Generational Differences in Perceptions of Military Advertising and Organizational Commitment

Mark D. Cistulli, Jason L. Snyder
Central Connecticut State University

Randy Jacobs
University of Hartford

Abstract

The purpose of this pilot experiment was to compare and evaluate the attitudinal differences between generations about military service and its potential impact on military recruitment. Affective commitment is a concept that is typically associated with the organizational communication and psychology literature, but previous research has shown that consumers' evaluative responses to advertisements and brands can lead consumers to develop commitment to those brands in much the same way that employees develop commitment to their organizations (Cistulli, Snyder & Jacobs, 2012). Participants evaluated current ads produced by the military and were asked to answer survey questions using instruments based on previous advertising attitudinal and organizational commitment research. Respondents from previously categorized generations (Gen Y and Baby Boomers) were asked to fill out the surveys. Results indicate that military ads have a high recall rate across all generations. T-tests showed significant differences between generations on attitude toward the military, affective commitment, normative commitment, personal enlistment discussion and enlistment referral discussion. The potential social implications of these results are discussed.

Introduction

Since the beginning of an all-volunteer military force in 1974, there has been a greater need for the military to promote and advertise to their target populations. While the U.S. military has officially withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan, the volatile global economy and continuing perceived threats from anti-American groups has created new challenges and opportunities for military recruiters.

Generations and Perceptions of the Military

Historically speaking, military recruitment advertising has demonstrated responsiveness to changing American generational values, according to Tammy Erickson, an expert on generational groups (Carmichael, 2010). In 2010, the Pew Research Center identified the generally conforming and civic-minded Silent Generation, who lived through the Depression and World War II, receptive to the "Uncle Sam Wants You" tagline because it was consistent with their overall patriotism and support for large, national institutions. However, this contrasts considerably with the Baby Boomer, "Be All You Can Be" tagline. More recently, the "Army of One" tagline focused on the Generation X's self-focused and

independent sensibilities. The Millennials, therefore, also require another, novel approach to advertising (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

According to a Pew research Center survey, the Millennial generation's values and experiences related to the military are different from earlier generations. Millennials expressed less support for an "assertive" national security policy than other generations. In addition, 60 percent of the Silent Generation and 55 percent of Baby Boomers believe in a stronger military presence as compared to less than 40 percent of Millennials. Millennials were also less supportive of remaining in Iraq and Afghanistan. In terms of military service, 24 percent of the Silent Generation served in the military, 13 percent of Baby Boomers served, 6 percent of Generation Xers served and only 2 percent of Millennials served. Perhaps because of these differences, we see different methods of recruiting and different messages in the advertising. For example, the tagline for the Army, "You Made Them Strong, We'll Make Them Army Strong" takes a different approach and brings in an added dimension of parental influence.

Military Recruitment Advertising

Since the U.S. involvement in Operation Desert Shield (and eventually Operation Desert Storm and subsequent operations) in the 1990s, military recruitment has generally been in decline (St. Onge, 2010; Warner, Simon & Payne, 2003). To combat these decreasing numbers, the U.S. military has created a number of incentives like extending age requirements, making more money available to potential volunteers, and increasing the number of recruiters. Spending on advertising also has increased. Combined, the four main branches of the U.S. military spent more than $600 million in 2007, which was up 150% from 1999 (Dertouzos, 2009).

Military advertising has also been shown to penetrate the American consciousness. Beyond the success of many of their taglines like "Be All You Can Be" and "The Few. The Proud. The Marines." (Bruno, 2010), the military ads people have viewed have created interest in both the academic community and the community at large. For example, while some research showed the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with military membership (Padilla & Laner, 2002; Shyles & Ross, 1984), other research has shown that political climates may impact (both in an intended and unintended way) the perceptions of the military (Keck & Muller, 1994) and the preferences of military ad messages based on individual motivators – in other words, how the content of the ads relate to their individual needs (Miller, Clinton & Camey (2007).

While advertising has long been a cost-effective method for gaining recruits (Dertouzos, 2009; Warner, Simon & Payne, 2003), macroeconomic and external environmental factors (e.g. unemployment) have been shown to have an even greater effect (Hanssens & Levien, 1983). They further supported the idea that effective advertising will create interest in the military and therefore more inquiries into the military, but not necessarily enlistment itself. This idea is further supported by research that showed that exposure to ads about the Navy.

Mackenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986) suggest that fostering a positive attitude toward an ad (Aad) can lead to an understanding of consumer behavior. Much of the literature in attitudes and advertising link the attitude toward an ad and attitude toward a brand (Abrand) and the intention to purchase a product based on previous positive evaluations of ad and brand (Batra & Ray, 1985, Edell & Burke, 1986; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Ang and Low (2000) and Stone, Besser, and Lewis (2000) found that good creative ads were often evaluated positively. As noted previously, advertising-agency created ads for the military has been well-received and recognized. The advertising literature has historically examined consumers'

affective responses to advertisements and brands, and the impact of those responses on consumer purchasing intentions and behaviors (Gobe, 2001).

Affective Organizational Commitment

The organizational commitment construct is based on the level of an individual's identification with an organization (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1979). According to Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982), organizational commitment consists of two key components: attitudinal and behavioral organizational commitment. Attitudinal commitment is defined as the way employees think about their own values and goals in relation to the organization. Behavioral commitment is the process of becoming attached to an organization and of dealing with the consequences of being part of that organization.
Meyer and Allen (1991) proposed three dimensions of organizational commitment – affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Their dimensions illustrate an employee's sense of belonging to an organization in terms of emotional, psychological and behavioral dimensions. The three main themes associated with organizational commitment are: affective attachment to an organization, the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization and the perceived obligation to remain within an organization.

Research by Cistulli, Snyder and Jacobs (2012) has shown that affective organizational commitment can predict the decision to enlist in the military as well as the decision to discuss enlistment with friends and family. This affective organizational commitment, which has traditionally been used to measure employees' attachment to their companies, was shown to be similar to the emotional commitment that survey respondents had to the U.S. Military (in and of itself a large organization). The results of the study illustrated that the positive evaluations of the stimulus ad shown to respondents led to a higher likelihood for enlistment and suggesting enlistment to their friends.

Hypotheses

In an effort to better understand these generational differences, this study seeks to compare the Millennials' responses to attitudinal and behavioral questions to their older generation counterparts. The following research questions were developed:

RQ1: What differences, if any, exist between generations in evaluations of current military advertising?

RQ2: What differences, if any, exist between generations in levels of organizational commitment?

RQ3: What differences, if any, exist between generations in responses suggesting enlistment for others?

Method

Design and Procedure

The participants made up a convenience sample (N = 158, 49% Female, 72% White, 9% Black, 6% Latino, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander) of individuals ranging in age from 17 to 64 recruited via the Internet, through email and Facebook. Study participants clicked on a link where instructions and the survey were posted. They then filled out a questionnaire. Data was collected and downloaded from a survey site.

Measures

Descriptives. Participants were asked their age, sex, political affiliation, race, and political orientation (five-point Likert-type scale, Strong Conservative (1) to Strong Liberal (5)). We wanted to not only have their affiliation but their general self-perception of their political leanings.

Recall. Participants were asked whether they could recall an ad about the military in the past month. They were also asked about which branch of the military they remember seeing or hearing.

Affective Organizational Commitment. A six-item affective organizational commitment measure created by Meyer and Allen (1991) was used for this study. The items utilized a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (α = .80). Four of the items were retained for this study. The items were: "I really feel as if the armed forces problems are my own." "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the armed forces." "I do not feel emotionally attached to the armed forces." "The armed forces have a great deal of personal meaning for me."

Attitude toward the Ad. Participants rated their overall impression of the ad using a semantic-differential scale developed by Donthu (1998). The five-point scale (α =.90.) read as follows to members of the experimental condition: "To me, the advertisement I just saw was _____." The items were: unpleasant/pleasant, vulgar/refined, unlikable/likable, boring/interesting, tasteless/tasteful, bad/good, inferior/superior, unenjoyable/enjoyable, unattractive/attractive, worthless/valuable. For the control condition, the language was changed to reflect recall and appeared as follows: "To me, military ads I have seen were_____."

Attitude toward the Military. Participants rated their overall impression of the Armed Forces using a five point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) derived from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2009). The eight items (α = .89) were as follows: "I trust the United States Armed Forces," I rely on the United States Armed Forces," "Members of the United States Armed Forces are honest," "The United States Armed Forces keep me safe," "I feel good when I see and ad about the United States Armed Forces," "I am happy with the United States Armed Forces," and "I am pleased with the United States Armed Forces."

Personal Enlistment Discussion (PED). Participants responded to five five-point Likert scale items addressing their own possible enlistment in the Armed Forces (α = .84). They included: "I would discuss the option of my enlisting in the Armed Forces with my friends", "I would discuss the option of enlisting in the Armed Forces with my family." "To learn more about the military, I would visit a recruiter before deciding to enlist in the armed forces." and "I would consult recruitment materials before deciding to enlist in the armed forces."

Enlistment Referral Discussion (ERD). Participants responded to four five-point Likert-type scale items about recommending the Armed Forces to friends or family (α = .98). The questions included: "How likely are you to recommend visiting a military recruiter to a friend (family member)?" and "How likely are you to recommend consulting recruitment materials to a friend (family member)?"

Results

Military advertising exhibited a very high recall for the participants. Over 87% of respondents recalled some form of military advertising. Most thought of the Army (51.9%), followed by the Marines (35.1%),

the Navy (6.5%), Coast Guard (2.6%), and Air Force (1.9%). About 2% said they did not remember a specific branch in the ad.

We performed independent samples t-tests to discover what, if any differences exist between the age groups. Research Question1 asked about differences in perceptions of military advertising. We found no significant differences between the generations, in terms of their attitude toward the ad but did in terms of their attitude toward the military. Millennials reported a significantly lower attitude toward the military (M = 3.6, SD = .67) than did other participants (M = 3.9, SD = .59, t(90) = -.213, p<.05).

Research Question 2 asked about the differences in levels of organizational commitment. We found significant differences in affective and normative Commitment, but not in continuance commitment. Millennials reported a significantly lower level of affective commitment (M = 3.0, SD = .89) than did other respondents (M = 3.4, SD = .80, t(90) =, p<.05), as well as lower normative commitment (M = 3.5, SD = .67) than did the other respondents (M = 3.8, SD = .78, t(90) = -2.28, p<.05).

Research Question 3 asked about the differences in enlistment referral discussion. We found a significant difference between the generations. Millennials reported a significantly lower score on enlistment referral discussion (M = 2.6, SD = 1.0) than the Gen Xers and Baby Boomers (M = 3.0, SD = 1.2, t(90) = -1.97, p<.05). Millennials also reported lower scores on Personal Enlistment Discussion (M = 4.4, SD = 1.1) compared to their older counterparts (M = 4.9, SD = .70, t(90) = -2.34, p<.05).

Table 1.
Means and Standard Deviations for Variables of Interest

Variable	Millennials M (SD)	Gen X/Boomers M (SD)
Attitude Toward Ad	3.42(.83)	3.68(.51)
Attitude Toward Military	3.63 (.67)*	3.94 (.59)
Affective Commitment	2.97 (.89)*	3.44 (.80)
Normative Commitment	3.45 (.67)*	3.82 (.78)
Continuance Commitment	2.71(.66)	3.02(.89)
Enlistment Referral Discussion	2.55 (1.00)*	3.02 (1.20)
Personal Enlistment Discussion	4.35 (1.10)*	4.86 (.70)

Note. * indicates statistically significant difference between Millennials and GenX/Boomers

Discussion

This research continues previous research exploring the relationships between the military, advertising and organizational commitment originally put forth by Cistulli, Snyder and Jacobs (2012). However, this research goes a step further in that it looks at these relationships through the different lenses of each generation.

With each new generation comes a new worldview. At the time of this survey, the US was active in Afghanistan and was in the process of withdrawing from Iraq. The military machine of the United States of America has adjusted along the way using more and more sophisticated market targeting techniques to tie into the unique circumstances of every new generation. In doing so, it has created advertising and promotion campaigns using high repetition over various media and tailored messages to attract just the right 21st century solider.

In this study, we have found a number of important differences between Millennials and Generation/Boomers. Why do Millennials have a lower attitude toward the military? One reason for this difference might be the fact that Millennials have a smaller family connection to the military than do their older counterparts.

According to the Pew Research Center (2011), only 33 percent of adults between ages 18 and 29 have family members who have served in the military. Meanwhile, 57 to 79 percent of those Americans in older cohorts reported having family members who have served in the military. These age differences held even after controlling for other life factors, such as being married and having grown children. That study also showed that "Americans who have family connections to the military have different views from those who don't on a range of topics related to patriotism, the military and national security" (Pew Research, 2011). Therefore, GenX/Boomers may have more positive attitudes toward the military than Millennials in order to maintain a sense of cognitive consistency between their feelings about their family members and their feelings about the military.

In addition to difference in attitudes toward the military, our study also revealed differences in affective commitment and normative commitment for Millennials and Gen X/Boomers. In both cases, Millennials reported feeling less commitment. Although the two forms of commitment are different, the explanation for the differences we observed may account for both differences. Affective commitment refers to the emotional attachment that one feels toward the military. Those with high levels of normative commitment remain committed to the military because they perceive it to be right thing to do.

Millennials may have lower levels of commitment because they have less of a direct family connection to the military. With fewer personal connections to the military, Millennials may have a harder time developing deep emotional connections to the military. Those families with military veterans may be more likely to develop a set of values consistent with values espoused by the military. Millennials may not feel as great a sense of obligation to the military and its values because those values are as likely to have been ingrained by a service veteran.

It is worth noting, that although Millennials in this study reported lower attitude toward, and commitment to, the military, other research has demonstrated that Millennials hold stronger pro-government views than older generational cohorts. However, Millennials tend to favor less assertive national security policies and do not generally support military intervention (Pew Research Center, 2010). As with other generations, it can be difficult to create a generalized view of the Millennials– their attitudes and behaviors are characterized by diversity.

Millennials reported being less likely discussing military enlistment with others. Again, this generational difference may be due to the lack of family connection to the military. Fifty-one percent of Americans with a family member serving in the military, "say they would advise a young person close to them to join the military" (Pew Research, 2011). At the same time, only 43 percent of those without a family member in the military are likely to offer the same advice to a young person (Pew Research, 2011). Fewer Millennials have family members in the military and they are less likely to agree with military intervention. Therefore, it is not incredibly surprising that Millennials are less comfortable recommending a military career to their peers. In addition, for Millennials, the target of these discussions is more likely to be in the same generational cohort. It may be easier for GenX/Boomer to mentor a young person about a career in the military simply due to the age difference.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper does have some limitations. We are in the process of gathering more respondents so that we may acquire a larger sample size and apply more sophisticated and rigorous statistical analysis. With a larger sample and with a large enough representation of each generation, we will not have to collapse groups to perform our analysis. Still, the fact that we could compare Millennials to a combined group of Gen Xers and Baby Boomers and find significant differences suggests that there is much more to be done in this area.

Future areas of research should continue to look at generational differences in evaluations of the military and investigate just how socially significant these differences really are. The relationships and interactions between the generations also offers hope for fertile research, since, it can be suggested at least in some cases, the younger generations may turn to their parents or friends in an older generation for advice. We saw lower likelihood for Millennials to discuss enlisting in the military with family and friends, but what happens when they do? How are these interactions different than say, 20 years ago? We also have continued collecting data and those individuals that have served in the military and their responses to this survey. We hope to continue to explore that area – how might those individuals who served differ in their responses from those who did not?

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Mark Cistulli is an Associate Professor in the Management Information Systems department at Central Connecticut State University where he teachers managerial communication. His research focuses on the influence of military advertising on people's willingness to communicate about enlistment.

Jason Snyder is an Associate Professor in the Management Information Systems department at Central Connecticut State University where he teachers managerial communication. His primary research focuses on supportive and comforting communication in a variety of business communication contexts. He was the recipient of the 2011 Outstanding Article of the year in the *Journal of Business Communication.*

Randy Jacobs is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at the University of Hartford where he teaches courses in advertising, integrated communication, and mass media. His most recent research is focused on ethnic differences in media use.