

Locked-in on Our Youth: An Inquiry into American Military Recruiting Media

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Abstract

As American military branches continue to encounter challenges associated with filling the ranks, recruitment efforts and corresponding media messages may be inadvertently targeting our nation's youth. Using existing child-development research, along with relevant theoretical perspectives, this article will explore the strategies used by the military for recruitment and the effects those tactics and media have on a juvenile audience.

Keywords: Advertising to juveniles, media ethics, military recruiting, child development

Introduction

With the current war abroad and ever-growing threats from terrorist groups and anti-American forces, the United States military may be looking for new opportunities to increase enlistment. Short of re-instating the draft, some groups believe that the military is using unfair media tactics to lure our nation's youth into service. Tim Franzen, of the American Friends Service Committee, believes that recruiters are being trained to actively target children, some as young as 14 years of age, for enlistment (RT, 2014). Although the earliest a person can enlist into a branch of the American military is 18 years of age - 17 with parental consent – there is evidence that the U.S. armed forces are actively recruiting adolescents much younger than the minimum registration age. For instance, military recruiting efforts are embedded into American high schools in similar fashion to math, reading, and writing curricula. Federal regulations stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act ensure that military recruiters have full access to children, typically ranging in age from 14-18, in most public schools. Additionally, many military outlets have extended their recruitment efforts to include new media focused on targeting adolescents such as video games, the Internet, television, and social media. This article will explore the U.S. military's recruitment of children, prior to 18 years of age, and the predominant media and tactics utilized.

Thesis: Due to enlistment changes and societal factors, the American military has expanded its recruiting efforts to non-traditional forms of media, including games, movies, and social media.

In doing so, a younger-aged demographic may be directly or indirectly exposed to recruitment media that does not accurately portray the true reality of the service requirements experienced by today's enlisted military members.

Method: Most of the evidence and supporting materials utilized and discussed in this study were collected via secondary research sources, including published academic reports as well as editorial and informal online websites. To further indicate the current recruitment practices employed by the American military that may be targeting a juvenile audience, the researcher will also discuss the findings stemming from an in-person interview with a United States Marine Corps recruiter as of July, 2014.

The main limitation to this report, and the methodological basis as a whole, is the inclusion of just one primary resource. The present time-frame did not allow for a greater amount of empirical research and analysis, nor were any juvenile recruits found for inclusion, currently, regarding the implications and outcomes discussed in this article.

Brief Background & Current State of Recruiting

World War II essentially began the transition from the traditional ways American military branches filled their ranks, through the draft, to voluntary enlistment via civilian recruitment. Richard M. Nixon un-officially ushered in the modern era of recruiting in 1968 with his political campaign promise to end the draft completely; then, as the war in Vietnam began to end, the military drafting of U.S. citizens formally concluded on January 27, 1973 (Baskir & Strauss, 1978). The President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force (1970) did not necessarily establish the present day military recruiting methods discussed in this report, but noted, even then, that recruiting efforts would be intensified due to the repeal of the draft, and that new enlistees would need to be "convinced" to join the armed forces.

Currently, the United States is involved in a major war in the Middle East, and numerous other tactical skirmishes and missions around the globe requiring increased manpower. But, recently, defense officials have warned Congress that finding recruits to join the military could be considerably more challenging than years past. Specific to those challenges are a steadily improving economic outlook, which results in more employment opportunities for high school aged youths, as well as higher percentages of direct transitions for adolescents from high school to college. These trends have left some, including Senator Tim Kaine, D-VA to wonder if the military would have to do "anything unusual, or extra" to meet enlistment quotas (Army Times, 2014). To solve these potentially increasing recruiting problems, given the prediction of enlistment shortfalls, it is the contention of this researcher that additional media venues and "extra" sources, to use Sen. Kaine's phrasing, will be utilized to not only reach a larger audience, but to concurrently target and prime an increasingly younger age demographic. Dr. Gary Evans (2008), speaking on behalf of the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities may have been the most poignant and direct when discussing the current state of affairs related to this topic by stating,

"This nation's teenage children are currently being tracked, targeted, and sometimes captured by a global dominance military-industrial-media complex under orders of an exceptionally callous neo-conservative group now in control of the U.S. government. The people in power today systematically use recruiters...as the agents of control and manipulation of U.S. youth."

Predominant Media Utilized by U.S. Military

Military recruiting can be described as the organized act of attracting and contractually enlisting individuals to serve in one of the U.S. defense branches such as the Navy, Army, Marine Corps., and/or Air Force (Dibner, 2013). Currently, this practice carries a multi-million dollar price tag, paid by U.S. taxpayers (Operation and Maintenance Overview, 2013). The extensive budget allocates funds for promotional media including; in-person recruiters, television, print advertisements, and pro-military features embedded into video games and movies. This section will discuss each of the aforementioned media avenues as they relate to children's exposure and their respective implications.

Face to face / In-person / Social media: At its core, military recruiting began and continues to be dominated by the in-person recruiting process. The role of the individual recruiter, according to Sergeant P. John of the U.S. Marine Corps., is "to locate highly-qualified individuals, determine if they are eligible for service...and enlist them into the ranks" (John, 2014). Presently, the main focal point for individual recruiters, according to Sgt. John, is high-school seniors. They are generally targeting the 18 and under population by going into the high schools, making telephone calls (thanks to NCLB information that is discussed later), and sending text messages.

However, John acknowledges, "this is the twenty-first century...ninety percent of the time I can find [potential recruits] on *Facebook* and they are much more likely to respond to my interaction on social media than a phone call. Social media is currently the best type of communication when dealing with the sub-18 population. Kids are not watching [traditional media] programming as much anymore...social media, including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* are the absolute best ways [to reach them] right now" (John, 2014).

Others describe the face-to-face recruiting process in more sinister terms. Some parental watchdog groups believe that military recruiters tell children outright lies; including heightened pay grades, benefits, un-verified signing bonuses, college tuition reimbursement, fabrications regarding the possibility of deployment, and assurances of the vast advantages that accompany an honorable discharge (Solnit & Allison, 2007). Evans (2008) concurs, saying, "...a recruit is promised the moon, they are asked to sign on the dotted line, most often missing the fine print."

In-person recruiting media can range from traditional information pamphlets to recruiters arriving at schools in Blackhawk helicopters. The U.S. Army also has a rolling 18-wheel “cinema van” that commonly shows up at high school sporting events and pep-rallies and is fully-equipped with video projectors and rock climbing walls that clearly appeal to a children’s demographic (Objector.org, 2014). The evidence suggests that American teenagers are being given a false vision of today’s modern military experience, and that the media propaganda are increasingly targeting younger recruits.

Movies / television: Although military advertising budgets have been decreasing in recent years, there are still examples of big-budget expenditures to support their cause. A prime example is the Pentagon’s financial backing of pro-military movies such as *The Sum of all Fears*; where actual B-2 bombers, F-16 fighter jets, helicopters, and even an aircraft carrier were provided during filming because the movie was deemed to support military initiatives. It is reported that the Pentagon employs officials who read Hollywood scripts and then trade access to military resources for screenplay changes that propagandize recruiting efforts (Evans, 2008). Online editorials abound with accounts of military involvement in the production and filming of many studio projects. Movies such as *Battleship*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Black Hawk Down* are just a few blockbusters to garner access to classified military information, locations, and training from actual special-force regiments (Rico, 2014). This phenomenon may have stemmed from the 1986 movie *Top Gun*, where Navy enlistment, along with aviator sunglasses, reportedly increased 500% after the film’s release (Cangialosi, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the Navy gave the film’s producers full cooperation, along with thousands of dollars’ worth of military paraphernalia, and ultimately helped to rebuild confidence in the armed forces during the post-Vietnam era. The military’s support of Hollywood movies and television essentially means that those screenplays must serve the armed force’s agenda. The Pentagon does not shy away from this notion, either. According to freelance journalist David Robb (2012), the Army’s recruiting handbook states that cooperation with the entertainment industry must “aid in the recruiting and retention of personnel.” It is not surprising either, that each of the aforementioned movies, save for *Black Hawk Down*, were rated by IMD at or below the PG-13 age recommendation.

Video Games: “Every 17 year old that comes into my recruiting office has aspirations of being a Marine sniper because they grew up playing *Call of Duty* video games” says Sgt. John (2014). Researchers, including Youn (2008), refer to this effect as “game-vertising.” Essentially, children are, sometimes unknowingly, being advertised to while they are playing games. Another step in the trend toward using gaming technology to increase recruitment can be evidenced by the Army’s \$12 million virtual-world combat center built near Philadelphia in 2009. Taxpayer funds paid for the multi-million dollar project known as “The Army Experience Center” which lasted only 2 years, but was hailed as “a great success” by Army spokesperson, Brian Lepley. He also stated that the center “provided valuable information on how to connect with (and recruit) a generation used to getting information from computers (Associated Press, 2010). The center was equipped with over 80 computer-gaming systems and designed to give civilians a sense of the excitement of being in the military. The Associated Press (2010) reported that the Army used interactive gaming exhibits and combat simulators to attract over 40,000 visitors, where anyone over 13 years of age could participate, which resulted in 236 new recruits in just 2 years.

An even more direct example of military recruiting via video games is evidenced in the *America’s Army* game. Free at most recruiting stations or to download, *America’s Army* is designed to simulate the entire Army experience; from boot camp to battle. The goal for the game is to be authentic and real, with training sites modeled after actual military bases. Yet, beyond the fun and excitement, is an overt attempt to support the Army’s recruiting efforts.

When an individual downloads the game their computer information and data are recorded into a tracking system. Similarly, if a teenager requests a free copy of the game from their local recruiter, their name and contact information are also requested (Barbaro, 2008).

Print / posters: To encourage young people to join the armed forces, military recruiting endeavors have increasingly focused more on 21st century communications such as social media, interactive video games, and the Internet. However, the need to sequentially build a product using traditional branding practices and media will likely still find worth in the passive-audience based, old-fashioned print advertisements. Although the medium changes, the message is still remarkably similar to other forms of pro-military communication. As illustrated in many popular recruitment posters, images, and taglines, the military panders to adolescents’ desire for independence and adventure, while essentially selling desirable character traits such as pride, strength, and bravery.

Developmental and Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical paradigms, in a philosophical sense, can often help describe how individuals interpret, understand, and make sense of the world around them. Assuming that the average high-school student is likely 15-18 years old, it makes sense to look at how military recruiting efforts may be informing the beliefs, assumptions, and practices of this very impressionable age group. Therefore, this section will discuss several applicable perspectives to allow for a better understanding of the ways whereby adolescent children may comprehend and take realistic meaning from the myriad of military recruitment media to which they are frequently exposed.

Piagetian cognitive development: Swiss philosopher Jean Piaget is well known by educators and scholars due to his studies on children and learning. His epistemological theories are based on four distinct developmental stages that occur from birth through adolescence. The highest level, known as the formal operational stage, begins at or around age 11 and progresses onward -gradually - to adulthood. In this phase, he describes changes in cognitive functions that allow children to begin to think abstractly and logically, and provide the ability to problem solve in methodical ways (Piaget, 1972). Additionally, this is the stage whereby Piaget's theory would support the notion that teenage children are capable of deductive reasoning and therefore able to determine the future consequences of their present actions regarding military enlistment. However, Piaget himself noted that not all individuals are capable of exhibiting this upper level cognition, and that children integrate knowledge based on their discrete frames of reference; hence, different outcomes may be constructed from similar actions. More striking is the contention of some researchers who postulate that only 35% of high school graduates attain the highest levels of formal operations discussed by Piaget (Kuhn, Langer, Kohlberg & Haan, 1977).

The main idea, therefore, with regard to military recruiting media that target children, is that cognitive development, executive functions of the brain and the ability to holistically understand a given situation are formed with age and, perhaps, never fully achieved. Therefore, from this perspective, the ability needed to make the reasoned judgments that are critical to a four-year enlistment into the military may not be fully-developed, or present at all, in many of today's targeted recruits' age group. Rightly so or not, there are many who believe that specific techniques currently being used in military recruiting media are undoubtedly and purposefully targeting the distinct cognitive functions present in the teenage brain (Evans, 2008).

Similarly, research has shown evidence that recruitment media being utilized in high schools may be targeting the psychological developments that Piaget noted in teens. Bigelow (2005) and Ayers (2006) discuss the effectiveness of media designed to target students' desire for social significance among their peers, while also using media that appeals to their attraction to new technology. Additionally, Ayers reports that military-based movies may give teenagers a heightened sense of empowerment or the feeling that if they were in the military they could "stand up for themselves and no one could hurt them" (Ayers, 2006). By overtly pandering toward teenagers' desire to better their social positioning and their heightened sense of ego, it would appear that the military has a clear picture of both the cognitive and psychological capacities of their target audience.

Rational choice theory: Based in economics, rational choice theory states that people will make decisions based on utility maximization for their own self-interests (Homans, 1958). Subscribers to rational choice theory believe that each American teenager that is recruited by the military has an inalienable right to make decisions based on free will. The belief is that individuals can, and will, accurately weigh the benefits and consequences of each potential action prior to making a decision. In theory, proponents of this framework would be correct in thinking that rationality should be the definitive factor when considering enlistment into the military.

Yet, the previously discussed concepts regarding research on the adolescent brain and the principles of Piaget's cognitive development model would imply that juveniles are not able to rationally balance the implications of such a decision, therefore rendering this theory false when applied to adolescents' enlistment in the military. It would be difficult for anyone, especially a 17 year old child, to realistically calculate the benefits of an enlistment bonus, worth thousands of dollars, to the reality of war and the genuine potential of mortality. There are additional studies in opposition to rational choice theory as well which statistically demonstrate that adolescent brain development is deficient when it comes to making choices that will have lifelong ramifications (Spano, 2003; Viner, et al., 2012).

Power-elite theory: In Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address in 1961 he warned the American society about, what he referred to as, the "military industrial complex" (NPR.org, 2011).

He was concerned that the military was too closely linked to industrialized groups, likely including the burgeoning communications industry, and that the armed forces would combine with these groups and form coalitions to propagate their own needs. This leads directly to C. Wright Mills' concept of the ruling powers in America, which he calls "the power elite" (Mills, 1956). Mills' philosophy asserts that the military will make decisions to protect their own power, at all costs, even when those decisions may be detrimental to society. Eisenhower, a military general, used this theory in his speech five years after Mills published his identically-titled book, *The Power Elite*, to caution the public about the potential dangers of increased military size and control over the U.S. The modern symbiotic relationship between the pervasive powers of the communications industry and the multi-million dollar advertising budget within the military may have been prophetically uttered over 50 years ago.

Using Mills' power-elite theory, a problem occurs regarding the recruiting tactics utilized by the armed forces which are used in dominating ways in an attempt to proliferate their own industry. There is an applicable power elite relationship in today's military, whereby recruiting media and enlistment efforts aimed at targeting adolescents are in direct alignment with the protection of the military's own power, regardless of whether or not those endeavors are good for American youth or the greater society as a whole. This theory may also explain the rhetorical nature and persuasive power inherent in the enlistment media aimed at enticing American youths into service. Mills (1956) warns, "The military order, once a slim establishment in a context of distrust fed by a state militia, has become the largest feature of government...and well versed in public relations." He similarly cautions the U.S. about the increasing power vested in national security which could develop into "decisive and immediate consequences" (Mills, 1956).

In almost every sense of Mill's definition, it is not difficult to view today's American military as one of the nation's largest 'power-elites.' The military makes decisions affecting constituents far outside their domain; and, given the reality of the consequences, the decisions made by their youthful followers could result in the gravest of costs.

Brave-world syndrome: Albeit this is not a documented theory, there may be a warranted association between Dr. George Gerbner's (1986) "mean-world syndrome" -- that was borne out of his seminal research on television effects and cultivation theory -- and what this article will refer to as the "brave-world syndrome." Gerbner's principles contend that media, especially television, is responsible for shaping individuals' conceptions of certain situations, and over time, the effects of increased media exposure will shape people's perceptions of reality as a whole. What is interesting is that Gerbner did not perpetuate the notion that watching violent behaviors makes one violent. Rather, watching violence in the media leads people to believe that they will fall victim to violence. He also believed that the more people view violent media, the more likely they will have feelings of insecurity and will seek out protection from perceived dangers. Similarly, Gerbner thought that fearful people were more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, and more susceptible to deceptive measures (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Effects of daily news coverage of violence around the world, war, famine, poverty, and crimes against humanity in general may be part of the armed forces' agenda of creating a fearful population that relies on a well-funded and well-recruited military. Clearly, then, the notion that perception dominates reality may be evidenced both by how individuals assess the real dangers of society, as well as how adolescents perceive the real dangers of military enlistment.

Using Gerbner's principles further, the mean world syndrome may have a direct association with a new condition of bravery. Adolescence is widely recognized as a time when children are inclined to be more impulsive and when risk-taking behaviors are at their peak. It is no surprise, then, that military recruiting media are laden with risk-glorifying behaviors that may, in turn, increase the risk-taking inclinations of the individuals viewing those media. Research suggests that media content that glorifies or promotes risk-taking behaviors, especially when viewed or used by teenagers, has a positive correlation to increases in risky activities and/or decisions (Fischer, et al., 2011).

The results of this knowledge would then suggest that pro-military advertisements, games, simulations, movies, and other media depicting high-risk situations would, in turn, lead to increases in individuals' inclinations to perpetuate those risky behaviors and bravery in real life; the most direct of ways being enlistment for military service. Therefore, this report will operationally define the concept of the 'brave world syndrome' as: the increase in children's propensity to enlist in the military as their exposure to risk-glorifying, pro-military media content also increases.

Ethical Considerations

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was written into law under the premise of establishing measurable goals that would result in improved educational outcomes. The federal funding of the initiative is tied to standardized national achievement testing and schools' attainment of AYP - adequate yearly progress (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). Government legislation within the NCLB act also allow for military recruiting to be integrated into American public schools. Essentially, for schools to receive the federal funding that accompanies NCLB regulations, even if achievement tests show adequate improvement, they must open their doors to military recruiters. Recruiters, therefore, are guaranteed access to student information including names, addresses, and home phone numbers of high school aged children (Dibner, 2013). These high school students, the majority of whom have not reached legal adulthood, are more innocent and vulnerable, yet have feelings of invincibility and desires to be strong and capable individuals. Known are the given emotional and psychological mindsets, and, therefore, often exploited by recruiters and pro-military media communications delivered in schools. "The high school itself has become a battlefield for hearts and minds" (Ayers, 2006). Additionally, Hagopian and Barker (2011) report that suggested behaviors by for in-school recruiting, as outlined by the U.S. Army's School Recruiting Program (SRP) handbook, are remarkably similar with what psychologists define as "predatory grooming." With this knowledge, an ethical dilemma arises. Moral gray-lines may be straddled when military recruiting messages are directed at passive youth audiences or when teens choose to view or interact with pro-military media on their own accord. However, when children are essentially forced to view and take part in their own recruitment, such as the case with No Child Left Behind initiatives, then the proverbial 'ethical line' has likely been crossed.

Another ethical area remains in question, as well. Is the reality of war being excluded from recruitment media? Indirectly, at least, the answer is yes, according to Marine Sgt. John. He believes that some military media, such as *Call of Duty* video games and war movies including *Black Hawk Down* and *Battleship*, are not being true to the reality of service. "I have to explain it to [the recruits], that these are video games; this is not reality...that is not what warfare is." He continues, "...it has created a false sense of what war is. Kids think they know what [fighting] in Afghanistan is because they have played it on *Medal of Honor* games; that is truly not the case" (John, 2014). In the video game *America's Army* that was previously discussed, the goal was to provide real and authentic military experiences for the users. Yet, the realism does not transfer to the drawbacks of battle. When hit by an enemy's bullet in the game, the player sees a puff of red smoke and can be hit additional times before being 'killed.' Therefore, if the military is going to portray active-duty service like a video game or movie, where experiences such as shooting an enemy on the screen are devoid of their real-life moral consequences, then clearly an ethical boundary is being crossed. If, in fact, an individual would be shot to death in a video game and as a result the game itself would be rendered inoperable, perhaps the gamer would have a slightly clearer reality of the boundary between life and death. Similarly, in the previously mentioned "Army Experience" gaming center, where individuals could take virtual rides in military Humvees and aircraft to experience the thrill of battle, it would be highly doubtful that one of the computerized vehicles would run over a grenade or be struck by an assailant's missile.

Lastly, from a moral standpoint, if the military is going to actively recruit a teenage audience, then they must be certain that the adolescent brain can cognitively grasp and weigh the both the advantages and disadvantages of enlisting. Stemming from Jean Piaget's studies on cognitive development in teenagers, it does not appear that juveniles can realistically grasp the future ramifications of their enlistment contract. Fundamentally, the pre-frontal cortex of the teenage brain, which controls future outcomes and consequences, is still under-developed; thus, rendering their decision making process unreliable. In addition, there is evidence that the adolescent brain has less impulse control and is more susceptible to promises of rewards (Edmonds, 2014).

As it so happens, this cognitive combination is responsible for many undesirable teenage actions, such as drug addiction, risky driving, and alcohol and tobacco use. If these actions are deemed irresponsible by society it should be no great surprise when other impulsive actions by teens, such as military enlistment, come into question.

Conclusion

It would be prudent to assume that the military is going to continue to effectively and efficiently communicate with kids about everything that is beneficial about enlisting.

However, given the impressive budget allocated toward recruitment efforts using 21st century media tactics, it behooves greater consideration as to the effects on a (perhaps) unintended juvenile population. The new media channels that now have pro-military messages, at least on the surface, appear to be directed straight at the adolescent age range. Yet, despite this seemingly strong evidence, currently there are few, if any, empirical research studies focused on the potential (negative) implications associated with military media targeting juveniles for recruitment. Although more information may exist about these implications, extensive searches of peer-reviewed academic journal publications yielded no recent articles exemplifying the potential effects discussed in this article. Therefore, a specific recommendation of this report would be to begin and/or further the scholarly discussion about the military's use of media targeting an adolescent population for recruitment purposes and what significant effects, if any, they may have on our nation's youth.

In conclusion, military recruiting behaviors have become increasingly aggressive and focused on targeting children. Many negative outcomes associated with military service, including physiological and psychological disorders, have been documented and evidenced in adult populations. One could only posit as to the increased effects that could be experienced by juveniles. Additionally, there is supported research that shows the cognitive functions of teenage brains are not fully developed and therefore not able to make accurate predictions and decisions regarding life-changing choices such as enlisting in the military. For these and other reasons discussed, the military should not be allowed to directly or indirectly begin recruiting individuals until the age of 18; which includes face to face contact in high schools, target marketing on television and in film, and the inclusion of risk-glorifying and pro-military messages embedded into children's video games. Some student, parent, school, and community-action groups have begun to respond to such implications discussed in this report. However, many individuals are not yet aware of the predatory tactics currently employed by American military media communications, or the very real potential for disastrous outcomes based on immature decisions.

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