece of sporting equipment. It's like a basketball. I need it to compete."

"I think they're beautiful pieces of equipment; they're precision made."

The female guide had lived in the wilderness of Alaska for an extended period of time, and she also stressed the fact that for her the gun was a tool, a necessity for survival.

The basic pistol class, as a group, were least able to provide either symbolic or instrumental descriptions of firearms. Instead, they described firearms in terms of ownership.

"This is the gun my husband bought for me."

"My husband has a lot of guns around the house."

Under detailed probing, the members of the rifle team and the hunters generated more personal and anthropomorphic descriptions of their firearms.

"They're our babies."

"I like just having the rifle in my hands, having a piece of equipment in my hands, an extension of my body. It's just a major rush."

**Meaning of Gun Experiences**

For all women interviewed, the firearms with which they interacted held some larger meaning within their total life experience. Not surprisingly, the competitive shooters had formed a self-image largely dependent on their sport and the equipment necessary for their sport.

"As a woman it makes you unique, it sets you apart."

"It's a part of my personality, who I am. I'm a shooter."

"It's part of my life a part of me."

"It means everything in my life."

This response was particularly evident when the competitive shooting group was asked what it would mean if they were no longer allowed to have their guns.

"It would take away something really important about me."

"It would drive me nuts."

"A part of me would be gone, a part I'd miss a lot."

There was a subtle distinction, however, when women were probed on this point. The above quotes refer to a general absence of guns in the individual's lives. Further questioning uncovered object-specific feelings:

"I'd be disappointed if I lost my other guns, but I'd be upset if I lost my 22."

"My rifle means more to me because I use it, shoot it more often."

"I love my shotgun. Guns come and guns go, I wouldn't care if I lost my other guns."

Particularly for the women involved in competition and hunting, there was a genuine reverence for firearms, especially when the topic of guns in homes where children are present was brought up. The immediacy of response to the question indicated that everyone had thought about it. Not everyone was going to allow guns in
the same home as their children, and most everyone had very strong feelings against toy guns, whether the children involved were boys or girls.

There was also a fairly strong categorization of the purposes of the firearms. That is, for the shooters, the firearms were for competition, not for self-defense. For example,

"The scaredist I ever was was in a hotel room in L.A., and I was surrounded by guns."

Similarly for the hunter, three were guns for hunting and there were guns for self-defense. Further the tone of the conversation changed when the different types of guns were discussed. The discussion on the hunting firearms elicited neutral to positive comments. The conversation on the protective firearms was decidedly emotionally negative. Consider the following comment which was made when a participant was asked whether she would shoot an assailant to kill him or to stop him:

"I don't want to send him to prison; I want to send him to hell."

Reactions to Ads

The women in the two focus groups were presented with a written description of an advertising piece for Smith and Wesson Lady Smith handgun. The ad features the gun juxtaposed next to a mink coat, scarf, and picture of a little girl. The background is a woman putting the little girl to bed. When asked what they thought the ad was saying, what its main points were, typical responses included:

"To me, this ad is trying to appeal to a woman's desires (mink coat, etc.) and what's near and dear to her (children) and associating these things with owning the gun. It's also suggesting that these guns will give a woman independence as well as power and responsibility."

"I think the ad is making women look like they are all alone against the 'bad guys.' It's also making it seem like a revolver is a household appliance, or something that every woman should carry in their purse like lipstick - the gun's feminine."

"The main points of this ad are to sell pistols and to play on women's emotions for security by making them think that they have to have a gun for protection.

"I think this ad is trying to say that you're more female owning this kind of gun."

One woman in the protection group vocalized a sentiment to which the other agreed suggesting that the ad was "classist."

"Soundslike something only the rich would have. If you want to get to everybody you don't put a mink coat in there."

When asked to identify the reasons the ad gave for owning a firearm, the women interviewed responded as follows:

"Women need to feel secure, independent, above males."

"To make a woman feel safer where she is."

"Power, responsibility, independence, security for her and her children, something new and different, to be a good mother, you should have a gun to protect your children."

"You need to protect the things you've worked so hard for."

After picking out the main points and the reasons for gun ownership portrayed in the ad, the women were then asked their views, i.e., Do you believe what the ad is saying? More negative than positive responses were generated.

"It's ok to have a gun for protection, but it really bothers me when I see an ad that says that a woman has to buy a gun for protection. They don't know how to shoot it, they really know nothing about it, and then accidents occur."

"I don't think that the gun is going to do any of this for a woman. It's a typical advertising ploy."

"I don't think a gun gives independence to anybody."

"There are so many other worries that come with owning a gun. The idea that you're protecting your children is interesting, but what happens when the child gets ahold of that thing?"
When asked to describe the woman depicted in the ad, women responded as follows:

"I get the picture in my head that this is a divorced lady with kids, on her own for the first time and needs protection."

"I see a woman who has all these things, very independent."

"I see something like a soap opera."

"I see someone who is insecure in a lot of ways."

Women's overall reactions to the ad were also largely negative.

"It seems kinda pandering in a way. It makes it look like owning a gun is glamorous."

"I thought the ad was funny. I think they're trying to make women feel like they are equal to men."

"It made me laugh because you don't see that - a woman, mink coat, gloves, rose, carrying a pistol."

"I don't think I could buy a gun just from an ad like that. I'd have to talk to somebody."

"I don't know anyone who wouldn't laugh at this - it's so ridiculous."

"I don't find any part of this ad appealing. They glamorize the gun too much."

Yet, while these women were critical of the ad themselves, there was some feeling that there were women who might respond to the ad.

"I don't like it, but it will appeal to some people."

"Any woman what didn't know about guns might think this is a glamorous thing and they might want to run out and buy a gun."

While there were generally many negative comments about the ad itself, there was support, even enthusiasm, for advertising guns to women in general. The competitors liked the idea of female shooters being featured in the ads. The basic pistol group had very specific ideas about what the ad should look like:

"Need more of a 'jeans' approach."

"More realistic, down to earth."

DISCUSSION

Recall that the purpose of this study was to examine what it means when a product almost entirely associated with men is used by women. The discussion is framed in terms of motivations, experiences, images, and individual differences among women who use firearms. Additionally, the marketing implications of the relationship between women and guns were to be addressed.

What are women's motivations for gun ownership?

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) argued that physical objects derive psychological value from their symbolic and instrumental functions. Symbolically, possessions enable people to understand and express themselves and, in an instrumental sense, they facilitate the individual's manipulation of her environment.

Clearly, some of the women interviewed were strongly dependent on their interaction with guns for their self-identity. Such an interaction made them feel unique and powerful. Other women discussed their use of firearms dispassionately and in the technical terminology used for equipment or tools.

Future research focusing on the advertising of guns to women should explore further this distinction between the symbolic and instrumental segments of the female gun market.

What are women's experiences with gun ownership?

In general, while the women interviewed were cognizant of the fact that they were operating within a traditionally male domain, that fact was not particularly salient or important to them. One possible explanation for this attitude may be that most of their involvement with firearms had been male-initiated and male-approved. Women who had first been exposed to guns as children were typically introduced to firearms through the men of the family. Among the women who developed an interest in guns later in life, often their boyfriend's or spouse's interest in firearms precipitated their own involvement. Even for women who cited self-protection as the motivating
factor for their interest in guns, their behavior was in fact male-initiated since victimization by men initially led to their interest in self-protection.

What images do women hold of gun ownership?

Definite individual differences did exist among the women with regard to the images they held of firearms. In general, when speaking of their personal firearms they tended toward anthropomorphism. That is, they attributed human qualities to their favorite guns. For example, some women saw the gun as an extension of their own bodies. Others referred to their guns as their babies. As might be anticipated, those women with the most experience and involvement with firearms had the most well-developed and personalized concepts about gun ownership.

Overall, the images of guns held by the women interviewed were all imbedded within a larger life scheme. That is to say, women did not tend to see firearms as discrete objects. Rather, they stressed the role of firearms within some endeavor in their life. Even those women with the most abstract, symbolic motivations for gun ownership saw the gun itself as only a necessary, but not sufficient component, of that aspect of their lives.

While some of the women interviewed did hold an image of their firearms as an extension of their own bodies, none of them spontaneously generated the idea of guns in general representing analogies to the male body. When this idea was introduced at the end of the sessions, it was universally considered to be without merit.

How did the women interviewed react to the advertising of guns to women?

Overall, the women interviewed were in favor of firearms advertising targeted at women. Remember that these women were all current gun owners and relatively frequent users. The women interviewed were not particularly positive toward the description of the Smith and Wesson Lady Smith promotional materials, however.

The setting of the promotional piece, depicting an upper-class lifestyle, seemed to be the element that fell short in tapping women's need and motivations with regard to gun ownership. While women did tend to agree with the appeals to self- and family-protection, they felt that the message was distorted by the glamorization of the gun in the ad. The upscale approach, although consistent with Smith and Wesson's chosen media vehicles, was clearly a "turn-off" for these women who were already involved with firearms.

In summary, the women who were interviewed were appreciative of the efforts being made to meet their needs and wants as gun owners. Further research will seek to identify and measure these needs and wants. The results of this research stream should provide a broader perspective on the marketing of extremely male-identified products to women.

REFERENCES


Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-


*Glamour*, (1986), "Guess Who is the New Marketing Target for Guns? You Are!" September, 94.

*Glamour*, (1989), "Are you Prepared to Kill?" April, 345.


Tanay, Emanuel with Lucy Freeman (1976), *The Murderers*, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.


