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Nov 04, 2016 by [Jami Fullerton](#)

Academic Study Raises Questions about Perceptions of America as a Violent Place ^[1]

In this space on August 27, 2013, I wrote about the senseless murder of an Australian student-athlete who was studying in Oklahoma and how the incident caused the former deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer, to caution Australians not to visit the U.S. because of our lax gun laws. Regardless of how one feels about U.S. gun rights, the Australian minister's statement brings into question the international image of the United States as a violent place and how that perception impacts travel and other positive intentions toward our country.

To explore the question empirically, Dr. Alice Kendrick from the Temerlin Advertising Institute at Southern Methodist University and I re-visited a large data set that we had gathered from a representative sample of Australian adults in November 2012 (10 months prior to the shooting). The original purpose of our study was to gauge Australian attitude toward a U.S. tourism commercial and its ability to increase interest in travel to the US, as well as improve attitudes in general toward the U.S. government and the American people. As reported in the September 2013 issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*, the commercial was effective on both fronts – it improved attitudes for tourism as well as public diplomacy.

It occurred to us after the Oklahoma shooting, however, that the study might also provide insight into the moderating effect that perceptions of violence may have on the strength of the commercial. The data set contained an open-ended question asking, "When you think of the United States, what five words come to mind?" About nine percent (28 out of 316 respondents) mentioned one or more of the following terms: guns, unsafe, violence, crime, and shooting. The 28 respondents were then placed in a "violence mentioned group" (VM) for further analysis. When the VM group was compared with the rest of the sample, we

discovered that those who perceived the U.S. as a violent place were unaffected by the commercial in terms of its ability to increase travel interest and attitude toward the U.S. government (attitude toward the U.S. people fared better). Not only did the VM group have statistically significantly lower interest toward traveling to the U.S. before seeing the ad, they also showed no increase in interest after seeing the ad, unlike the rest of the viewers. Essentially, the effectiveness of the ad to enhance attitudes toward travel didn't work with those who held pre-existing perceptions of America as a violent place. The same pattern held true with their attitudes toward the U.S. government.

I'm not sure the findings surprised us, or anyone who heard our paper when it was presented last month at the American Academy of Advertising conference. It was interesting, however, to find empirical evidence that supported a notion that those of us who study and practice public diplomacy feared – U.S. gun laws and the way stories of U.S. violence are covered in international media do damage to America's image abroad.

That reality was confirmed when I visited Israel in February. My very smart, Jewish tour guide, who had fought in the 6-day war, told me that he thought the U.S. might be the best place on earth to visit or live, IF, he said, it were not for the fact that average citizens could carry guns (and that we don't have national health care, but that's for another blog). I was shocked. If this very worldly (and very conservative) former soldier's perception of America-the-Violent kept him away, how many other tourists and positive intentions are we losing?

Our research is not free of methodological limitations. We didn't ask about the perception of violence directly, but only through unaided descriptors. Our groups were not evenly matched in size, although statistical tests showed them to be equal in terms of age, gender, visits to the U.S., and other important characteristics. But the differences in attitudes toward America were large and statistically significant, enough so that we believe this relationship should be explored further.

And so much so, that we would call on our leaders to consider what our gun laws and the conversations we have about gun rights, which are frequently carried in the global media, might be doing to the perceptions of America abroad. In this writer's opinion, damage to America's image isn't the only or even the best reason to re-think our gun laws, but it certainly is another consideration in debating this controversial policy.
