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Many people have strong opinions and beliefs regarding issues of firearms, gun rights, and the proliferation of firearms, and firearm accessories such as silencers or suppressors. The mass media is at the forefront of the hype surrounding these debates on both sides of the political spectrum. Typically, the mass media is inundated with salacious headlines designed to capture the reader's attention and induce a sense of fear or dread (Jewkes, & Linnemann, 2018). Research suggests that the techniques of priming framing can cause people's opinions to shift based on the priming or framing stimulus (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Perera, 2021). Mass media is omnipresent in our daily lives and frequently employs priming and or framing strategies to significantly alter, effect, or enhance feelings and opinions (Cohen, 1963; Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018; Lim, & Rasul, 2015; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). My research examined the thoughts and opinions of focus group participants regarding the controversial and fiercely debated topic of firearm silencers and suppressors in a pilot study.

This study consisted of a single cohort of participants over the course of two focus groups. During the first group meeting, I first identified the participant's initial feelings, opinions, and reactions to this topic. At the conclusion of the first focus group, I primed the participants by showing them two fictional yet controversial videos. After a 24-hour reflection period, I conducted a second focus group with the same cohort. I framed the questions posed to the participants around the concept of the movie's producers using the stylized depictions as a political motive to push the gun control debate in a particular direction. In the second meeting, I

was able to obtain a preliminary look at how media portrayals may influence opinions and beliefs.

THE SILENCE IS DEAFENING: A PILOT STUDY OF THE ROLE MEDIA
PLAYS IN PEOPLES' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING FIREARM
SILENCERS AND SUPPRESSORS

by

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DEDICATION

To Kevin, my father. He taught me what it is to be a man. He always believed in me and pushed me to be a better human. He never abandoned his childlike wonder, silliness, and an amazing ability to make up words such as “Tuggsetatongtong.”

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Firearms and criminality are widely studied fields. The wide-ranging literature on this topic underscores how it is contested, dichotomous, and often emotionally charged (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; Pierre, 2019). One of the more controversial firearm accessories is that of the firearm silencer or suppressor. These mechanical devices attach to the barrel, or chassis of a weapon system and are intended to muffle the perceived report of the gunshot itself. To date, there is little research on the role media plays in consumer's perceptions of firearm suppressors. The conducting of this research could perhaps offer a deeper understanding of the challenges or the ease with which people discuss firearms, and more specifically, firearm silencers and suppressors.

To address this gap in the literature, the purpose of this pilot study was to examine the notions of priming and framing exposure to deliberately provocative mass media videos, and what role media plays in people's perceptions. Moreover, I navigated what my participants drew upon to make sense of these perceptions. Specifically, I relied on my professional and personal knowledge, training, and expertise in the firearm silencer and suppressor industry. I am reasonably certain that many, if not most, people (especially younger persons) form what they assume they know and believe about the world based, in good part, on the visual and textual messaging from the mass media.

I bring to this study more than twenty years of exposure to the firearms silencer and suppressor industry as a soldier, police sniper, collector, and self-described firearms enthusiast. I am fascinated with these mechanical aspects of silencers and suppressors, and the engineering that goes into their design and development. Initially, I assessed a basic baseline of the participant's feelings towards the issue of firearms silencers and suppressors, then exposed the

participants to deliberately misleading, perhaps even propagandized, portrayals of these devices. I then compared the initial baseline readings, feelings, and discussion to those after exposure and reflection. Did the deliberate priming and framing of the participants influence their initial opinions? I would say, based on the research I conducted; Yes! Some of the participant's initial feelings were reinforced, and some new avenues of thought were introduced and explored. While this study was small in scale and scope, a measurable difference was notable, and provides a steppingstone for further research. Hopefully this pilot study will begin to peel the proverbial onion, and lead to a deeper field of study regarding how the mass media shapes personal beliefs and opinions.

Mass media, in the 21st century is nearly inescapable, and a growing part of modern life. Virtually all facets of our daily routines are in some way influenced or shaped by some form of mass media, be it movies, television, cable, internet, or social media. These various formats can be used to warn and inform (Lim & Rasul, 2015); they can also entertain, or influence thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Soules, 2015). The ultimate extreme version of this would most certainly be these platforms being deceptively and maliciously exploited at the state level to alter the perceptions of large groups via psychological warfare (Chim, 2018). Why do so many headlines, serial dramas, movies, and video games feature such horrifically violent content (Jewkes, & Linnemann, 2018) and why are we as humans drawn to these negative portrayals (Hammond, 2015)? Have these rampantly depicted acts of inhuman savagery always existed, and simply seem more prevalent due to the proliferation of technology? Or is the answer more sinister? Are these media portrayals perpetuating the problem with ever more sensationalist portrayals (Helfgott, 2015; Surette, 2017)? What effect(s) then, if any, could this exposure to mass media have on people's perceptions of firearm silencers or suppressors?

The population I drew from in my pilot study were all volunteers and were at least eighteen years old at the time of participation. The participants were prescreened to ascertain their viability and accepted the parameters of this study. One of these prescreening elements stipulated that all participants had no practical experience or exposure to firearm silencers or suppressors. Any personal or professional exposure to firearm silencers or suppressors could have blunted the effect(s) of the videos shown at the conclusion of the first focus group.

The following research question guides this study: How does the act of priming and framing via one tool of popular media affect perceptions of a specific and reasonably controversial issue, that of firearm silencers or suppressors? There are various, common misconceptions about the legitimate uses, as well as the actual physics of firearm silencers or suppressors and how these devices function (Halbrook, 2015; Paulson, 1996; Spitzer 2020). Even among firearms enthusiasts, the knowledge of, and experience with, firearm silencers or suppressors outside of the military and paramilitary police units is minimal. The use of firearm silencers and suppressors with criminal intent does exist and is a real issue. However, is mass media reporting this issue accurately or using fear and hyperbole to play upon consumer's emotions and fears to drive a predetermined narrative? Because relatively little research in this area, my research could possibly help by sparking an honest and open discussion.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Firearm Silencers and Suppressors

The first documented and patented silencer for a firearm was produced in 1909 by Hiram Maxim (Halbrook, 2015; Maxim, 1915; Paulson, 1996; Violence Policy Center, 2019). Maxim was engineering automobile mufflers when he saw the potential to design the first firearm silencer. In other words, he did not set out to manufacture a firearm silencer or suppressor, but through the recreation of various mufflers designed to reduce the excess noise from an internal combustion engine, Maxim noted the similarities in the hot, rapidly expanding gases a firearm produces when discharged (Clark, 2007; Halbrook, 2015; Maxim, 1915). Maxim began producing the first commercially viable, purpose-built firearm silencer. Maxim then expanded on his automobile muffler company by adding the Maxim Firearm Silencer to his brand (Paulson, 1996). It is also important to note that the initial inventor, Maxim named his invention “silencer”, and the federal government also uses this term to legally define these items. However, aficionados and collectors generally concur that this term is inaccurate as these devices do not truly silence the effects of a gunshot, but merely reduce these effects, and that the term “suppressor” is more accurate (Clark, 2007; Halbrook, 2015; Paulson, 1996).

During the early 1900's, there existed no laws concerning the manufacturing, selling, or possession of firearm silencers or suppressors in the US. With the burgeoning growth of organized crime shootouts, the federal government sought to regulate and severely tax silencers and suppressors, along with fully automatic firearms (e.g., machine guns), destructive devices such as land mines and grenades, and sawed-off shotguns and rifles (Clark, 2007; Halbrook, 2015; Violence Policy Center, 2019). The result was the National Firearms Act (NFA) of 1934.

The NFA imposed severe restrictions including a two-hundred-dollar tax on the possession of any of these items (Halbrook, 2015; Paulson, 1996; Vizzard, 2015). This tax was prohibitively expensive to most citizens considering the average annual income was around fifteen hundred dollars.

Until recently, the history and design of firearms silencers and suppressors had remained relatively stagnant after their invention in 1909. A scant few minor achievements were made with the advent of integrated silenced weapons, where the silencer or suppressor was built into the weapons system from the start. For example, the Heckler and Koch MP5SD (Heckler & Koch, 2021) developed during the Vietnam War for Special Operations Forces. Additionally, researchers working for the German and Swiss Firearms manufacturer Schweizerische Industrie Gesellschaft, known in the US as SIG Sauer developed the non-centric firearm silencer and suppressor in 1993 (Förster & Geopfert, 1993). However little interest in this new technology was displayed until the commercial development of the Osprey firearm silencer by SilencerCo, in 2010. Due to various factors such as the restrictive costs of the federally mandated tax stamp, a lack of interest by major consumers such as the military at large, there simply was not much market or demand for additional research and development into newer and more advanced designs of firearm silencers or suppressors.

One of these limiting factors that hampered major interest at the state level is an operational issue dictated by Newtonian Physics: The bullet itself creates massive noise as soon as it breaks the sound barrier and will continue producing this noise until the bullet stops, or its velocity becomes subsonic. This noise, known as a *ballistic crack*, is in fact a small sonic boom (Clark, 2007; Department of Defense, 2017; Dater, 2014; Hakonen, 2011; Paulson, 2002; Stewart, 2018). So then, even with a well-crafted silencer entirely removing the report of the

gunshot itself, the ballistic crack still occurs and is nearly as loud as the initial gunshot. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent with rifle bullets which are usually designed to travel at supersonic speeds, often several times faster than pistol bullets (Clark, 2007; Dater, 2014; Department of Defense, 2017; Paulson, 2002; Stewart, 2018). The phenomenon of the Ballistic Crack is important to note because the speed of sound at sea level is roughly 1050 feet per second (FPS). As far as typical bullet speeds go, this is quite slow. Pistol bullet speeds are typically in the 1200 FPS or higher, while rifle bullets are typically 2000 FPS or faster and frequently in the 3000 FPS range. The slower a bullet is moving, the less kinetic energy, or force, it can impart to any target it hits. Additionally, the slower a bullet is moving, the more it is capable of being affected by exterior ballistic conditions such as wind, the Coriolis Effect, and gravitational drag, all of which can significantly influence accuracy (Paulson, 2002).

While modern designs of silencers and suppressors do drastically outperform their ancestral counterparts, the basic principles are the same: trap the hot, violently expanding gases, slow the rapidity of expansion of these gasses, causing the dissipation of heat, expansion, and expending of their potential energy (Moss and Anderson, 2017). Modern designs for silencers and suppressors are now constructed using the latest space age alloys and materials such as carbon fiber. These materials allow for newer silencers and suppressors to provide more internal surface area, trapping more volume of gasses, allow for more rapid cooling, and less build of heat in the silencer itself (Förster and Geopfert, 1993).

Significant advances in Computer Aided Design and Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAD/CAM) allow designers to engineer these materials into lighter and stronger silencers and suppressors that can withstand tremendous stresses and pressure levels (Hakonen, 2011; Moss and Anderson, 2017). This also allows for more powerful bullets to be fired through smaller and

lighter silencers. These advances in workmanship and material construction, paired with advanced acoustical engineering platforms, allow for designers to better understand exactly what happens inside a silencer or suppressor as a bullet is fired through it (Kilikevicius et al., 2017). This new understanding has led to advanced baffle designs and more efficient means of distributing the report of the gunshot over time (Hristov et al., 2015; Searson, 2016).

Another issue that had been plaguing the silencer and suppressor industry was that of repeatability. Firearm silencers and suppressors were threaded directly onto the barrels of firearms. If these threads were not perfectly timed to the host weapon, the bullets would shift their point of impact significantly each time the silencer or suppressor was installed. This created an inherent lack of repeatable accuracy and stalled much of the interest in firearm silencers and suppressors by the US military. In the early 2000's, the development of quick detachment couplers solved this problem. These couplers are designed to align the same way each time they are mated (Fish, 2019; Ilan, 2018).

These modern design improvements, as well as the US military's rapid expansion led to renewed interest in firearm silencers and suppressors for military use. This interest was further spurred by the dual front of two wars in vastly varying operational terrain: The sprawling and remote mountains of Afghanistan to the densely packed urban scape of Iraq (Hristov et al., 2015). Indeed, the 2000's saw entire weapon systems and newly designed ammunition specifically built around these improvements. This surge of improved technology, and increased military utilization led to a resurgence in the use of these devices by civilian shooting enthusiasts (Fish, 2019; Hakonen, 2011; Ilan, 2018).

Additionally, many US soldiers were returning from these warzones with severe hearing damage and tinnitus. Often these medical conditions were caused by repeated firing of military

rifles with little to no hearing protection (Department of Defense, 2017; Dater, 2014, Hakonen, 2011). Almost any close exposure to gunfire can cause permanent, severe hearing damage (Hakonen, 2011; Kilikevicius et al., 2017; Stewart, 2018; Wells et al., 2013). This is especially true of weapons fired in proximity to enclosed spaces such as small rooms and vehicles, and from military rifles shorter barrels (Department of Defense, 2017; Fish, 2019; Hakonen, 2011; Stewart, 2018). This led the US military proliferating the use of firearm silencers amongst standard combat troops rather than relegating these devices only to Special Operations units.

The use of firearm silencers or suppressors in actual crimes is exceedingly rare, yet portrayed as a regular occurrence on television, in movies, and other forms of mass media (Clark, 2007; MacCarthy et al., 2011; Spitzer, 2020). Opponents of the proliferation of firearms and silencers or suppressors, including the Violence Policy Center (VPC), claimed that firearm silencers and suppressors are a menace and a severe risk that will allow criminals to escape detection (VPC.org, 2019). However, the vast majority of firearm silencer and suppressor related crimes are the mere possession or manufacturing of an unregistered firearm silencer or suppressor with no criminal intent or mens rea to use these devices in an additional crime (Clark, 2007; Spitzer 2020). This issue was at the heart of legislation known as the Hearing Protection Act (HPA) (Duncan, 2017; Congress.gov, 2018; Krouse, 2018). This bill would have deregulated firearm silencers and suppressors from the requirements enacted in the NFA and relegated these to the much laxer restrictions placed on hunting rifles (Congress.org, 2017; Duncan, 2017; Spitzer, 2020). Proponents of the HPA argued that current research indicates firearm silencers and suppressors would be most beneficial by reducing hearing damage to users, a marked tangible benefit to society (Clark, 2007; Kilikevicius et al., 2017; Meinke, et al., 2017; Murphy, et al., 2018). The HPA was politically abandoned immediately following the Las Vegas

Massacre in 2017.

Opponents of firearm silencer and suppressor proliferation argue that suppressors have no legitimate uses and would aid criminals in escaping punishment for their crimes (Menendez et al., 2021; Violence Policy Center 2019). On the VPC.Org website, newspaper articles regarding firearm silencers or suppressors used in crimes are prominently displayed. Further research indicates that these articles can be traced to pre 1934 and the federal regulation of suppressors, or the crimes listed included the use of illegally manufactured or constructed firearm silencers and suppressors, yet these ads were displayed as though they were currently relevant or pertained to legally issued and acquired firearm silencers or suppressors (Violence Policy Center, 2019).

Issues that are incredibly polemic, such as the gun rights debate, although shaped by culture, tend to be held as absolute truths, and those belief holders often ignore empirical data that clashes with their beliefs (Mustard, 2003; Pierre, 2019). Additionally, mass media, in particular media platforms such as television, cable news, and social media spend vast resources prodding users to one side or another, undermining rational argument and discussion, and leading to deeply held beliefs possibly based on speculation and innuendo (Kahan & Braman, 2003; Smith et al., 2004).

Process of Buying a Firearm Silencer and Suppressor

Because of the complications involved, I believe it is advantageous for readers to understand the purchaser licensing laws and application procedures that must be completed to legally obtain a silencer and/or suppressor in the US. These devices are severely restricted and tightly regulated by the Federal Government. Specifically, these devices are the exclusive purview of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (BATFE). Additionally, regulations often apply at the state level. Thus, various states require further actions to acquire

firearm silencers or suppressors. The process can be exhaustive and laboriously time-consuming, which may contribute to the mysterious and esoteric nature of firearm silencers and suppressors. Currently, Hawaii, California, Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts ban the possession or legal registration of silencers altogether.

The process begins with the buyer selecting a firearm silencer or suppressor from a Federal Firearms License (FFL) dealer, who is also licensed to deal in NFA items. The buyer will pay for the firearm silencer or suppressor, including sales tax. However, the item will remain in the possession of the FFL dealer until the lengthy process is complete. Next, the buyer will submit payment for a \$200 tax stamp, two passport photographs, as well as three Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fingerprint cards, and an ATF Form 4 to the BATFE. An official notice is simultaneously sent to the buyer's local Chief Law Enforcement Officer (CLEO), who is typically the local county sheriff. The buyer then waits for clearance from the BATFE, and issuance of the tax stamp, which is a physical postage style stamp in the amount of \$200. Upon receipt of the tax stamp and paperwork clearance, the buyer may then retrieve their firearm silencer or suppressor from the federally licensed dealer that the silencer or suppressor was initially purchased at. Typically, this process takes nine to thirteen months to complete.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMES

Priming and Framing

Personal exposure to firearms silencers and suppressors remains rare, professional exposure even more so. Much of peoples' beliefs regarding these devices is already filtered to fit a particular narrative (Halbrook, 2015; Iwanyik & Lee, 2017; Smith et al., 2004, Violence Policy Center, 2019). This study is aimed--no pun intended--at investigating how individuals form their opinions of firearm silencers and suppressors based, at least in part, on mass media portrayals. Using priming and framing as theoretical lenses, I examined how my study participants formed their notions of firearm silencers and suppressors without ever having been physically exposed to these objects.

To guide the data collection and analysis, I utilized McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Cohen's (1963) and Perera's (2021) theories on priming and framing as the theoretical framework for this study.

Arthur: "Okay, here's me planting an idea in your head. I say to you, don't think about elephants. What are you thinking about?"

Saito: "Elephants." (Nolan & Thomas, 2010)

The previous dialogue is borrowed from the Christopher Nolan 2010 film *Inception*, which serves as an uncomplicated articulation of the more complex psychological concepts of priming and framing. While simple, this dialogue sets the stage to begin exemplifying the multifaceted nuances of priming and framing. McCombs and Shaw (1972) researched priming and framing, concluding that exposure from mass media did not necessarily tell people what to think, but certainly good at swaying their opinions (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Due to the current proliferation of digital media platforms and social media, it can reasonably be assumed that today's audiences are exposed to greater levels of mass media. Therefore, the way something (e.g., guns, political agendas, controversial personalities) is portrayed in mass media has the power to influence consumers' views and/or ideas about that something. An example of this portrayal is by comparing one media news outlet, renowned for having specific political leanings, to a competitive media news outlet with opposing political leanings. Even a casual observer of both conservative Fox News and/or liberal MSNBC as two examples, could observe the same story with diametrically opposing viewpoints portrayed, possibly coming to altogether disparate conclusions.

Yet another method that can be employed to manipulate an audience is by exploiting a phenomenon that occurs in human psychology known as the Primacy Recency Effect, (Allen, 1973, p. 275-8; Price, et al.,1997). The Primacy Recency Effect demonstrates that test subjects tend to remember the first and the last stimuli or questions with greater accuracy than anything else sandwiched in between. For example, the first and last questions asked, or the first and last examples used in each data set played a key role in subtly directing the outcome of the subject's thoughts on a given situation (Alen, 1973; Price, et al.,1997; Virens et al.). The primacy recency effect can be exploited and significantly alter the results of painstakingly collected empirical data and conclusions drawn from the analysis of this data. By controlling which questions are asked both first and last, the entire narrative can be framed to affect a specifically preordained outcome.

Corporations rely upon research developed using priming and framing techniques to enhance the public's perceptions of their corporate images and actions (Wang, 2011). These corporations use various mass media techniques from commercials depicting the American

heartland to exemplify a stoic and tenacious work ethic, to something as simple as a green or blue colored label to indicate their commitments to “green” tech/practices and or recycling. One version of this that I have personally noticed at the grocery store involves the use of various meatpacking companies using green labels and the phrasing “vegetarian fed” on the labels of ground beef. These packages of beef are often strategically placed next to more expensive beef products that are advertised as “grass-fed.” The idea is to associate the supposed healthiness of grass-fed beef with that of vegetarian-fed beef. Realistically though, cows fed a diet consisting of corn is still a vegetarian based diet. The addition of the green border on the label, the proximity to other products promoted as healthier, and the cleverly manipulated marketing are examples of priming from sources other than visual media.

Perera’s (2021) work sums up the ideas and theories of framing quite succinctly. Her writings highlight how the presentation of data, particularly with statistical percentages, can frame the way we as humans tend to perceive this information. For example, of the two following statistical models, which one resonates more with you as a reader?

You have a 90% chance of walking alone downtown and not being robbed at gunpoint.

You have a 10% chance of being robbed at gunpoint if you walk alone downtown. While the above statements indicate the same data mathematically speaking, the way our human minds process data can vary greatly with the presentation. This cognitive bias inherent to the human condition can then be manipulated and exploited by the presenter (Perera, 2021). Put more simply, the logic of framing and priming theories is that essentially it is not so much *what* is said, but *how* it is said and in what order. These issues were a key part of my research as I ended the first focus group with two short film clips depicting firearms silencers being used, that is, recency, and priming, as well as opened the follow up focus group discussing the film sequence,

that is, primacy, and framing. This allowed me to not only study how the participants formed their opinions, thoughts, and feelings regarding firearm silencers and suppressors, but how the priming of the ending and beginning of the focus groups may have altered their opinions, subtly or otherwise.

Framing is simply another way of explaining how the argument, or specific supposedly salient points, are addressed (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Perera, 2021). This rhetorical tool is frequently seen in political debates (Scheufele, 2017). Innumerable examples exist where a political candidate will shift the argument or questions away from their own behavior and onto the perceived morality of their political rivals. The purpose of this technique is to draw as much attention as possible away from the speaker's behavior or political faux pas, and simultaneously place as much blame as possible on their opponent while also ignoring the intent of the original question (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Sacks, 2005).

A fictional, yet intentionally transparent version of framing is portrayed by Robert De Niro's amoral spin doctor character Conrad Brean in Barry Levinson's 1997 film *Wag the Dog*. Brean successfully distracts the Whitehouse press corps from a salacious story of a presidential sex scandal by pretending to accidentally reveal details of a new stealth bomber, and the subsequent fake war produced with Hollywood special effects to maintain the distraction long enough for a successful reelection of the incumbent president (Levinson, 1997). The foundational plot of this film is the idea that one can control the narrative by directing what people are thinking, and therefore talking about using the techniques of misdirection and priming to either distract from the original train of thought or direct the train along a specific line of thought.

CHAPTER IV: METHODS

Data Collection

For this pilot study, I utilized focus groups to explore if exposure to mass media played a role in or is even likely to influence ordinary peoples' perceptions of firearm suppressors. Focus groups are a popular and valuable method of data collection. Sociologic research often focuses on key aspects that can be captured by using qualitative data such as ethnographic interviews. Focus groups have become a significant and important tool for conducting this type of data collection which tends to be deep and rich, yet often narrow in scope (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). A key component to focus groups is that the participants can communicate with each other during the interview process which can lead to avenues of discussion that could have been left unexplored in one-on-one qualitative interviews (Kitzinger, 2020). These small-scale tests are utilized to indicate if perhaps deeper research is warranted (Porta, 2008; NIH, n.d.).

My research participants were specifically pulled from (then) currently enrolled undergraduate students in the UNCG Sociology program as a population from which to solicit volunteers. Additionally, I enlisted the help of Dr. Molly Riddle, PhD. to assist with leading the focus groups. My reasons for this were twofold; one, to lessen any effect(s) my being a male could have had on influencing the responses of the all-female focus groups participants. Furthermore, Dr. Riddle has no professional firearms or firearms silencer experience, and there was some concern my professional knowledge and experience in this industry could artificially influence the participants.

I conducted two focus groups with the same participants over a twenty-four-hour period during the fall 2022 semester. The question protocols in the first focus group were simply to ascertain a basic baseline of the participants' thoughts, feelings, understandings, and emotional

responses (if any) to firearms silencers and suppressors. The first focus group concluded with the participants being shown two mainstream movie clips depicting the use of firearm silencers and suppressors in a manner that is entirely fictional and (hopefully) deliberately provocative. After a twenty-four-hour reflection period, participants then returned for a final focus group.

The second focus group opened with the participants being asked questions directed to ascertain to what extent, if any, exposure to the two movie clips induced or triggered new, additional, or differing feelings, thoughts, or opinions regarding firearm silencers and suppressors. My aim was to generate a comparable data set to determine if, and to what extent, priming the test participants at the end of the first focus group stimulates any change in their views and feelings towards this genre of firearm technology.

The first video I used was a twenty-three-second-long clip from the 2017 motion picture entitled, *John Wick: Chapter 2*. Depicted, is a fictitious and stylized use of silencers by professional assassins in a public setting. The assassins utilized the effectiveness of their firearm silencers to keep the nearby public oblivious to their multiple assassination attempts. The video portrayed an unrealistic depiction of the noise silencers and firearm suppressors create when a pistol outfitted with a silencer or suppressor is fired (interior ballistics), the noises bullets make when flying (exterior ballistics), and the noises made by bullets striking solid objects (terminal ballistics). This scene, while not remotely grounded, is however compelling, well filmed, and I believe aimed to drive the audience emotionally. Because of these features, I maintain this video to be an ideal source for having primed the participants with deliberately false material (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

The second video I used, from the 1990 movie *Navy SEALs*, depicted several commandos rescuing hostages by shooting the hostage takers with fully automatic

integrally suppressed weapons, specifically the Heckler & Koch MP5SD (Heckler & Koch, 2021). The scene depicted the proverbial good guys triumphing over the evil terrorists while simultaneously delivering the depiction of these integrally suppressed submachine guns sounding like something that is far different than anything these submachine guns can sound like. This scene also depicted another Hollywood staple; the addition of what movie producers and/or sound editors think a suppressor sounds like. Much like the famed Wilhelm Scream, which has been used in hundreds of movies due to its lack of copyright restrictions, movie makers will often use the same “Pfft!” sound for a suppressor or silencer when in fact the real thing sounds quite different even under the most ideal conditions (Furst, 2019).

The depicted sounds made by the silencers and suppressors in both clips are entirely fictitious, and often imitated, “stock” sounds. These artificial sounds are often used in mass media productions to depict the sound of a firearms silencer or suppressor. These depictions are so widespread, that it could make people unfamiliar with firearm silencers and suppressors believe that the depicted weapons and firearm silencers or suppressors as having sound signatures that are unrealistic.

Because the focus group participants were selected from a group of students with no practical or professional exposure to firearm silencers or suppressors, they were less likely to be aware the depictions were entirely nonsensical and impossible. Additionally, the scenes were thought provoking, and did indeed stimulate colorful and deep conversations during the second focus group. The hyperlinks to the above scenes are attached below.

John Wick: Chapter 2

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fOQlhdzcrA>)

Navy SEALs (starts at 1:27 into the clip)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1tbtFkmZeA>)

Participant Selection

At this stage, the participants were selected from those students attending UNCG undergraduate sociology classes. My aim was to utilize the classroom setting to put the participants more at ease and in a familiar and comfortable setting. I used both audio and video recording devices to better capture the emotions and statements of the participants, as well as preserve the ability to transcribe and review the collected data. This was accomplished using Zoom with an additional audio recorder creating an audio only backup. This allowed me to review the focus group interactions for a second (third, fourth, etc.) chance to study and analyze the participants non-verbal gestures. Additionally, because of the intentionally emotionally charged subject matter, the Zoom format allowed me to capture tone and emotional expression with greater accuracy than traditional note taking.

I gained access to the participants by obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board, then soliciting participation via an email invite. More specifically, I obtained permission from professors in the UNCG Sociology department to address some of their classes in person. During those brief interactions, I solicited volunteers from the students. Any students who expressed an interest received a form with my email my email address and the basics of the study, as well as my incentive plan to offer participants each a \$20 Amazon e-gift card for each study group participation completed, as well as an additional \$10 bonus Amazon e-gift card for completing both focus groups. Additionally, this initial email served as the first step of the participant's implied consent. From that group of students who contacted me, I selected four students who could meet the attendance requirements and had little to no exposure to firearm

silencers or suppressors. These selectees were then given the necessary consent and participation protocols in detailed emails.

The email invitations (See Appendix A) stipulated the purpose of the study and how they were expected to participate. I then emailed the participants and the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix B) thus ensuring the study participants acknowledged and agreed to the terms of the study officially.

During that period of data collection, the students' emails were kept securely in a password protected computer within a locked private residence. Once the data collection period was over, those emails were deleted along with any other personal identifying information to protect the identity, and privacy of the participants as well as the integrity of the study. Additionally, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, based on a random US city. I added these pseudonyms to the transcriptions from the two focus groups.

Data Analysis

The focus groups were conducted as planned on two successive days at the same time each day. A total of four participants were interviewed during these focus groups. The participants were all women, from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Interestingly, some additional data was revealed as one of the participants grew up in a rural environment and regularly participated in shooting sports such as hunting and target practice. Also worth noting, one of the participants had direct experience with tragedy surrounding firearms. A school shooting had occurred at her school resulting in two deaths.

The coding structure was developed using forensic analysis of the focus group videos and transcripts. While transcripts of a focus group may not always be necessary, I found these tools to be quite beneficial as the discussions generated were rich, complex, and each focus group

exceeded forty-five minutes in length, (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). I specifically looked for repeated behaviors, phraseology, concepts, and ideas. I carefully added each that I felt was significant to an Excel spreadsheet looking for emerging patterns. Ultimately, these patterns were identified by numerical representation. I was able to extract nearly five-hundred line items that I then cross referenced for repeatability. These trackable items ranged from individual occurrences to an occurrence rate of twenty-four. I then developed my themes from the most frequently occurring coded items.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

Themes

Coding the transcripts from the two focus groups revealed several significant thematic elements. These elements were Respondent Affirmation, Aural Description, Dramatization was Notable, Unrealistically Unbelievable, and Reasoning Behind the Cinematic Effect. These themes are mostly inductive in nature as I intentionally tried to remove myself and knowledge base from the discussion and allow the participants to react organically. I pulled the themes from the most frequently occurring codes contrasted against their significance in my research.

Respondent Affirmation

Respondent Affirmation, that is the research subjects agreeing with something said by either another participant or one of the researchers, is an inductive theme that occurred twenty-four times over both focus groups. Thirteen occurrences took place during focus group one, and eleven occurrences during focus group two. One of the main purposes of, and key benefits from, the use of focus groups is to get the research subjects talking and interacting with each other, which in turn tends to generate even more data, (Kitzinger, 2020). This concept was dramatically represented in my research. The focus group format allowed for the generation of rich and involved discussions from the participants in response to my questions and in response to the answers from other participants.

Additionally, this theme of Respondent Affirmation can serve as its own form of self-replicating priming and framing as one participant's comments and replies are possibly affected and or prompted by previous participant's comments. The issue of firearms, as with any controversial, and hotly contested issue, often has deeply developed emotional roots. Because of

these frequently present emotional entanglements present when discussing any controversial issue, the pressure to socially conform to the group likely had some, if not a much more significant, effect. This would be further indicative of the effects of framing and influencing the videos shown had on the discussions and voiced reactions from the participants. Further research could examine these effects in this format as a form of Social Conformity, (Asch, 1955; Ulutaş, 2019). To follow are several examples of how this theme occurred during the focus groups.

(03:28 of Focus Group I):

Amarillo: I think that that's definitely most prominent in my mind, that this country, the US, is a predominance of mass shootings compared to other countries.

Modesto: I was gonna say the same thing. I was gonna say the news because that's where I hear about firearms the most. Um, it's more popular on the news. Like Amarillo said, there's- there's a lot of shootings that happen on the news where you get to see what happened, where it was and, like, what was used, who did it. So I was gonna say the same thing.

Asheboro: Yeah, I was gonna go off of that. Um, I feel like a lot of the main, like, media portrayals of firearms that you do hear are, like, school shootings.

Nashville: Like the others, I do also hear a lot about, uh, shootings in the news, things like that.

(6:16 of Focus Group I)

Dr. Riddle: How does the media portray firearms, in your- in your opinion?

Nashville: I see as, when they're spreading the correct information, I see it as them doing their duty as a service to the community and the people around us.

Modesto: Yeah, I think, um, I agree with Nashville on this. I think that they are- they do a really good job of giving us the information we need and being informative. So I think... I think I agree with her on that. That's a big thing, I think.

Asheboro: Yeah. I definitely think it's a little bit of both. But at the same time, depending on, like, what news company it is, um, a lot of them, like, will just make the headline, like Nashville was saying, um, like, they'll make the headline kind of like a click bit, almost.

(2:53 of Focus Group II)

Asheboro: Yeah, in the movie, you couldn't even tell that they were shooting. It just kind of, like, sounded like a kind of thump almost.

Modesto: Yeah. I agree with that. You couldn't hear, like, any of, like, the ding that you could, um, from any kind of, like, shells dropping or anything, and they were, like, surrounded by a whole crowd of people and even though they have silencers, it still makes a sound.

(12:21 of Focus Group II)

Asheboro: I would like to say that they're not easy to get, but they're also legal in 42 states... Like, if you have a license, you're gonna be able to get it. And so, yeah, I mean, I wish it wasn't like that, but I feel like it definitely it is.

Modesto: I agree with that as well. I think because it's legal in 42 states, it, like, gives ... There's a whole lot of people that have access to that and, um, as ... it's pretty easy to get. So, yeah, I think I agree with, I agree with what they said.

Amarillo: Yeah. Everything Maddy said, 100%. If you can, if you can get a gun, you can get a silencer. Um, you can a suppressor for your weapon. You just walk in the shop and, and, um, you know, if it's a state where it's pretty easy to access, um, or if, you know, you to a shop and people know you, then I think it would be very easy.

These occurrences of Respondent Affirmation occurred fully one third, or thirty-three percent, more than the next thematic development. While my sample size (N) of four is simply too small to do much realistically evaluation from a statistical perspective, one of the main purposes of the focus group format, as previously noted, is to encourage interaction between the participants, which I believe was demonstrated quite well by the rate of these occurrences, and the participant's willingness to engage with each other in this format.

Aural Description

Aural Description is the second most demonstrated thematic development. This inductive theme was exhibited eighteen times over both focus groups. Although this theme occurred at a rate of thirty-three percent less than that of the previous thematic development, it is likely a more significant finding as it lends itself directly to the heart of my research. The videos presented an entirely false and fictitious depiction of the effects of firearm silencers. The effects of firearm silencers and suppressors are by their very nature often described aurally. This theme generally involved the participants discussing their perceptions of the sounds made by silencers and firearms in general, and specifically those displayed by the videos. Fully thirteen of these instances occurred during the second focus group. This was somewhat anticipated as the videos depicting the use of firearms silencers were shown to the participants at the end of the first focus group.

(19:45 of Focus Group I):

Amarillo: Uh, like, I- I'm cer- I'm pretty certain that- that, you know, that avoids the public being warned of the gunshots.

Nashville: Because let's say you have a silencer on and someone has come and attacked you in your home and you're outnumbered, because that gunshot has that s- the gun has a silencer on it, no one's alerted, and no one knows. Your whole family can be in there and they won't know a thing.

(01:54 of Focus Group II)

Amarillo: The part I heard sounded ... Like, the gun sounds were, like, you know, like old school action movies and they're just synthesized. I, I don't know where they get them from. Like, like, they're like pew, pew, pew...

Dr. Riddle: Oh, but I ... That's actually the sound, Amarillo, that I make, pew, pew, pew, pew, that's the sound I make, so it was funny to me when you just said it, 'cause that's ... Yeah. Anyway, okay. So, what about the other one? So, the John Wick one, can you tell us what you thought about the sounds, um, or what you perceived when, when you were watching the John Wick?

Asheboro: I couldn't, like, hear the actual shots. But, I mean, that's also not realistic.

Amarillo: Okay. Another thing I forgot to follow up about the John Wick video was when their bullets hit, those aren't going to be silent. So, when they were using silenced pistols and their pistols were supposedly silent, when your bullet tings on something, and they're in a building, so I don't know what they're hitting, like, it does make, like, the, like, ting sound, you know?

Amarillo: Instead of, you know, walking by like nothing happened. That, that was very unrealistic for me (laughs). Um, but ... Yeah, 'cause it made no sense. You just see

someone walking ... First, you see somebody that's bloodied. Then you see them holding a gun and people act and walk by like nothing's happening, like, it's totally normal. Is that gonna, is that gonna be what we're gonna have society see if we have silencers? Is that, like, what we're trying to send? Like, oh, somebody's bloody and they have a silencer on a gun and they're walking by and just shooting up carelessly. Amarillo: Over positioned. Is, is that the message we really wanna send?

Dr. Riddle: Okay.

Amarillo: That- That's what went through my head.

At this point there was a bit of a thematic convergence as the themes *Dramatization Was Notable, Unrealistically Unbelievable, and Reasoning Behind the Cinematic Effect* each occurred eleven times over both focus groups. While these elements occurred at the same rate, each played into the other as they are supportive of the whole. Additionally, the key elements of my research were significantly demonstrated in these themes.

Dramatization Was Notable

Dramatization Was Notable occurred eleven times, with five instances in the first focus group and six in the second. The participants were able to detect that the film clips were stylized and dramatic, particularly the *John Wick: Chapter 2* clip. These discussions of the unrealistic portrayal of firearm silencer usage led into further discussions of why the participants felt certain elements are dramatized in their depictions by the film and media industries.

(5:46 of Focus Group I)

Matt: Are they doing it to be hyperbolic and get viewers or are they doing it because, hey, this is- this is- this is our civic duty and this is important?

Dr. Riddle: And so if all of you could also respond? I- I know you- I want you to hear- I want to hear what you say, but if all of you could kind of tap into that. Basically, you know, how could you- it- it... How does the media portray firearms, in your- in your opinion?

Nashville: I see it as both. I see it as them- them doing their duty as, uh, informing us 'cause we need the information, because without news or any media outlets, we wouldn't know what's going on in the world unless we had family in the area. But they also do make, uh, capital off of it because they're sitting here... They could over-exaggerate the details of it and send misinformation, which I see as them gaining from it and gaining, uh, profit from it. And others, I see as, when they're spreading the correct information, I see it as them doing their duty as a service to the community and the people around us.

Modesto: Yeah, I think, um, I agree with Nashville on this. I think that they are- they do a really good job of giving us the information we need and being informative. If we're, like, in the area and we need to, um, like, get away from it or something like that, I think they do a good job of that. But this is also, like, how they make money. So sometimes they would, like, have to make it sound intriguing. They'd have to give, like, the gross details or, um, you know, make it more- more dramatic so that it's more interesting and pulls more people to view it. So I think... I think I agree with her on that. That's a big thing, I think.

Asheboro: Yeah. I definitely think it's a little bit of both. But at the same time, depending on, like, what news company it is, um, a lot of them, like, will just make the headline, like Nashville was saying, um, like, they'll make the headline kind of like a click bit, almost.

Modesto: I immediately thought of the movie Tenet because there was a lot of silencers used in that movie. Um, I also really enjoyed that movie, by the way. Great movie. If you haven't seen it, you should watch it. But- (laughs) anyway, um, there was a specific scene in that movie where they were- a couple of the characters in the movie were breaking into, like, a highly guarded home, like a rich person home. And, um, they were, like, just taking out the guards and they were using silencers, and no one inside the house, even though there was someone literally, like, right by the window, did not know it was happening because no- no- there was no sound. Um, and it kind of... It's like they used silencers making it more of like, um- like a more epic kind of movie and made it a lot more intriguing. So I think... I think that, like, when directors and people making movies are, um, involving silencers in their movies and, like, action movies, I think most of the time it's just to make the m- make the movies more intriguing and more interesting. Um, because it was definitely intriguing to me 'cause I really enjoyed the movie and I thought the silencers went well with the story. Um, so I think they portrayed it in a way where it was just to help with making the movie better, um, and more interesting, rather than for, like, necessarily negative uses, I guess.

(06:45 of Focus group II)

Amarillo: Okay. Another thing I forgot to follow up about the John Wick video was when their bullets hit, those aren't going to be silent... nobody noticed that. Um, and then when I have been around silenced weapons, um, I, I mean, I guess I don't think about, like, the impact on, like, how I feel about them mentally. It's just, yeah, not something I think about. Um, but, like, if I have had any thoughts, it's more, like, thoughts of I guess comfort because I know I'm not annoying my neighbors. Um, the same with the subsonic

bullets.

Matt: Have her explain the, the subsonic bullets. Um, could you ... You mentioned the subsonic bullets. Would you expand on that a little bit, Amarillo?

Amarillo: Uh, yeah, sure. They are, um, they are legal, at least in the state of Minnesota. I don't know about down here. Um, yeah, I could google and, and try to send you a link to those, too. But they're not quiet quiet, but they do take away some sound.

Dr. Riddle: I think what, what maybe we can think of first is, in your opinion, why do you think perhaps the writers and the directors did this, you know, made this such a significant ... The sounds, the way things were and, yeah, maybe just start there. So, why do you think the writers or directors did it this way?

Asheboro: I mean, specifically with the John Wick movie, like, I think that they did it that specific way because if there we- ... If the guns weren't silent, obviously everyone in that building would have been looking up and that would have just taken away, like, some of the coolness effect of it, I guess, because, like, they're dressed in suits, like, they're dressed nicely and they're just walking, like, down very casually shooting at each other. And it's like ... I don't know, I think it just kind of adds to, like, the experience of you watching it because, like, if everyone around was noticing, it would obviously cause, like, a great panic and people would be running, and that just ... I don't think that it was, like, done like that for a political reason or because they don't know what silencers sound like.

Because, I mean, when you think about other movies, like, they'll have a lot of different things, like, that have noises that sound nothing like the real thing. Like, a explosion, like, it'll just be like a giant boom. It's just done for, like, the actual experience of

watching it and, like, to please the watcher rather than, like, be realistic, because if it was realistic, it wouldn't be as interesting.

Amarillo: That was exactly my point. I think that they were prioritizing, um, effect from the audience instead of being realistic like some of the Call of Duty games are, and that effect from the audience I definitely experienced because I, I was in some kind of awe from seeing guns being shot so close to the crowd and I think that, that sort of unexpectedness can really add something unique to the movie. But at the same time time, it did sort of pull me out of a little bit because I was thinking, if there's bullets whizzing overhead, the crowd is definitely going to hear some of that.

An interesting aside regarding the videos and the reactions of the research participants is that I spent a great deal of time and resources to locate the videos shown. However, the participants brought up an additional popular contemporary movie that depicted the use of silencers of which I was unfamiliar. The movie in question is “Tenant” a Christopher Nolan film, which is also ironic in that I used the quote from a previous Nolan film Inception in the section about priming, (Nolan & Thomas, 2010; 2020). This led to some interesting and deeper discussions as to the dramatization of firearm silencers and the use of gunplay in films and mass media.

Unrealistically Unbelievable

Unrealistically Unbelievable occurred eleven times in total, but only within the second focus group. This is understandable as the videos were shown at the conclusion of the first focus group. The participants noted that the film clips did depict several unrealistic events and depictions. As with the previous theme, the participants discussed why the producers used such stylized and fallacious depictions. This is an important finding to my research, as the participants noting and discussing openly such controversial issues while realizing the depiction is unrealistic

or impossible can lead to rational discussion based on factual evidence rather than emotional outcries.

(04:04 of Focus Group II)

Amarillo: Um, but I did find it strange that none of the crowd reacted the sound of the, the silenced weapon because it did, it did still make a sound. Um, but my boyfriend was saying that some really, uh, accurate gun sounds portrayed in media would be in the Call of Duty games, the newer ones. They sound very accurate.

Dr. Riddle: Have any of you actually heard one, at a gun range? Like, have you ever been somewhere where you've actually realistically heard one go off?

Asheboro: Yes, and they're very loud.

Dr. Riddle: Yeah. Te- Tell me about it.

Asheboro: They're very loud.

Nashville: My perceptions on the silencer, uh, for me, particularly the John Wick one, it stood out to me how it was very easy for them to use the silencer in a crowded place, and no one really paid attention, whether it was intentional or not. It just stuck a cord with me 'cause is it trying to say that it's okay to use them in a crowded place if you are intending to, um, injure someone? That, that really struck a chord with me 'cause it, it made no sense. And as for the Navy Seals, I mean, they were in a combat area and I s- like, I haven't seen the movie, so i- in my opinion, I don't really know, uh, who's good or bad. But, I mean, I feel like it was justified in there, but I could be wrong. But the John Wick one, I ... It struck something in me 'cause I wasn't too particularly fond of it.”

Nashville: Uh, unrealistic wise, I mean, in John Wick, it would be very unrealistic for them to be in a crowded place and have a gun. Like, somebody would have noticed. Any normal person would have been like, hey, uh, why are you walking around with that?

Modesto: I feel like it's just a little bit unrealistic and a bit ridiculous that, like, absolutely everyone thought it was, like, normal and, like, didn't say anything or no one noticed that it was actually happening.

Reasoning Behind the Cinematic Effect

Reasoning Behind the Cinematic Effect also occurred eleven times, and all within the second focus group. This thematic development strikes at the heart of my research, with the participants discussing the matter directly with myself, Dr. Riddle, and each other. I was surprised to note that the participants were generally aware of the synthetic and unrealistic nature of what they had seen in the video clips.

(20:47 of Focus Group II)

Asheboro: I mean, specifically with the John Wick movie, like, I think that they did it that specific way. If the guns weren't silent, obviously everyone in that building would have been looking up and that would have just taken away, like, some of the coolness effect of it. I don't know, I think it just kind of adds to, like, the experience of you watching it because, like, if everyone around was noticing, it would obviously cause, like, a great panic and people would be running. I don't think that it was, like, done like that for a political reason or because they don't know what silencers sound like. Because, I mean, when you think about other movies, like, they'll have a lot of different things, like, that have noises that sound nothing like the real thing. Like, an explosion, like, it'll just be like a giant boom. It's just done for, like, the actual experience of watching it and,

like, to please the watcher rather than, like, be realistic, because if it was realistic, it wouldn't be as interesting.

Amarillo: That was exactly my point. I think that they were prioritizing, um, effect from the audience instead of being realistic.

(23:37 of Focus Group II)

Modesto: For me, I feel like they are using those kind of factors as a more, like, cinematic experience. Um, I feel like they want to add more to, like, the movie rather than maybe make a political statement. So, I feel like, I feel like they used, like, a lot less sound in the guns and some of the aspects that they used in the movie to make it more of a cinematic experience, like, more interesting.

Dr. Riddle: But, um, I'm just wondering th- how it's been fictionalized, using suppressors, silencers. Just what type of a- an effect do you think it has had on society and their perceptions of silencers?

Asheboro: I think it definitely takes away some of, like, the impact of, like, gun violence and, um, the use of suppressors because, like, in reality, the use of guns and the use of suppressors are, like, they're both very violent things and they're both, like, very serious things to have and to own and to use. And I feel like because of mass media and, like, social media and movies like that, it's almost been, like ... The weight of it has almost been, like, removed and it's very much casualized.

Modesto: I actually wanted to say, I think ... Sorry. I think that, um, what Amarillo and Nashville said about how guns are used to solve problems, I actually agree with that 'cause, like, Amarillo said they're used to solve problems in movies, like, action movies, which is true. They use that to solve a lot of problems in action movies. But there's also

in real life experiences where people buy guns to wanna solve their problems. Like, they want to ... The main reason people get it now that makes it so normalized, like Nashville said, is that, um, they will ... Like, people will start buying guns for protection purposes to keep at their bed or to keep, like, in their house so that they can have more protection. So, they have it to, like, solve problems because they think something's gonna happen. Um, so, I think that could be another reason why it's a whole lot more normalized.

Amarillo: Yeah. I guess an action movie where they all just sit down, go to therapy, talk about their problems, and solve things that way wouldn't sell many tickets. Um, but with the, um, the guns for protection thing, um, personally, my, my boyfriend and I have decided that if we ever had kids or, you know, e- even if it's just us, we won't have one for protection, even though we were both raised around people that weapon carried, um, because just statistically, there's a lot higher chance of a gun misfiring and injuring yourself or a loved one... the chances are just much higher that they would be injured rather than you successfully ward off a home intruder, you successfully perform judge, jury and executioner and kill someone and stand your ground and you're the hero in your own home.

Asheboro: Yeah. To go off of what Amarillo said, I feel like a lot of people will see a scene like the John Wick scene and they'll see how casually they're just shooting and they'll be like, 'You know what, I think that I could do that,' and they'll buy a gun... that is more dangerous than not having a gun because majority of the time, people are gonna buy a gun and they're not gonna take any classes on it, they're not gonna practice, they're not gonna learn anything about it... and that's very unsafe.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusion

Focus groups can be a valuable tool in the researcher's toolkit. This method of research can generate additional data and findings as the subjects discuss their feelings amongst themselves and these feelings are recorded by the researcher, (Kitzinger, 2020). However, the researcher must be careful when using this format as it should be noted that that while focus groups can generate new data from the discussions amongst the subjects, the pressure to conform socially can also alter the data, especially when dealing with controversial, inflammatory, or emotionally charged topics, (Asch, 1955; Ulutaş, 2019).

The sounds of gunfire and particularly gunfire sounds as modified by the addition of a firearm silencer or suppressor, and the subject's perception(s) of this depiction in the video clips are a key part of my research. There is no doubt that the sounds of actual gunfire are reduced by the addition of a firearm silencer or suppressor, but do the participants realize that the depictions were utterly false? The research participants appeared somewhat aware of the dramatization of the sounds depicted in the clips. They brought up issues such as the fact that bullets create noise when they strike solid objects and that it is unlikely in today's culture that someone would not react and flee from a scene as depicted in the John Wick: Chapter 2 clip. The participants did however seem unphased and unaware of the entirely false nature of the depiction of the suppressed submachine gun sounds depicted in the Navy SEALs film clip.

The participants pointed out that had the bystanders panicked and fled in the John Wick: Chapter 2 film clip, it would have ruined the scene and taken away from the overall cinematic experience. This discussion also brought up their feelings that the dramatization was not specifically for politization, but to create a meaningful scene from a cinematic perspective. The

participants also brought up the point that in do so, and certain level of romantic depiction occurs, distracting from the issue of the very real topic of gun violence and firearm silencer/suppressor crimes. The issue that in many movies, particularly action films, guns are used to solve crimes, even when in the hands of the heroic protagonist, could lead to viewers to believe all or most problems should be solved in this manner. One participant also addressed the issue of proficiency with firearms being a perishable skill, and how the level of proficiency usually depicted in action films is that of an expert, whereas the average person may not realize that practice and proper training are necessary to refine this skill set. Professionally attest to the validity of this belief. Firearms are simply mechanical objects. Proficiency, especially at the expert level, with these devices requires hours, if not years, of intense repetition and practice based upon a foundation of solid fundamentals; nobody is just instantly amazing with these devices immediately and forever. Just like with anything else, expertise takes time, sacrifice, discipline, and dedication.

Additionally, the notion of availability and proliferation of firearm silencer or suppressor crime was addressed by the participants. My dissection of the participant's statements I believe indicated a basic ignorance of the current system in place to legally obtain a silencer or suppressor in the United States. Most of the participants indicated they believed one could simply walk into a retailer and walk out with the silencer or suppressor. While the process to legally obtain a silencer in this country is not difficult per se, it is entirely tedious, requiring multiple background checks at the state and federal level, as well as fingerprints, photographs, and lengthy wait period of typically nine to twelve months. This common lack of knowledge of the process is in my estimation understandable. The retailers, typically higher end firearms dealers, who also sell silencers display these devices in much the same way their firearms are

displayed, typically in locked glass display cases. Most US states allow for the purchase of firearms from a licensed retailer, where the purchaser can take the purchased weapon home that same day. It is not difficult then to imagine the easy leap of logic one could make here regarding the legal acquisition of firearm silencers or suppressors.

Crimes committed with silencers or suppressors are rare. The Virginia Beach massacre of 2019 is currently the only mass shooting to incorporate the use of a legally obtained silencer in modern times (VPC, 2019). While firearm silencer or suppressor crimes do exist, research has indicated that their difficulty to obtain is a hindrance, as well as their physical characteristics makes the firearms far more difficult to easily conceal, and therefore less attractive to usage by criminals (Clark, 2007). The vast majority of firearm silencer or suppressor crimes committed in the US are not violent in nature (e.g., a father and son trying to build one as a science experiment while being blissfully unaware of the state and federal regulations regarding the legal building of these devices (Clark, 2007; Spitzer, 2020). The depictions of firearm silencer or suppressor use in films and mass media seem however to drastically favor the portrayals of assassins and commandos using these devices to commit horrific crimes and then vanish into the ether with nary a trace.

Pilot studies are not conducted to prove a theory, or even to unveil a hypothesis. Pilot studies are designed to scratch the surface and examine if there is anything deeper worth studying. The purpose of pilot studies is to conduct “A small-scale test of the methods and procedures to be used on a larger scale” (NIH, n.d.). This is akin to conducting a geographical survey and taking a few samples before committing to digging for gold. The likelihood of success is significantly increased, and a larger or deeper investigation can be led by the basic facts and figures gathered from the pilot study (Thabane et al., 2010). By testing the idea of

deliberate exposure to a mass media video, that I personally and professionally know to be a fictional and false yet provocative depiction of firearms silencers and suppressors, I will be able to examine if this exposure evokes thought or an emotional response in the test subjects. If my study turns up effects from the exposure, it will, hopefully invite more in-depth research.

Often firearm silencers and suppressors, and firearms in general, are associated with criminality. In the world of criminality, qualitative interview research is a valuable method that could contribute to a deeper and more complex understanding of what people draw upon to make sense of criminal behavior. This brings up the idea of the media portrayals of firearm silencers and suppressors in and of themselves. “The brain has what is called *negativity bias*, meaning it remembers and responds to negative experiences up to three times more than positive experiences” (Hammond, 2015, p. 213). It would then stand to reason that if the test subject understood the portrayal to be negative it would likely evoke a deeper emotional or other response.

My professional experiences in the military and law enforcement have exposed me to the subject of firearm silencers and suppressors. Additionally, the use, and development of these devices is a personal hobby of mine. However, qualitative interviewing—and focus groups are a type of qualitative interviewing—is about the interviewee, not about the interviewer (Weiss, 1994). Due to extensive experiences with firearms and suppressors, I bring to this study certain biases that may potentially shape my interpretations as a researcher. I will need to work arduously to recognize and respond to my biases.

Conducted properly, my research could have theoretical and practical relevance. Theoretically, this study could add to the complex and multifaceted theories regarding popular media and its effects on public perceptions and beliefs. Regarding practical relevance, my

research could serve the interests of other scholars, in addition to being of some use in law enforcement training and the work of legislators and media producers. In short, it is my hope this research opens the door to the complex question of how firearm silencers and suppressors are portrayed by the media, and how they are perceived by media consumers (MacCarthy, 2011).

So then, does the act of priming and framing via tool of popular media affect perceptions of a specific and reasonably controversial issue, in this case that of firearm silencers or suppressors, and how so? My research would indicate that the tools of priming and framing unequivocally can, and in this study, did affect the perceptions of the test subjects. Simply put, If I can control the narrative, I can likely dictate the outcome of the argument.

This study relied upon the use of one form of popular media i.e., the participants watching contemporary movie clips containing the use of firearm silencers. However, this is only one form from the vast myriad of modalities used in mass media. We have all seen the ads depicting the latest edition of a sportscar with a beautiful model seductively posed on the hood, seemingly suggesting that should one purchase this vehicle gorgeous women will find you more attractive. I am also reminded of the various military recruiting campaigns I have witnessed. One brazenly depicted the exploits of navy SEALs performing all sorts of daredevil feats while the narrator asked, "If they wrote a book about your life, would anyone want to read it?" The commercial suggests a career in special operations could lead to a life of adventure and other daring-do, yet conveniently ignores the fact that greater than ninety percent of applicants fail to successfully complete the entry barriers to these careers and could end up swabbing decks.

Other forms of mass media can rely upon triggering emotions. The late great painter Norman Rockwell made his career by illustrating realistic life scenes that were intended to immediately produce a specific psychological reaction in the viewer such as nostalgia, familial

warmth, sympathy, or patriotism. The most psychologically successful add campaign I have ever witnessed was simply two lines, written in black and white that read:

SEX

Now that I have your attention, check out these awesome prices:

While incredibly simple and devilishly clever, this add campaign counted on the fact that we as humans would scan through the vast lines of text yet focus on a single word that triggered a specific psychologic response in our brain. As of late the term “groomer” has been popularized on one side of the political spectrum to immediately associate the label with certain aspects of pedophilia, thereby immediately evoking feelings of rage or disgust in the intended target.

A final example of this phenomenon is masterfully depicted in David O. Sacks’, and Jason Reitman’s 2005 film *Thank You for Smoking*, (Sacks, 2005). The scene in question depicts savvy and tobacco lobby spin doctor Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart) explaining to his young son Joey (Cameron Bright) how to successfully win every argument or debate:

Nick: OK, let's say that you're defending chocolate, and I'm defending vanilla. Now if I were to say to you: 'Vanilla is the best flavor ice-cream', you'd say --

Joey: No, chocolate is.

Nick: Exactly, but you can't win that argument. So, I'll ask you: so you think chocolate is the end all and the all of ice-cream, do you?

Joey: It's the best ice-cream, I wouldn't order any other.

Nick: Oh. So, it's all chocolate for you, is it?

Joey: Yes, chocolate is all I need.

Nick: Well, I need more than chocolate, and for that matter I need more than vanilla. I

believe that we need freedom. And choice when it comes to our ice-cream, and that Joey

Naylor, that is the definition of liberty.

Joey: But that's not what we're talking about.

Nick: Ah. But that's what I'm talking about.

Joey: But you didn't prove that vanilla was the best.

Nick: I didn't have to. I proved that you're wrong, and if you're wrong, I'm right.

The issue that the fictional Nick Naylor emphasizes in the previous example is reminiscent of the legendary military treatise *The Art of War* by Sun-Tzu. Several key points Sun-Tzu makes revolve around controlling the battle, or in this case the argument. I am reminded specifically of two quotes from the *Art of War*; “All warfare is based on deception, and He will win who knows when to fight and not to fight.” (Sun-Tzu & Minford, 2002, p. 8). By this I am illustrating Nick Naylor’s point; I am not fighting you or your argument directly, instead I am attacking you, your character, or another issue that distracts from the original point allowing me to win in the court of public opinion, even though I may not have addressed your original legitimate point(s). This example is highly illustrative of the practice of framing. By controlling the argument or changing the debate to an argument and narrative that I control I can exert more influence on outside observers, without necessarily arguing specifically for or against the original point.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INITIAL INVITE TO STUDY

Dear potential participant,

My name is Matthew Burke and I am a masters student from the Sociology Department at UNC Greensboro. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that seeks to examine the role media plays in people' perceptions of firearm suppressors. Your participation in this study would contribute to a sociological understanding of individual perceptions of suppressors.

To be an eligible participant in this study, you must

- be 18 years or older.
- speak English as a primary language.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one focus group interview held via Zoom. Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

By participating in this study, you will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card for participating in the focus group interview. The study will take place during the Spring 2022 semester.

If you have any questions about the study, please email me at mrburke@uncg.edu or contact the primary investigator, Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith, at s_krolls@uncg.edu.

Gratefully,

Matthew R. Burke
Sociology Department, UNC Greensboro
mrburke@uncg.edu
443.801.2705

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY

THE SILENCE IS DEAFENING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ROLE MEDIA PLAYS
IN PEOPLES' PERCEPTIONS OF FIREARM SUPPRESSORS

RESEARCHER IDENTIFICATION

Matthew R. Burke

Sociology Department, UNC Greensboro

mrburke@uncg.edu

443.801.2705

PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what your participation will entail. Please read the following carefully, and let the researcher (contact information above) know if you need any clarification.

Firearms and criminality are a widely studied field. However, minimal research considers the role media plays in peoples' perceptions of firearm suppressors, which can offer a deeper understanding of the challenges or the ease with which people discuss firearms, and more specifically, firearm silencers and suppressors. In an effort to address this gap in the literature, the purpose of this qualitative interview study research will be to examine the role media plays in peoples' perceptions of firearm suppressors. Moreover, I will navigate what peoples' draw upon

to make sense of these perceptions. To narrow the focus, particular attention will be paid to silencers and suppressors in the mass media.

STUDY PROCEDURES

The study will consist of two, 1-hour focus group interviews. The study will run the duration of the spring 2022 semester. I will audio and video record each of the focus group interviews.

BENEFITS

Exploring the role mass media plays in peoples' perceptions of firearm suppressors, as framed by their predetermined images of suppressors, this research will add to the relatively thin knowledge base on the specific topic of firearm silencers or suppressors, and perhaps more broadly, criminality.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses to the focus group interviews will remain anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning pseudonyms to each participant
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file or on locked computer in the personal possession of the researcher
- Deleting interview audio and video recordings once the interviews have been transcribed.

COMPENSATION

For the focus group interviews, there will be a total of \$50 (\$20 for each participation in each focus group interview, with a \$10 bonus for complete participation on both). The gift cards

will be distributed at the closure of each interview. Participants will not be eligible for compensation if they discontinue their participation prior to the completion of each interview.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page of this consent form or contact the primary investigator, Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith, at s_krolls@uncg.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may discontinue your participation at any time.