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

La cultura de las armas como tecnología doméstica en Estados Unidos

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ABSTRACT

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

RESUMEN

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

1. Introduction and objectives

The United States is distinctive among Western post-industrialized countries because of its high percent of gun owners, high levels of gun violence, and less restrictive gun laws (Mauser and Margolis, 1992). American society based their firearms domestic use on the Second Amendment. It was ratified in 1791 along with nine other articles of the Bill of Rights, and it literally means: «A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed» (Bill of Rights, 1791). However, in 230 years the environment has changed considerably, now there is no imminent risk of armed conflict or war with which the possession of weapons would no longer be justified. But the defense of gun ownership, including military-style assault weapons, is rooted in the view that citizens require the means to protect themselves against threats to their well-being, including government tyranny (Cummings et al., 2018). That thought has become a need for self-defense against different risks in society, focused above all on protection against crime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Background and Theoretical Framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Methodology

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

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

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

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

4. Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4.1. Authorship of the articles

Figure 1. Autorship of the articles by gender
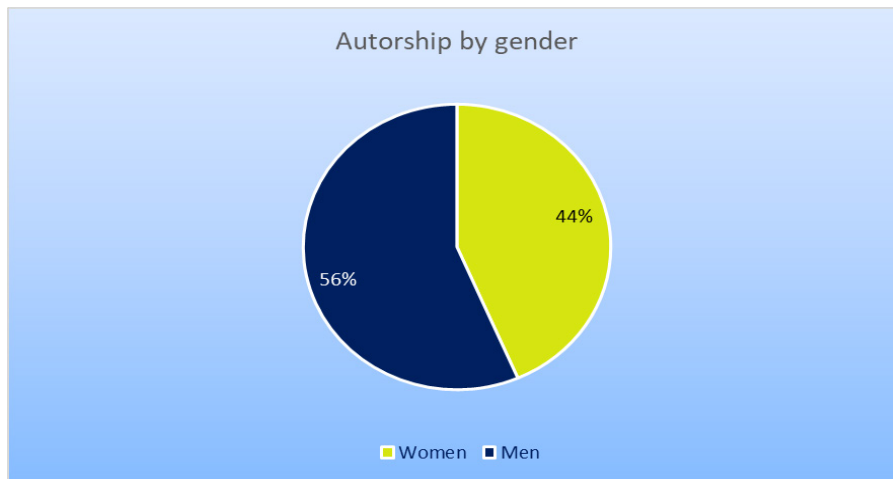
Source: Authors own ellaboration, 2022.

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

4.2. Methodologies and objects of study

Figure 2. Methodology of the selected articles
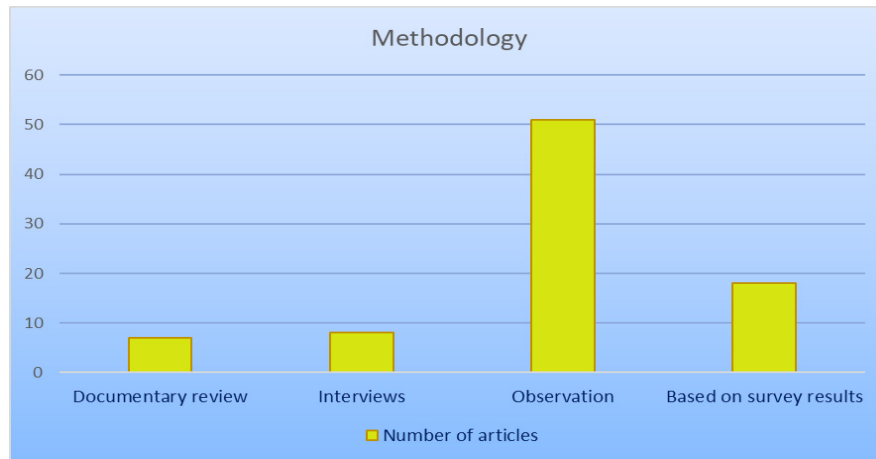
Source: Authors own ellaboration, 2022.

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

4.3. Location of the research object

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

5. Discussion and conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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