Consumers’ Assemblages of Fear and Safety With Firearms: Obstacles to Addressing Gun Violence in an Armed America

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Using assemblage theory and ethnographic data, we present assemblages American consumers construct to generate safety in a society replete with firearms. We contribute to research on human-object interactions and ways meanings are negotiated in markets and consumer experience. Further, we illuminate the role of public policy in consumers’ social worlds.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Firearms are ubiquitous consumer products in America. There are an estimated 300 million civilian-owned firearms, which are readily available for sale at sporting goods stores and mass merchandisers, and the ownership of which is protected by the Constitution (Cook and Goss 2014). Further, an estimated 8-14 million Americans have licences to carry concealed handguns on their person in public, and many more individuals live in states where licensure is not required (Cook and Goss 2014; Lott 2016). These products are dangerous by design and are implicated in a complex social problem defined by injury or death of more than 110,000 Americans each year due to gunshot (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). These rates of death and injury have been increasing (U.S. C.D.C.) and eclipse those of other developed nations by a factor of ten (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016). Consumer interest in this issue has typically been conceptualized as two competing factions: those who support “gun control” and those who support “gun rights” (Winkler 2011).

Regardless of whether consumers adopt one of these positions or neither, they must live in a society that includes millions of firearms and where awareness of gun violence is embedded in the social milieu. In this study, we aim to better understand how consumers experience life in an armed America by investigating the various ways that consumers assemble human, material, and other actors related to guns and gun violence in ways that make them feel fearful of, and safe from, gun violence (Carlson 2015; DeBrabander 2015; Light 2017; Lott 2016).

We use the lens of assemblage theories (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze & Guattari 1987) to organize our thinking about the broad and complex market and to provide insight into consumers’ understandings of this “wicked” social problem (Rittel & Webber 1973). We use the concept of assemblages to examine heterogeneous bundles of human and non-human market actors, and their respective capacities, which come together in ways that imbue the whole with a capacity greater than the sum of its parts. Specifically, we are interested in assemblages with the capacity to inspire feelings of fear or safety in the consumers who contemplate them.

The author team consists of two NRA members, one author who has hunting experience and has completed training requirements for a CHL, and one author who has no personal experience with firearms. In the summer and fall of 2016, we conducted semi-structured depth interviews with adult gun owners in Oregon and Texas as part of a larger project on firearms in America. We recruited a sample with diversity in attributes that the literature has identified as relevant to our research questions: gender, political affiliation, and gun ownership. Our data set includes transcripts and fieldnotes from interviews with 18 informants, including: 12 males and 6 females; 5 Republicans, 5 Democrats, 5 Independents, and 3 with no political affiliation; 13 gun owners, 10 of whom have licenses to carry concealed handguns, and 5 non-owners. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes. Informants were asked about their experiences and opinions about gun ownership and use, beginning with a grand tour question (McCracken 1988) about their first experiences with firearms, and followed by prompts related to personal safety, fear, and policy. Data analysis entailed coding the textual data to identify themes, and moving iteratively between assemblage literature and our data to develop codes into an interpretation that addressed our research questions (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 1990).

In our findings, we identify the bundle of network actors, including human and non-human components, in which each informant is situated. We reveal how each of these assemblages differentially shapes and is shaped by informants’ respective feelings of fear and safety, and we highlight the variation in the role of firearms in informants’ assemblages. For instance, some informants are fearful of an armed home invasion, and situate themselves within an assemblage of market actors in ways that off-set that fear. Those assemblages may include a handgun(s), ammunition, firearms training, and a gun safe. Other informants are fearful of mass shootings or a child’s friend gaining access to a firearm, and situate themselves within assemblages that include police, background check legislation, and conversations with other parents about the importance of storing firearms securely.

Across informants’ respective assemblages, the agency to inflict harm on a person is distributed differently. Some attribute agency to kill or injure someone entirely to human actors - for example, one informant declares, “a loaded gun can sit in the corner over there and it won’t hurt anybody” - and stress the need for firearms training in situating a firearm safely within an assemblage. Conversely, others distribute the agency to harm people to a combination of actors, including the gun owner, a loaded firearm, and the situation, and firearms tend to inspire more fear than safety. Assemblages such as these include other actors, such as police and policies, to counter the fear of firearms misuse.

Based on our informants’ conceptualizations of safe assemblages, we identify two broad orientations of assemblages. The first, which we call self-protection, focuses on protecting informants’ personal safety in the face of an imminent threat, such as a home intruder, and places much of the responsibility for ensuring safety on the individual. The second orientation, societal protection, reflects a broader view which considers public safety as well as informants’ personal safety, and distributes the responsibility for keeping all citizens safe across a broad array of actors throughout society. We argue that variations in the composition and orientation of informants’ assemblages present challenges to reaching social agreement on how to address gun violence.

This research contributes an understanding of variation in consumers’ constructed assemblages to a growing stream of marketing research on human-object interactions (e.g., Bettany & Kerrane 2011; Epp & Velagaleti 2014; Ferreira & Scaraboto 2016), and we highlight the role of public policy in consumer’s social worlds. Further, we contribute to an emerging stream of qualitative research investigating the complexities inherent to this unique product market (e.g., Carlson 2015; Crockett 2017; Huff et al. 2017; Witkowski 2014).
REFERENCES


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