How Pop Can Army Strong Be? Uses of Popular Culture in U.S. Army Recruitment Campaign

The recruitment campaigns of all-volunteer military forces sell a life choice that requires commitment of time, autonomy, and personal safety, and their brand unavoidably ties with war, violence, and death. Despite the challenges, several studies have supported the positive effects of recruitment campaigns on enlistments (Dertouzos and Garber “Effectiveness”; Military Advertising; Warner et al.). The largest share of the US military’s recruitment budget goes to the Army, which has a high need for recruits and is consequently the most aggressive of the military advertisers (Hosek 217). In order to address young adults (the targeted audiences are mainly seventeen to twenty-five-year-olds), these advertisements use popular culture references, such as familiar modes of narration, music, and images from popular films, television, and games in their effort to present the Army as an exciting and appealing opportunity.

In 2006, the Army began using the slogan “Army Strong” alongside popular culture references in the commercials and other advertising campaigns. The slogan was part of the US Army’s public image until 2015. In that time, US Army Marketing produced at least forty-five commercials that explicitly use the recruitment slogan “Army Strong.” These advertisements were broadcasted on different American television channels and also appeared on various internet pages, such as goarmy.com (the Army’s official recruitment website) and the YouTube channels of the US Army and the US Army Media Center.

Most research on military advertising has focused on the success of their informative and motivational aspects (Dertouzos and Garber, Military Advertising; “Effectiveness”; Levy; Miller et al.; Park et al.; Warner et al.). The typical questions raised in traditional approaches
to consumer behavior modeling in advertising assumes conscious and rational individuals who will cognitively process brand communication. However, alternative approaches emphasize the importance of emotions and affects in advertisements, where the mood of both the consumer and the advertisement are of importance (Hansen and Christensen). Due to the Army’s preference for advertisements that feature popular culture products, the cultural studies approach, which gives special attention to the logic of popular culture and the implied meanings and affects of the commercials, proves crucial for a comprehensive understanding of US Army advertising.

Analyzing the “Army Strong” commercials as part of American popular culture reveals the source of the campaign’s narrative modes and its affective appeal to viewers. Postclassical narratology, which is interested in the contextual elements of narratives, such as the goals and the socio-cultural contexts of narratives, strategies of reception, and the role of the viewer (Prince), suggests a focus on the roles of the narrator(s) and narrative viewpoints, generic modes, the uses of cinematography, editing, and sound, as well as the uses of main themes, characters, settings, and images. This method allows us to understand the storytelling logic of the campaigning and critically analyze what popular cultural-related strategies of communication these advertisements use. It ultimately suggests that the “Army Strong” campaign borrows narrative modes from two main sources: action films and reality television.

Modalities and Affects of Popular Culture

The connection between popular culture and advertisement is complex. Jib Fowles argues that although advertising shares elements with popular culture, such as the use of stories, the desire for pleasure, and the aim to be widely consumed, they utilize symbolic content differently. Popular culture aims for entertainment through attractive contents, whereas
advertising uses positive associations to directly influence consumers’ actions. By using similar techniques, advertisement not only draws from popular culture, but also contributes to it (11-20).

For the Army, an important marketing strategy appears to be borrowing practices from popular culture genres that are well liked among the target audiences, such as the techniques employed in action and superhero films and reality television. In this way, the Army aims to be accessible, inviting, and relatable. Television advertisements function in the context of popular culture, highlighting the interconnectedness of the “Army Strong” campaign and popular genres.

Christine Gledhill argues that each genre creates certain repetitive articulations of particular themes or conventions, which start to function symbolically within that genre. These iconic images, aesthetic conventions, and articulations of themes, such as the decaying castles of horror films or the saloons in Westerns, become recognized and expected by the audience, and thus become modalities of the genre (228-29). The modalities can be used as intertextual references, and they can be borrowed for other uses in other media products. These intertextual references also carry along with them the distinctively expressed cultural meanings of the original genre. In other words, when cultural meanings and themes travel across genre boundaries, the mythologies, ideologies, and narrative structures created within one possible world travel with them. Thus, using the modalities of popular genres in commercials means using more than the recognizable imagery. It means commercials mediate the emotions and ideologies related to their imagery, such as the concept of heroism in action scenes. The reuse of specific dimensions of expression and the capability of crossing the boundaries of medium and genre reveal the cultural power and productivity of modalities, which can also “circulate back to form social expectations and practices” (Gledhill 235; see also Watson 110-26).
The circulation of modalities is comparable to the logic of affective economies. Sara Ahmed argues that when emotions work at the boundaries between bodies and the world, they turn into affects—processes that do not exist within any one subject or object, but which circulate between different signifiers, working between the individual and the collective. An important part of this theory is the stickiness of affects—when a certain emotion becomes connected (or disconnected) to a certain sign. In other words, other contexts where the same sign is used start to carry the same affect with them (117-24). For example, just as action films emphasize heroism and personal strength in action scenes, so do the use of similar action tropes in advertisements create similar affective interpretations of the scene. Thus, when Army commercials borrow modalities from action films, they do not borrow only the aesthetics of the action scenes but also the ideologies and emotions of heroism and sense of duty. By doing this repeatedly, the Army aims to saturate its brand and campaign slogan “Army Strong” with the same (positive) affective signifiers.

Slogans and Brand in the US Army’s Advertising

In US Army marketing, slogans build upon the stickiness of affects. Short phrases, like “Army Strong,” build brand recognition, identity, and public imagery, and they create continuity between multimedia advertisements (Miller et al. 66–67). The repetitive use of slogans and the logo of the Army make the commercials recognizable, but, at least since Uncle Sam’s direct address “I Want You” in World War I posters, they have also helped to create a public story about the Army. Other military branches have survived with a few consistent slogans (such as, “The Few, the Proud, the Marines” and the Navy’s “Accelerate Your Life”) whereas the US Army has used several slogans in order to keep up with the changing contexts of the targeted audiences (Miller et al. 67; Peckenpaugh 14).
The transition into the all-voluntary force in 1973 increased recruitment efforts, and both market research and advertisements gained in importance. The public image of the Army needed uplifting in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and the first slogans distanced the public image from ideas of duty, sacrifice, and obligation and turned towards the opportunities and services provided, such as education, experience, and traveling. The slogan “Today’s Army Wants to Join You” (1971-73), in particular, was a deliberate attempt to assure the potential recruits that the Army would respect and appreciate individuality. The critics, however, worried that the opportunities perspective would encourage selfishness rather than idealism and service to one’s country (Bailey, “Army” 48-62; Levy 28-31; Miller et al. 67). The next slogan, “Join the People Who’ve Joined the Army” (1973 until the late-1970s), thus included references to team work, and “This is the Army” (lates-1970s until 1981) aimed for a clear brand statement similar to other military branches.

The first long-lasting and recognizable slogan, “Be All You Can Be,” was introduced in 1981, and for twenty years was synonymous with the Army. It is often considered the best-liked Army slogan because it depicted the Army as a place to develop oneself. Army life becomes associated with “esteem, autonomy and self-actualization,” whereas previous Army slogans invoked the desires of belonging and affiliation (Miller et al. 66, 68, 75-76). This campaign also proved the importance of popular culture. National television and, in particular, major sporting events, such as the NFL playoffs, which overlapped with young Americans’ yearly schedule for career decisions, were the campaign’s main medium. The commercials referenced action figures, such as G.I. Joe from the television series, and used a recognizable television jingle—a short and catchy melody where the slogan was not narrated but was sung (Newman; Pieslak 17, 27; Dertouzos and Garber, Military Advertising, 10–11). This marketing strategy worked well, especially after the end of the Cold War when the Army was adjusting itself to match a peacetime public image. The Army was seen to add
value to the civilian sector in the form of well-trained leaders, skillful employees, and all-round good citizens (Bailey, *America’s Army*, 201-06). Thus, “Be All You Can Be” well suited the brand identity, which emphasized social good, equality, and opportunity.

By the end of the millennium, however, Army recruitment was struggling. Despite being a recognizable brand, young people were finding other job opportunities. Critics increasingly argued that the essence of the Army was missing from the public imagery, and, as a reaction, Army marketing introduced the image of the warrior, which was further emphasized after 9/11. The slogan “An Army of One” (2001–06) rebranded the Army in light of the increasing demand for active enlistees in Iraq (Knowles et al., 78-91; Miller et al. 68). In 2003, “The Warrior Ethos,” a part of the Soldier’s Pledge, became an inseparable part of the soldier’s life, public imagery, and advertisements with the claim, “I am a warrior and a member of a team. I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat.” The campaign, which included commercials shown during television series that were popular among target audiences accompanied by aggressive campus marketing, reintroduced such values as “loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage,” as Bailey formulates (*America’s Army*, 208; see also Bailey, “Army” 47-48; Houppert 213-14). The commercials emphasized heroism but did not abandon the idea of opportunities.

Recently, changes in the media landscape have again compelled the Army to come up with new marketing strategies. The importance of broadcasting networks has diminished and alternative media sources have emerged. For example, the Army’s free video game *America’s Army* (2002) and its commercial training simulator game *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), which give participatory experiences for players, have become part of the recruitment and branding processes (Lugo 14). In addition, their recruiting website provides an opportunity to see what it means to be in an army. The “Army Strong” campaign (2006-15) was created within this multimedia and popular culture-inspired context. It spread powerful images and
sounds that resonate with popular culture images of warriors and heroes in television, games, the Internet, and social media. The first commercial of the campaign, broadcast on November 9, 2006, defined the meaning of the slogan “Army Strong”:

There’s strong, and then there’s Army strong. It is not just the strength to obey, but the strength to command. Not just strength in numbers, but strength of brothers. Not just the strength to lift, the strength to raise. Not just the strength to get yourself over, the strength to get over yourself. It is more than physical strength; it is emotional strength. There is nothing on this green earth stronger than the US Army, because there is nothing on this green earth stronger than a US Army soldier. (“Army Strong”)

Several familiar themes from earlier decades appear in the commercial, such as the notion of opportunities and personal growth. It continued the familiar theme of becoming a better person from the “Be All You Can Be” campaign, and symbolic images of a strong soldier, strong Army, and, thus, a strong nation from the “An Army of One” campaign. In this way, the slogan aimed to underline the Army’s function and discuss the values of autonomy, achievement, and dominance, which have all been seen as favorable characteristics among possible recruits (Miller et al. 66, 75-76).

The “Army Strong” campaign lasted about ten years, but it was also heavily criticized and mocked for, among other things, the lack of wartime references and the lack of the violent reality of soldiers on active duty (Tyson; Garfield 57). Mark Davis, from Army marketing, argued that the slogan failed to resonate with public, even though “Everybody in the Army understands [the notion of Army Strong] intuitively, because they’re a stronger human being for their experiences” (qtd. in Lilley). However, according to Ann Scott Tyson, when the campaign was initially tested on soldiers in 2006, their reactions were mixed. Some liked it, but others saw it as uninspiring.
The increasing awareness of the physical and emotional challenges that soldiers face, including the high suicide rate, post-traumatic stress disorder, aggression, violence, and post-deployment adjustment problems (Quartana et al.; Elbogen et al.), have inspired several parodies of “Army Strong.” The parodies often exploit the theme song and marketing phrases, for example by stating “Webster defines strong as having great physical power. Strength has nothing to do with this commercial,” and then continuing to address physical weakness, drinking problems, suicide, imprisonment, and failures (“Army Strong Spoof”).

In order to respond to increasing mockery, the “Army Team” campaign started to replace the “Army Strong” campaign in 2015 (Lilley). The biggest change is the new slogan. Instead of strength, the main message focuses on the importance of a team. For example, the commercial “Tunnel: Halo” offers a motivational speech: “I want you to always remember, this is the greatest team you will ever be part of.” The action film style of the soldiers preparing to parachute, however, shows that much of the audiovisual material is borrowed from the “Army Strong” campaign. Thus, the use of popular culture modes continues. The action-based commercials from the “Army Strong” campaign frame the Army as an exciting and dynamic life choice, whereas the reality television mode emphasizes opportunities and stability.

**Action Modes of the Commercials**

Fifteen of the forty-five commercials from the “Army Strong” campaign prioritize modalities from the action genre. In these commercials, particularly, the theme song is an important communicative element. Music, like a slogan, creates continuity between different commercials, adds to the branding of the product, and because music carries with it recognizable cultural codes of emotions, values, and atmosphere, it can help to target specific markets by using musical styles that have been identified with those demographic groups
The Army chose Mark Isham, who has created soundtracks for such films as *Men of Honor* (2000) and *Warrior* (2011), to compose the epic-sounding theme for the “Army Strong” campaign (Nickerson; Pieslak 24). Brass, drums, strings, and a chorus create the theme. It starts with the static and slow texture of low brass, which is soon accompanied by drums. The music increases its tempo, introducing more elements, such as other brass instruments and strings. The main melody is then varied in different ways, including adding undertones of the Soldiers’ Chorus of the US Army Field Band to the mix. The intensity of the music increases throughout the one hundred and fifty seconds of the song, which also allows different commercial editors to choose which part of the music they choose to support their message.

The chosen style of brass band music is equally as dramatic as the earlier use of metal music in “An Army of One” campaign. These campaigns abandoned recognizable jingles and sought narrative inspiration from popular culture, including films, television series, and music videos. For example, since the 1980s, popular culture has increasingly connected metal music to scenes of action and violence, and, according to Jonathan Pieslak, twenty-first-century military advertisements have also used metal music and metal timbres to imply action and adventure (18, 31-42). However, instead of referring to the music used in action scenes, the “Army Strong” theme refers to the modalities familiar from their theme songs. Similarities can be found, for example, with *The Terminator’s* (1984) slowly increasing intensity of theme, from the associations of personal courage and team work in the continuous brass music of *Armageddon’s* (1998) theme song, or from the use of choral voices in the *Band of Brothers* theme (2001), which creates an atmospheric and even a nostalgic setting for war.

Beth Bailey, similarly, argues that the use of elegiac music familiar from this television series about World War II “creates a powerful historical connection” (“Army” 47). Pieslak, for his part, has compared the theme to that of the *Superman* film from 1978. He
argues that, whereas the *Superman* theme has a faster tempo, both themes employ “a series of repetitions and variations” and use similar scale structures and melodic organization with brass instrumentation and string/wind accompaniment. As a consequence, the Army Strong theme manages to appropriate the nobility of Superman and imply similar values of honorable duty (Pieslak 25-26). These similarities tap into ideas and ideals of masculinity, heroism, personal strength, and adventure that make the Army look more appealing to potential recruits. In his study, Jordan Newman found out that soldier-musicians saw the “powerful, emotional and moving” music to be an important reason why they considered the commercials to be heroic, patriotic, and inspiring, as well as representing pride and strength. In this process, the brass sounds demonstrates the glory and strength, and the chorus adds “a powerful human core” (Newman).

Whereas music borrows from the world of action and war films, other elements support this circulation of modality and affects. The action-based images where soldiers run across fields, jump from planes, ride helicopters, rise from the water, go through physical training, and conquer the world from the highest hills to the deepest oceans are all recognizable from the world of popular culture. The editing tempo is fast, and the camera is constantly moving or filming moving characters (soldiers are running, climbing, jumping, lifting, and pushing). Even when the soldiers are facing the camera and staring at the viewer, the frame is mobile with panning, tilting, or zooming effects. Sometimes the camera even invites the viewer to be one of the team members by using a subjective shot (first-person camera), for example, while jumping out of the plane. Thus, the sense of mobility can be further emphasized by making the viewer participate in the moving images. This dynamic impression is also connected to questions of power and strength by avoiding high-angle framing, which would make the viewer look down at the soldiers. Instead, the commercials
use straight-on positioning of the camera and also repeatedly exploit a low-angle view, which makes the object filmed appear impressive and powerful.

The choice of narrative voices complements the action film-style images. Most of the commercials rely on a deep-voiced voice-over narrator, reminiscent of traditional dramatic film trailer narrators. The silent commercials rest on the symbolic associations of the theme song and narrative intertitles. For example, “Hand Signals” focuses on the hand gestures: it starts with a soldier signaling a helicopter to land, continues with soldiers using hand signals in combat training, and finishes with fist-bumping team members to signify respect and success. The images and theme song are accompanied with an intitle: “There is a type of strength that doesn’t require words.” These commercials use an omniscient narrator who appears to be in charge of the discourse and, as a consequence, gives the image of an Army that has everything under control.

Whereas narrators are familiar figures from film trailers, contemporary blockbusters tend to avoid traditional voice-over narrators. Similarly, the most recent commercials in the campaign, the “Defy Expectations” ads from 2014, follow this trend by telling the story in the diegetic world. They create cinematic short stories that rely on dialogue and interaction between the characters instead of the interaction between the narrator and the viewer. The storytelling tendency is further emphasized with the use of humor and self-irony, which have not been very visible in the Army campaigns. However, the message remains the same: the Army is a dynamic and worthy choice.

The action-based commercials, more than other commercials in the campaign, focus on the values and symbols of the Army. The first “Army Strong” commercials concentrate on the meanings of the slogan. For example, “Definition of Strong” starts with a declaration: “Webster defines strong as having great physical power, as having moral or intellectual power, as striking or superior of its kind. But with all due respect to Webster, there’s strong...
and then there’s army strong.” These commercials emphasize both the emotional and physical strength both required and provided by the Army, as well as strength of character and strength of purpose. The claims for physical strength are often accompanied with images of soldiers going through physical training, the emotional strength is mediated by soldiers interacting with (foreign) children, the intellectual power is combined with images of science and medicine, and the strength of purpose with symbolic images of the Army.

The symbols include, in particular, field and service uniforms, and honors, which all highlight the importance of personnel in the US Army. The commercials also utilize recognizable images from basic training and army drills that illustrate the elements of army life. Another typical set of visuals include tanks and other army vehicles, guns, and helicopters. These images reveal the American military’s love of technology—high-tech weaponry, advanced surveillance technology, and the widespread adoption of helicopters—that are not only used in combat but also represent the values of progress, modernity, empowerment, and the superior force of the US military (Mahnken). Another frequently used symbol of national and patriotic values is the United States flag. The commercial “Symbol of Strength” ends dramatically, and rather uniquely for this campaign, with an image of the soldiers saluting the flag that fills the screen.

In the action commercials, the narration, for the most part, represents the Army as an experience, and as a nation’s strength. Only at the end of the commercials does the voice-over encourage the viewer to seek further information: “see what it takes”; “find out more”; “try it on.” Six of the commercials, however, use the emphasized “you” already before revealing the Army logo. “Live Out Your Dreams” entices with the words: “It is not just the strength to wake up your life, but the strength to live out your dreams.” And “Stronger” promises “The Army takes you to your strongest point and whatever you do after that in your career or your community, you’ll just keep getting stronger.” The direct address to the
viewers aims to tie the experienced affects with an invitation to be part of the presented exciting and heroic storylines, images, and music.

In order to create the public imagery of the US Army, the action-based commercials use modalities from action films. The theme song builds intensity, the fast rhythm of editing and active imagery picture a dynamic team, and identifiable symbols make the Army look authoritative and respected. Thus, the commercials have borrowed more than just the exciting imagery of action films, they also manage to sell ideas connected to the popular genre. By using easily identifiable conventions, the Army manages, within the short length of the commercials, to sell enlistment by appeals to heroism, masculinity, nobility, and respect—features often related to action films (Neale 71-78).

**Making it Real: Active Choices**

The action-based commercials are for a general audience, and their main goal is to enhance the public image of the Army. However, this is only one part of the campaign. Other commercials encourage enlistment by those who might consider the Army to be a suitable career option. These commercials emphasize how the Army can provide education, career skills, and leadership experience, helping recruits to gain an edge in the job market, to make a difference, and to become better people. The topic is approached by providing the viewer with identifiable role models.

Jonathan Cranin, creative director for the Army’s marketing agency, argues that the actual soldiers were the inspirations for the campaign. The ads try to identify and mediate the defining character of soldiers and their motivations (Nickerson). The decision to use actual soldiers intersects with the popular trends of reality television. During the early-twenty-first century, reality television has become a widely recognized cultural form with claims to the “real.” In its observation of people’s lives, reality television shares elements with
documentaries, but it uniquely combines fiction with fact, commercialism with “real life,” and focuses on people in emotional situations (Hill 1-5, 15).

Similarly, the Army is following the audiences’ interest in the “real” in the wake of reality television, and the new individualism encouraged by the social media. Along with the advertisement campaign, the Army created an armystrongstories.com website, an official blog and storytelling program where soldiers could share their experiences and stories with others. The blog is also part of recruitment, and it follows the same marketing strategies of the campaign. Furthermore, the Army has produced its own reality television series, Starting Strong. The series follows people who participate for three days in Army training and then try and decide whether they want to enlist or not. The trailer for the first season opens with the reminder: “These people are not actors,” which underlines the “real” aspect. Later on, the connection to the recruitment campaign becomes clear when the trailer’s narrator uses the familiar catchphrase “learn what it takes to be army strong” (“Starting Strong”).

The commercials that portray individual soldiers also proclaim the “real” and “participatory” nature of what is being filmed. These commercials picture soldiers in either close-ups or medium-shots. Close-ups bring out details, such as facial expressions that emphasize the potential for identification and empathy, and the medium-shots make gestures and expressions visible. The soldiers in close-up look at the viewer with a steady and compelling gaze, and the medium-shots of the soldiers who are standing to attention mediate ideas of discipline and posture. These images emphasize emotional strength and strength of character. The interest in the personal also makes the commercials intimate and approachable.

The commercials with an interest in the “real” have two different narrative approaches. Some of the commercials concentrate on active choices made by dynamic people, the go-getters. In them, both the style and the content favor images that encourage viewers to move on with their lives. Other commercials communicate notions of career
stability and concentrate on safety, not only in their messages but also in the audiovisual world. This latter group’s strategies differ from the rest of the campaign. The reasons for differentiation can be found in the targeted audiences, such as army parents who wish to hear that their children will be safe.

The go-getter commercials include general career commercials (four), as well as commercials aimed at potential reservists (five) and officers (eight). To mediate a certain level of realism, these commercials introduce different members of the US Army. Instead of settling for talking heads, the narrative strategy is to concentrate on active images of training and working (pilots, firefighters, doctors, athletes, etc.). These commercials, therefore, use both action modes and the narrative of the “real.” The officers, especially, are constantly on the move and the camera follows them from helicopter rides to parades. Another typical solution is to picture officers taking a leading position (giving lectures, speeches, and guidance). The dominant positions that demand respect are accompanied with mobile framing, where the image actively refocuses on symbols (honors and uniforms) and details (determinant stances and facial expressions). Furthermore, a dynamic atmosphere is created by adopting a fast tempo and by constant use of mobile framing.

For example, in the “Army Joe Depinto,” a former Army officer, and current CEO, reports that the Army was his way to success. However, only at the end does he look at the camera, when he poses in his uniform and nods encouragingly to the viewer. The earlier parts of the video use his voice-over together with his movements—he drives a car, walks around, and takes the lead in a meeting. The commercial lets the officer tell how the Army enables him to actualize his education and skills to gain respect and leadership along the way. These solutions support the campaign’s aim to create a “realistic-looking and moving montage of life in the Army,” as Newman puts it, and in the end of these commercials, the narrator
challenges the possible recruits with such phrases as “An Army officer leads by example, can you?” (“MAJ Otto Padron”).

The commercials about reserves similarly use continuous movement to bring the civilian and army realm together. Typically, the images lead off with the characters’ civilian career. Using dissolves, the civilian clothes are replaced with camouflage gear, and the civilian setting is transformed into a (training) field. The strategy underlines the opportunity to combine civilian and army careers—a central challenge to the US Army (Hosek 219). These commercials are aimed at those who have already served in the Army, thus the address is based on shared experiences and values. In “Army Reserve” the narrator encourages the target audience to join the reserve by arguing: “The US Army reserve requires a different type of strength. The strength to stand out in school, and stand strong with your team, the strength to serve your community one day and your country the next.” The narrator, as in the above, often speaks directly to the viewer, and the personalization is enforced through images of career-oriented people who successfully combine their civilian and military careers and who appreciate serving both their communities and the nation. The value-based addressing is obvious, for example, in “What Drives You?”: “How about dignity, respect, being part of something much bigger than yourself?”

When compared to the action commercials, the go-getters are represented through versatile sound effects. Not only is the narrator’s voice often combined with the voices of soldiers, but the Army theme can be varied or replaced with other music/sound effects. The occasional use of other music than the campaign’s official tune marks the importance of personal choices. George Dewey from the Army’s creative agency mentions that the Army “learned through research that when the ‘Army Strong’ music came on in that first second of the commercial, those achievement-oriented students would reject it because they would think it was not for them” (qtd. in Quenqua). The differentiation strategy is used, for
example, in “Real Challenge,” which targets gamers. The commercial starts with two young men sitting on a sofa with controllers in their hands playing America’s Army. The game is interrupted when the soldier from the game knocks on the television screen and directly addresses the players (and the viewer): “You look like you are really into this. You guys want a real challenge?” After this the familiar marketing speech begins, yet the background audio continues with gaming sounds and unidentifiable music.

The go-getter advertisements, all in all, use the same ideas of dynamism as the action commercials, but instead of borrowing influences from the action genre, the narratives are based on ideas of actual soldiers and realistic stories where individual success, competitive careers, and personalized options are emphasized. However, the personalized stories are always dependent on the interaction with the Army to whom they owe their success. This, in return, creates an inspiring and dynamic image of the Army as part of the progressing society.

**Keeping it Real: Opportunities for Everyone**

A rather different narrative strategy is used in commercials that interview either the soldiers or the parents (thirteen commercials). There the narration enforces stability and safety rather than action and excitement. The career interviews offer clips of different soldiers describing their experiences of being in the Army, and the commercials with parents include both the parents’ reactions and the son’s or daughter’s motivation to enlist. For worried parents, the commercials highlight the possibilities of personal growth, education, and career opportunities: “If your son or daughter wants to talk about the Army, listen. You made them strong, we’ll make them Army strong” (“Army Parents”).

These commercials use the similar tendencies of the “real” as the go-getter advertisements, but they further highlight the sense of emotionalism. The interviews are reminiscent of confessional from reality television, where characters are involved in intimate
close-up interviews about their inner feelings, personal insights, and words of advice. These kinds of interviews are fundamentally about emotions. In similar situations in the “Army Strong” campaign, parents admit that they were anxious yet proud when their children joined the Army. This type of emotional expression is part of the constant process of self-discovery, management of emotions, and social identification that defines reality television in particular and the emotionalization of television in general (Biressi and Nunn 11-14).

The confessional element is visible in the ways in which the commercials narrate soldiers’ or the army parents’ experiences. The images always concentrate on the person, making him or her the most important visual element, a talking head. In the soldier interviews, a few images of army life are used as illustrations, but none of these contains field action. Instead, soldiers only take on daily tasks at the Army base. In the parent interviews, almost all references to military life are erased. The interviews take place in the soldiers’ homes, and the commercials depict soldiers spending time with their families and enjoying their hobbies. The focus on private spaces highlights intimacy and safety, which foregrounds the concept of ‘Army families.’ These commercials are aimed at convincing parents, mothers in particular, who the Army sees as the key to whether sons or daughters enlist or not (Christensen).

A slower editing tempo than in other commercials further emphasizes the theme of safety. The camera is quite static, staying in one position and creating a sense of stability. The camera, however, is not perfectly still because most often the shots are filmed with a handheld camera. This mode of filming aims to increase the impression of authenticity, subjectivity, and participation. Moreover, interview subjects face the camera and talk directly to the viewer without any intermediary or narrator. Even the background audio is either soft piano music or almost an unnoticeable variation of the “Army Strong” theme, which helps emphasize the personal experiences and voices.
When the commercials present a profile of a particular person, they raise questions of identification, social recognition, and, as a consequence, questions about the diversity and socioeconomic backgrounds of the recruits. In the parent commercials, for example, black families are more visible than in other Army commercials. This follows the Army’s tendency to target those with limited options, such as communities with racial minorities and lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Houppert 215). This kind of targeting is partially related to ideologies. The social acceptance of the military tends to rely on the lower-middle class, which is often more politically conservative and more positive towards the military (Levy 31).

Portrayals of diversity (first race, then gender) have existed in the US Army campaigns since the 1970s (Bailey, America’s Army, 209-18). The soldier interviews present both identifiable motivations and ideals of equal opportunities. A woman emphasizes the Army as a family tradition and an existing value in her life (“Family”). A white man from a lower socioeconomic background describes the Army as a better option for him to take care of his family because life back at home offered no options at all (“Brandon”). For a Latino, the Army has provided chances to build a different career than flipping burgers (“Charles”). A black woman working in a field hospital advertises the Army as a great way to pay for medical school and get expertise (“Tracy”). Another Latino points out that the Army offers a possible route to citizenship (“John”). These interviews, thus, seek to convince viewers that the Army can provide options and useful experiences.

In all of the interviews, the Army is in the background and the presented arguments are more emotionally bounded, more family-oriented. Even in the one-on-one soldier interviews, families are often part of the discourse. Combining this content with more static camera use and imagery indicating safety and intimacy, the Army sells not only security, but honesty, trust, and stability. These take their modalities directly from reality television, and
they are the most personalized commercials in the campaign. They aim to complement the public image of a strong Army with the personal strength that arises from well-considered and mature decisions.

Conclusions

In the “Army Strong” campaign, the slogan, the theme music, and the filming of actual soldiers aim to associate the US Army with ideas of emotional, physical, and national strength. The themes emphasize the experience of becoming more skilled, a better soldier, a better citizen, and a better version of yourself, which reminds one of the popular slogan “Be All You Can Be.” Also, the opportunities provided by the Army—career skills, education, and leadership experience—continue the Army’s recruitment strategies adopted since the 1970s. Sejin Park et al. argue that in the twenty-first century, the Army’s television commercials have emphasized occupational rather than institutional motivations. They argue that concentrating on personal benefits addresses potential reservists rather than active soldiers, who would respond better to patriotism (304, 315-16). The “Army Strong” commercials, similarly, emphasize aspects of ‘real life,’ yet the public image is created through the unifying use of the slogan and the theme song. Especially at the beginning of the campaign, commercials were constructed by means of action modalities. Thus, the affective elements of this campaign emphasize action and heroism, and, through them, a sense of patriotism. Here, the ideologies of team work, freedom, democracy, nation, and progress become connected to the personal gains of career, education, travelling, acceptance, and respect.

The Army’s advertising campaign employed different addressing strategies to get the message through to a variety of target audiences. Modalities from action-adventure films suggest ideas of heroism, physical prowess (masculinity), and freedom which combine into
the values of a strong soldier for a strong nation. These general commercials use popular
culture imagery to make the Army look exciting, powerful, and intensive, but even these
commercials avoid overt patriotic references. Patriotic values are missing from direct address
(narrator’s speech and intertitles), yet they exist at the symbolic level in recognizable
elements like the flag, Army camouflage, and technological dominance. The other
commercials refer to similar themes, but instead of emphasizing the values of nation, they
combine ideas of a strong soldier and a strong citizen. Here, the modalities are borrowed
from reality television, emphasizing the connection with the “real,” as well as with honesty
and experience. These commercials concentrate more on opportunities. They approach
enlistment as a question of what the Army can do for you, not what you can do for your
country.

Whereas it is interesting to see which popular culture modalities the Army utilizes, it
is also important to notice the absence of war. During the “Army Strong” campaign, the US
Army was involved in several active war zones. However, this imagery is lacking from the
commercials. Almost the only references to war films or other war-related popular culture
genres are the similarities in the campaign’s theme song and theme song of Band of Brothers,
as well as references to the America’s Army video game. Reality television modalities, in
particular, are attached to everyday life on US soil, and the action commercials focus on
thrilling experiences, not on violence or war. This highlights the desire to use positively
interpreted affects, as well as the tendency to avoid negatively understood connections to
violence and death that continue to be an element in an Army career.

**Works Cited**


“MAJ Otto Padron.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Oliver Chiang, 16 Mar. 2010,  


