"A Soldier is a Soldier?":

Constructing the 'Combatant' in British Army Recruitment Media

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ABSTRACT

Military recruitment is a is a multi-million-pound industry in the UK, yet has faced relatively little scrutiny from critical scholars, despite extensive research into the military overall. Recruitment campaigns, employing various media, and digital and experiential spaces, offer valuable insights into how the military constructs and presents itself towards an external audience. The nascent existing scholarship has noted deep tensions between liberal militaries' current attempts to identify as inclusive, diverse and even peaceful, and their reputations as the training ground for narrow, militarised masculinities. This thesis contributes to this conversation by conducting a Critical, Multimodal Discourse Analysis into British Army recruitment videos from 2017-2024. I introduce an understanding of dyadic co-constructions such as masculinity/femininity and military/civil, while recognising that the 'paradox' of feminist analysis is such that it is impossible to discuss these dyads without inadvertently reifying them. I start with an analysis of how masculinities and femininities are constructed in recent recruitment discourses, finding that while a broader conceptualisation of masculinity is presented, femininities remain sidelined and constrained. I then turn to the messy positioning of the Army in relation to the 'civilian' world, with further dyads including military/civil and combat/non-combat, the constructions of which have largely not been unpacked by existing literature. This reveals further tensions and contradictions, from the gendered origins of the combatant/civilian divide to a potential 'existential crisis' regarding the purpose of the modern military.

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Introduction: 'Just' a Soldier?

There are no 'female soldiers' in the British Army.

Just soldiers.

Video description of 'A Soldier is a Soldier' (Army Jobs 2021).

In stark contrast to the above description of 'just soldiers' in the British Army, feminist scholarship has long recognised the significance of comprehending gender to understand military forces, activities, effects and institutions, which in turn are key for understanding the social operation and power of gender (Woodward and Duncanson 2017, 1). The Western tradition implicitly divides the world into corresponding hierarchical dualisms, such as self/other, male/female, protector/protected, soldier/civilian (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 140; Haraway 2013, 113). Hence, a powerful dyad of men-as-protectors/women-as-protected is constructed (Kinsella 2005). In this sense, the statement "There are no 'female soldiers' in the British Army" could operate to bolster the military's masculine borders against the disruptive feminine. Likewise, historically, women's involvement in the British military was limited (Woodward and Winter 2004). Nonetheless, their roles have gradually increased, and by 2018 all British military roles were officially opened to women (West 2023, 163). Therefore, the statement is ostensibly meant to read as "there are no gender divisions in the British Army".

This trap, between reifying or disrupting gendered dichotomies, is ironically faced by modern military recruiters and marketing specialists, and by the feminist scholars trying to analyse their recruitment media. Questioning these military recruitment strategies, and their relations with masculinities and femininities, should indeed be "inviting" to the feminist critical military analyst, since they "speak to broader questions on how militaries are created, sustained

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and deployed" (Enloe 2015, 1-2). Moreover, military recruitment media is an accessible, public-facing source of narratives created by the militaries themselves (often in cooperation with contractors). Needing to continually recruit new soldiers to replace those who retire, arguably even facing a 'recruitment crisis', the British Army contracted with Capita in 2012 with a £1.3 billion 10-year programme to "transform its recruitment approach" (UK Parliament 2024). However, considering the discursive power of these extensive campaigns, as well as significant sums of taxpayer money involved (particularly in the UK and US contexts), comparatively few scholars have critically examined military recruitment media (Rech 2014). Those who have (Strand and Berntsson 2015, Jester 2021, Beck and Spencer 2021, Baker 2023) tend to expose deep tensions between the progressive, inclusive messaging of liberal armed forces, and the traditional understanding of the military as the conservative training ground for a narrow, hegemonic militarised masculinity. This paper makes a novel contribution to this nascent critical literature by introducing the framework of co-constitutive gendered dichotomies, to ask how the 'combatant' is constructed in British Army recruitment media. The analysis begins by continuing the conversation on gendered soldier identities, exploring how 'masculinities' and 'femininities' are (or are not) presented in recruitment media. It then focuses on relations between the 'military' and 'civilian', and the related construction of 'combat', which have previously been neglected by the existing literature.

Therefore, this paper conducts a Critical, Multimodal Discourse Analysis into British Army recruitment videos from 2017-2024, with the timeframe corresponding to women's official full inclusion in the British Armed Forces. The British Army was selected for the size and notability of its recent recruitment campaigns, which were often controversial, and for the familiar cultural context of the United Kingdom more generally. This method facilitates an open exploration of the discourses more deliberately constructed within recruitment media, as well as the broader operations of discourses to potentially constrain what can be successfully

communicated by these videos. The focus is on constructions of gender through plural masculinities and femininities, the "patterns of social practice that are associated with the position of men [or women, respectively] in any given gender order," (R. W. Connell 2021, 108), and the gendered divisions between the 'civilian' and 'military' spheres.

Stern and Zalewski warn of the 'paradox' of feminist analysis, as the analysis into these dyadic constructions like masculinity/femininity, perpetrator/victim, war/peace, and so on inadvertently, inevitably reifies them as established 'things', while neglecting "the productive power involved" (2009, 619-20). They suggest that this paradox cannot be resolved, instead inviting scholars to "linger longer in anxiety" without aiming for the impossibility of "usable sure knowledge" (2009, 625, 629). In conducting an 'open' exploration, I therefore assess, curiously and sceptically (Enloe 2015), how these dyads are reified or disrupted by British Army recruitment media, examining potential constraints to the attempted identity constructions or messages within the videos, without decisively determining their overall level of success – there are far too many 'moving parts' and internal contradictions for such a decree.

Starting with an exploration into the masculinities depicted and constructed within British Army recruitment media, I find that particularly the earliest videos in my study tend to rely on more traditional military masculinity tropes and motifs, notably male homosocial bonding, as expressed through humour and limited platonic bodily contact. However, increasingly as the campaigns mature, the recruitment videos aim to portray a broader conceptualisation of masculinity, with racial and religious diversity, and a softer, more emotional tone. Women largely remain marginalised in these videos, so I then turn to the videos which more explicitly focus on women in the Army. Here, the Army is discursively constructed as an egalitarian, almost post-gender space. However, we still face the issue of the viewing the world through those hierarchical, gendered dyads, and it becomes unclear whether being 'just

a soldier' is possible, or if the no-longer-'female' soldier is instead aspiring for a hegemonic military masculinity.

Throughout the videos analysed, the 'military' is consistently constructed as separate from and superior to the 'civilian' world. However, the existing literature has not explicitly addressed the civil/military dyad, nor related constructions such as 'combat'. Therefore, the final chapter turns to how the Army attempts to position itself against/within the 'civilian' world – particularly considering that, while the 'civilian' has been described as an 'apolitical' category (Millar 2019, 250), it is actually imbued with gendered meaning, with the female-civilian constructed against the masculine-militant (Kinsella 2005). Significantly, 'A Soldier is a Soldier' aims to minimise or even deconstruct the male/female dyad while reinforcing the military/civilian dyad, which would either be powerfully disruptive against the masculinity/femininity dichotomy or rendered unintelligible by the co-constitutive nature of these dyads.

The positioning of the Army against or within the 'civilian' also points to broader tensions regarding what is, or should be, the role or identity of the modern liberal military. While the Army generally presents itself in recruitment videos as decisively separate from the 'civilian', soldiers are also increasingly depicted as performing 'civilian' or 'peaceful' tasks like evacuations, away from traditional, normative imaginations of 'combat', almost indicating an existential crisis. This extends the tensions the Army also faces in aiming to diversify its recruitment pool without potentially alienating its traditional cohort. Therefore, this paper contributes to the critical military recruitment literature by considering the civil/military dyad as co-constituted alongside femininity/masculinity, which adds significant nuance to the tensions and 'messiness' already noted by scholars within recruitment video narratives.

Chapter 1: How to Anxiously Analyse Masculinities and Femininities within the Military and its Recruitment Media

This chapter will first broadly trace the existing literature on 'military masculinities', which reveals them to be co-constructed against and hierarchically above 'femininity', alongside other hierarchical dyads, such as self/other, us/them, and significantly, military/civilian and combat/noncombat. Since I have identified military recruitment media as a rich yet underexplored source to analyse depictions of these dyadic constructs, I then provide an overview of the existing nascent critical literature on military recruitment, identifying significant gaps relating to the military/civilian and combat/noncombat dichotomies. This leads to my chosen methodology of Critical, Multimodal Discourse Analysis of YouTube videos, preestablished by the existing literature. However, by heeding Enloe's call for 'scepticism' (2015), and Stern and Zalewski's invitation to "linger in anxiety" (2009), my methodology aims for a certain openness, to account for the subsequent messiness of recruitment media as later revealed by my analysis.

1.1 Militarised Masculinities (and Femininities?)

It is broadly recognised within feminist critical military studies that militaries are deeply gendered institutions, generally relying on specific imaginaries of masculinities. Taking leading masculinities studies scholar Connell's pluralised definition of masculinities, they are the "patterns of social practice that are associated with the position of men in any given gender order," (2021, 108); likewise, femininities are the patterns of social practice associated with the position of women in a given gender order. Moreover, masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, oppositional and hierarchical (Connell 1987; Zalewski 1995); masculinity is culturally defined as that which is not feminine, and there is historical consistency with greater value being assigned to that which is associated with masculinity over femininity. However, as Connell posits, masculinities and femininities are plural, varying between and within different

cultural contexts. She thereby coined the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to refer to the dominant masculinity in a given context – not the most common statistically speaking, but normative, as the ideal, aspirational form (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Given that masculinities vary by context, including the hegemonic forms, hegemonic masculinities are subject to change, and older forms of masculinity can be challenged and replaced (2005, 832-835).

A widely acknowledged form of hegemonic masculinity is 'militarised masculinity'. As Millar and Tidy explain, the 'myth of the magnificent warrior' is grounded in a "privileged, powerful and strongly normative" imagination of heroic combat (2017, 148). A culturally ideal masculinity is often linked to virility and violence (Tickner 1992, 57); for instance, militaries have used sexist chants and insults to train soldiers for generations (Sjoberg 2011, 111). While this hegemonic masculinity has somewhat shifted over the decades, with most militaries experiencing a decline in active serving members, the military "retains pride of place as the most masculine activity" for men with less class privilege, and in patriarchal culture at large (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 159).

Meanwhile, the construction of militarised masculinity relies on a devalued femininity, of women in need of protection (by men) (J. A. Tickner 1992, 39). As Runyan and Peterson explain, this ties in more broadly to gendered divisions of violence, with the hierarchical divisions of self/other, us/them, aggressive/passive, soldier/victim, and protector/protected, which divides the world into the masculine defenders and the feminine civilians they seek to defend (2014, 140). Kinsella masterfully maps how this constructed of dyad of men as protectors/women as protected is central to understandings of 'the civilian' in international law, from Grotius to the Geneva Conventions (2005). Therefore, the masculine, military identity is discursively differentiated from the female civilian.

Moreover, the concept of 'combat' central to the heroic soldier myth is revealed by feminist and gender as a "normative imagination of martial violence", as opposed to the

unquestioned, empirical category it occupies within traditional war studies scholarship, as 'obviously' physical fighting with a given relationship to masculinity (Millar and Tidy 2017, 146). Scholars have observed how definitions of combat were constructed to exclude women, even as they served alongside recognised (male) combatants, from Northern Ireland to Afghanistan (West 2023). Caddick et al. trace a 'hierarchy of wounding' within articles reporting on 'combat' and 'non-combat' injuries during the UK's war in Afghanistan, to highlight the productive power of 'combat' as a category (2021). Similarly, Ford examines the epistemology of lethality, which is constructed in different ways in attempts to "stabilise martial control of combat" (2020, 92). However, within feminist scholarship more broadly, Millar and Tidy warn of "conceptual 'slippage'": the constitution of masculinities in relation to 'combat' is established, but how masculinities constitute combat is not, as combat is still often treated as a 'common-sense' empirical reality. For example, Goldstein writes "women always serve in combat, no matter how "combat is defined" (2018, 389), thereby recognising how combat is constructed by the US military, but still projecting a 'real' combat behind/obscured by this construction. Millar and Tidy conclude that this "blurred definitional treatment of combat" limits "our analytic ability to reveal the co-constitution of gendered power and privileged imaginations of violence", and further legitimates state violence (2017, 157).

A related myth has been the association of women with peace, painted as a biological, essentialist difference. In the narrative of war, Elshtain identifies not only the 'just warrior' protagonist, but also the women as pacifist 'beautiful souls', both the object and purpose of war (Sjoberg 2010, 55). This has been invalidated by various arguments, such as the evidence of women's support for men's wars (Sjoberg 2010, 58; Tickner 1992, 79), or pitting examples of peace-loving men against war-mongering women – frequently Gandhi against Thatcher (e.g. Runyan and Peterson 2014, 2; Zalewski 1995, 344). bell hooks further problematises this essentialist view by pointing out that many who make claims about the 'natural' peacefulness

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of women are white, whereas black women are more likely to recognise the violence and militarism of white women in maintaining racism or imperialism (1995, 60). She further points out how many mothers have been violent. This argues against the essentialist view of the capacity to bear children giving women a special responsibility towards planetary survival and disarmament work, which would also reinforce the sexist equation of womanhood with motherhood (1995, 60).

More explicitly, a clear disruption to the strict dualisms between men/women, war/peace, combatant/civilian, is the presence of women in the military. Although it is increasingly less common to voice this aloud, the presence of women in the military can make various people uncomfortable, as seen through male soldiers complaining about different standards for women's fitness in the American Army, which Cohn interprets as symbolic for their anger about their sense of male ownership of the military (2000). King historicises the presence of women in the British Armed Forces, explaining that before 1970 their presence was minor and limited to support roles, whereas their accelerated accession thereon created "organizational and cultural tensions" for the male personnel they worked with (2016, 125). Male soldiers henceforth created a binary classification for their female counterparts: sexually available 'sluts' against sexually unavailable 'bitches' (2016, 124), once again highlighting their discomfort with serving alongside women. Anti-feminist military scholar van Creveld argues that inclusion of women is "part symptom, part decline of the 'advanced' military" (2000, 432). Coker responds that van Crevald has ignored the "converging" of "the civilian and military worlds", while instead of "masculine values… giving way to feminine ones", "public institutions – including armies – must incorporate aspects of private life such as compassion" (2000, 450-451). This acknowledges (but perhaps continues to reify) the co-construction of the public-male-soldier/private-female-civilian dyad.

Meanwhile, calling upon Connell and Messerschmidt's re-evaluation of 'hegemonic masculinity' and the gender hierarchy, incorporating the agency of subordinate groups (2005, 843), King (2016) points to the relatively new development of a new category for female soldiers: 'honorary men'. 'Honorary men' often make their physical appearance and mannerisms more 'male', such as with short hair or slouching, to no longer appear as a sexual object to male soldiers and avoid being judged purely on sexual availability (as with the slut/bitch dichotomy) (2016, 126-137). Moreover, 'honorary men' must actively maintain their masculine status, while that some women can be 'men' is used to justify the rest being dismissed as 'sluts' or 'bitches' (137-8). Although King describes this as a 'regendering' of the military, he admits that the military has "yet to develop an unproblematic concept of femininity that recognises women as women" (127-139). Indeed, Belkin conceptualises military masculinity as 'a set of beliefs, practices and attributes that enable individuals – men and women – to claim authority on the basis of affirmative relationships with the military or with military ideals,' (2012, 3); the category of 'honourary men' would thereby constitute a masculinity, not necessarily a 'regendering' of the military.

Overall, there are varying militarised masculinities and femininities, but it is often unclear from the literature at what point behaviours, particularly from female soldiers, should be considered replicating established militarised masculinities, or new forms of militarised femininities. In general, existing scholarship tends to avoid this problem by focusing on either 'military masculinities' or discourses surrounding women in the military, instead of addressing both together. The difficulty of conceptualising a 'militarised femininity' speaks to the power of the traditionally co-constructed, hierarchical dualisms.

1.2 Gendered Recruitment Media

An area which has largely been neglected by military analysts is armed forces recruitment media, despite it offering varied insights into the construction and outward projection of militarised masculinities (and femininities) by the armed forces themselves. Rech more broadly states that military recruitment is "poorly understood in the social and political sciences", despite being the formal mechanism for persuasion and enrolment of military personnel, which he describes as the "manifestation of the state's obligation to account for itself and its role," (2014, 244-245). He explains that recruitment media provides means to observe the centrality of violent visions and metaphors to state-centric narratives of global politics. He also adds that military recruitment both reflect and constitute contemporary militarisms and military culture, such as unproblematic acceptance of warrior tropes – which implicitly relates to militarised masculinities. Finally, he notes how such examination could reveal possibilities for protesting militarism. Nonetheless, prior study of military recruitment has mostly arisen from sociology, aiming to provide solutions for military recruitment and retention programmes, thereby being "normative and partisan", or it has been subsumed within broader critical studies of a global 'cultural condition' of militarisation, lacking in depth or localised examination (2014, 244). He ultimately recommends adopting a critical military studies perspective which includes not only a global view of militarism as the "blurring of civilian and military sphere", but also a recognition that there are still "distinct, situated practices", including recruitment, where "certain military positions" are fostered and taught, which also requires "taking seriously the theory, practice and radical potential of protest" (2014, 258).

Following publication of Rech's 2014 article, a handful of articles have started to provide rich analysis into military recruitment. Beck and Spencer (2021) compare British and Swedish military recruitment videos, focusing on their respective uses of humour. They conclude that humour is used to both obscure and enhance the 'militarisation of everyday life',

while also acting to thwart criticism of the videos' political messages. Strand and Berntsson (2015) similarly examine military recruitment discourses in the United Kingdom and Sweden, using the Foucauldian lens of 'governmentality', to find that since the abolition of conscription, recruitment rhetoric has focused on promising employability and professional development. The countries differ in how they present soldiers, with the UK drawing on 'warfighting' traditions, while Sweden presents a more 'altruistic' image connected to 'peacekeeping'. Partly continuing these themes of employability and altruism, Strand's later work also draws out a greater inclusivity present in the Swedish Armed Forces' recruitment campaigns, through their 2016 digital Sports Club (Strand 2021), and their 2018 recruitment campaign, which asked "Can I have my period in the field?" (Stern and Strand 2022). Strand argues that in comparison to prior military recruitment and critical research thereupon focusing on "the promise of a masculine body and identity", another significant technique to attract the public is "the displacement of traditional gendered civil/military distinctions" (2021, 52).

Similar attempts towards inclusivity have also been found within later British Armed Forces recruitment media. Jester (2021) compares recruitment videos of the United Kingdom with the United States during the period 2002-2018, finding that the British Armed Forces videos prior to 2012 presented women only rarely and in subordinate terms, and focused on physical strength and risk-taking. Comparatively, since 2002 the United States has constructed its army in "less traditionally masculine terms" through the presence of women and people of colour as team members, and a focus on emotional strength alongside physical (57). She then maps a shift in the British recruitment advertisements, which distinctly changed after 2012 to resemble more closely those of the United States. Jester points out that at this time, the UK experienced a recruitment 'crisis', with the shortfall in recruits growing from 5,850 in 2007 to 8,200 in 2018, prompting aims to recruit outside their traditional pool of white men (63). For example, Jester examines the depiction of teamwork, existing only through references in

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voiceovers in the earlier period, but becoming a prominent theme after 2012, with men of colour and women participating in 'the team' on equal terms. She extends the depiction of militaries as 'liberating oppressed women in other countries' (such as in Afghanistan) to also being liberatory institutions for their own personnel, through this presentation of women and men of colour as equals to white men (2021, 68). Hence, she concludes that by presenting themselves through recruitment videos as rejecting hegemonic masculinity, the British and American armies have presented themselves as progressive, thereby obscuring military violence (2021, 57).

Baker (2023) takes a similar view with a narrower focus on the British Army's 'This is Belonging campaign', which marketed at London Pride in 2017, then launched live-action and animated YouTube videos in 2018 targeting specific groups, including LGBTQ youth as well as young women, religiously observant youth, and young men who are 'emotionally sensitive' or of average fitness. An animated video titled 'Can I be gay in the military?' presented a gay military future, ostensibly welcoming a gay male viewer. However, Becker notes various limitations with this advertising campaign. Significantly, the 'Gay?' animated video was the only theme out of five animations to not have an accompanying live action video, replaced by a video of homosocial male bonding (2023, 445). She argues that since the protagonist of the 'Gay?' video has a monogamous partner, he is less likely to "bring his desire threateningly to the ranks, from whence it might 'leak' to threaten military order", thereby permitting queer masculine desire to exist alongside the homosocial bonding of the live action video (2023, 544). She also notes that he is a white man (and it is ambiguous in British English whether 'gay' refers to all homosexuals or just men), implying that the campaign could "only cope with one axis of diversity at a time," (2023, 449). She concludes that while some 'respectable', 'institutionally advantageous' queers can belong in the British military, those who fail to comply with a heteronormative domesticity compatible with military life cannot (2023, 457).

This further problematises the inclusivity presented by British Armed Forces recruitment media.

Overall, the existing literature has made compelling insights into military recruitment, with varied messages and comparisons with people's lived experiences within in the military. However, it is still a nascent area of study requiring further research. Significantly, there has been little if any investigation into how combat is constructed alongside gender within this media, as recommended by Millar and Tidy (2017), nor more broadly how the 'military' is discursively distinguished from the 'civilian'. Rech gestures towards the 'global view' of militarism more broadly as the "blurring of civilian and military sphere" (2014, 258), but his article is more of an overview than direct analysis, so does not begin to unpack this within any specific recruitment campaigns. Strand conveys how the Swedish Armed Forces' Sports Club "partly [collapses] the gendered civil/military distinctions upon which the SAF has relied" to appeal to the wider public (2021, 51), but this focuses on the Swedish context, not British, and does not directly unpack 'combat'. This is why I have directly investigated the co-constitution of dyads, focusing on femininities and masculinities, and the civil/military distinction, within recent British Armed Forces recruitment media.

1.3 Methodology: Analysis and Anxieties

To aspire to answer these gaps or limitations in the existing literature, I will therefore investigate:

How are dyadic relations, such as masculine/feminine or military/civilian, de/constructed in recent British Army recruitment media discourses?

To find the recruitment videos used in my research, I have used YouTube as a source repository. This matches studies before mine with similar research goals (Jester 2021, Beck and Spencer 2021, Baker 2023). As Jester explains, YouTube acts as a "*repository* for army recruitment advertisements", (2021, 59), with clear posting dates. Beck and Spencer (2021) provide further nuance into YouTube as the source of these videos, stating that as a social media channel, it has "contributed to a new relationship between the military and the public", presenting military content as 'ordinary' and 'apolitical', effectively infiltrating 'civilian' life (Beck and Spencer 2021, 77). As the British military is institutionally divided into the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, it cannot be conceptualised as uniform (Atherton 2009, 822). Hence, I have focused on the British Army (land forces), selecting videos from their official 'Army Jobs' YouTube channel. If necessary (certain notable videos were either never uploaded or have been deleted from the official Army Jobs channel), I have also accessed videos through other channels, such as Armed Forces TV adverts uploaded by The Telegraph's official YouTube channel.

The British Army was selected for various reasons. As my country of birth and citizenship, the UK remains the one I have the greatest broader knowledge of, which is important in discourse analysis for recognising intertextual cultural references (Hodges 2015). The UK also had the sixth highest military expenditures worldwide in 2023 (Tian, et al. 2024, 2), despite only having the 21$^{\text{st}}$ highest population (United Nations 2024). The Army was selected over other branches of the British Armed Forces for facing the largest recruitment gaps, such as at over 30% short of their annual recruitment target in 2017 (Francois 2017, 2-3) with particularly high turnover and retention problems, as well as for the notability of their *This Is Belonging* campaign (Louise and Sangster 2019, 4). Moreover, following their inclusion in 'ground close combat' roles in 2016, from October 2018 all British Armed Forces roles were opened to women (British Army 2018). This marks a critical departure for the British Armed

Forces, given the historical co-constructions of combat and masculinity (Millar and Tidy 2017). Hence, I have only examined videos from 2017 onwards. I also made my timeframe and video selection in consideration of what should be the optimal balance between breadth and depth for this project, which is also a novel scope compared to the existing literature. Of course, this unavoidably sacrifices certain levels of detail as provided by a very narrow examination, as exemplified by Baker's focus on largely one part of one campaign (2023). I further recognise the benefits from a much broader study as Jester's (2021), which further gains from comparison between countries (the US and UK) and covers a much longer period (2002-2018). Therefore, I am grateful for the wider context and analysis provided by the existing scholarship.

My main methodology to answer my research question will be a multimodal, critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis can be simply described as "the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but to do things," (Gee 2010, ix). In other words, discourses are social phenomena, "systems of concepts, in which things… are made meaningful" (Woodward and Winter 2004, 20). This meaning-making ability of discourses means they have power (Foucault 1980). Specifically, militaries are institutions which "simultaneously represent and reify specific gender relations" (Kronsell 2006, 108), and given the power of such institutions in society, their gendered discourses warrant investigation. As a clear, external expression of such discourses, military recruitment media is an easily accessible avenue for such investigation.

An area of discourse analysis which specifically recognises relations of power is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) – although, following van Dijk, this is not a single special method of research, but a perspective (2015, 466). CDA views discourses as not just socially conditioned, but socially constitutive as well, with the goal of making discourses as power objects more visible in modern societies (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, 448). Meanwhile, although discourse analysis, including CDA, has traditionally been focused on linguistics and

'text', as Gee explains, discourse analysis is more generally about 'communication', "and in most cases images and multimodal texts are seeking to communicate," (2010, xii). Hence, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) has emerged as further paradigm in discourse studies, which combines the study of language with other resources, including gesture, images, music and action (O'Halloran 2011, 249). Moreover, as van Leeuwen observes, as "different semiotic modes… are combined and integrated in a given instance of discourse", discourse is normally multimodal anyway (2015, 447). He gives the example of spoken discourse, commonly examined by purely linguistic discourse analysis, but which combines language with intonation, facial expression, posture, and many other aspects.

Hence, within recruitment media, not only written or verbal text can be analysed via discourse analysis, but also images, movement, props, settings, bodies, clothing and more. By examining images as well as text, my discourse analysis will partly contribute towards the 'visual turn' in IR, which has occurred in the past two decades as more IR scholars have undertaken sustained "explicit engagement with how visual artefacts and modes of visuality constitute world politics," (Grayson and Mawdsley 2019, 434). Grayson and Mawdsley, reiterating older conclusions from visual, media and cultural studies, do warn that images are "polysemous and complexly ambivalent" – a problem I will aim to reduce by comparing images in the videos to widely established connotations of masculinity and femininity, from the cultural British context that I am well acquainted with, while further cross-referencing the images between different videos.

According to Foucault, a discourse involves the 'joining together' of power and knowledge, so must be conceived of as "a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is not uniform or stable," (1978, 100). This thereby invites inquiry into complementary or contradictory themes, within and between expressions of discourses, or in this case, within and between different British Army recruitment videos. Woodward and Duncanson encourage

enquiry into national and individual imaginaries of a gendered military as indicators for "capacities and potential for institutional change" (2017, 3), while Kronsell acknowledges how changing gender relations and expressions also implies potential for institutional change (2006, 109). Along these lines, and recognising the importance of reflexivity for feminist research (Tickner 2006, 27), I have made a conscious effort to remain open-minded to the possibilities of institutional change throughout my research, in spite of my personal anti-militarist biases. Similarly, following Enloe, a critical feminist scholar ought to be sceptical, rather than lazily cynical (2015, 7).

A prominent understanding of 'gender' is Butler's 'performative' definition of gender as "a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (1990, 33). However, Campbell (2007, 360) distinguishes between understanding a discourse in terms of the 'performative' (enacting what it names through materialisation over time) rather than 'construction' (wilful representations of the external). Hence, I am focusing on *construction*, in recognition of the deliberate (or 'wilful') messaging of recruitment media, through representations of the 'external', 'lived experiences' in the Army. More broadly, Enloe warns against assuming that military recruiters "do not think about masculinities" (2015, 7). Nonetheless, given the co-constitutive relationship between discourses and institutions (Kronsell 2006, 9), this is not to ascribe intentionality to every piece of analysis gleaned below. I also still place the videos within the broader gender order, which is reiteratively performed by bodies over time. Performance also retains significance in Multimodal Discourse Analysis, since 'repeated acts' by and between bodies within the videos are a key focus for my analysis.

As traced through the literature review, constructions of gender require various hierarchical dualisms, such as masculinity/femininity, soldier/civilian (Runyan and Peterson 2014, 140). This follows the broader Western tradition of hierarchical dualisms, including

mind/body and civilised/primitive (Haraway 2013, 113). However, in trying to find and unpack these constructions within feminist analysis, it is easy to paradoxically contribute to their continued materialisation, reducing 'gender' to 'masculinity' or 'femininity' as established 'things', "los[ing] sight of the productive power involved" (Stern and Zalewski 2009, 619-20). It is thereby difficult to find the balance between acknowledging the very real impacts of such constructions, through this productive power, without discussing the constructions as if they are also 'real' or continuing to produce them. Similarly, Millar and Tidy warn how the "conceptual assumption of men's dominance over women undermines the potential power and emancipatory potential of critical gender work by premising its central critique upon the existence of the relationship it seeks to problematise and replace" (2017, 152). They relate this back to the "conceptual 'slippage'" within critical scholarship, of combat being treated as empirical reality, as part of the constitution of masculinities, neglecting the concurrent gendered construction of combat. The existing literature on military recruitment media has similarly recognised the 'messiness' and contradictions within the videos (Baker 2023, 456), with the goal only of 'problematising' rather than "problem-solv[ing] issues of military power" (Millar and Tidy 2017, 147 in Jester 2021, 70).

Therefore, maintaining a focus on 'constructions' will be key for my analysis, even as I recognise that inevitably it will still partly reify the very dualisms I wish to deconstruct. There have been attempts to partially resolve this paradox, such as using the framework of 'haunting' to better recognise the 'ghostly borders' between these constructed dualisms (Welland 2013, Clark 2019). However, Stern and Zalewski invite scholars to "linger longer in anxiety", to accept that the paradoxical production of 'sexgender' cannot be resolved, and that "usable sure knowledge" is an impossibility (2009, 625, 629). This broadly follows feminist epistemologies, which often aim to find a balance between recognising subjectivity to be socially or

discursively constructed, without lapsing into a conservative stagnancy, unable to progress in terms of knowledge or politics (Lovibond 1989, Fricker 2006).

Accepting this invitation to "linger", I will thereby conduct an open exploration of recruitment discourses, critically assessing how the 'progressive' recent British Army recruitment videos can be considered to reify or disrupt traditional hierarchical dualisms, without aiming to decisively determine to what extent either are achieved. I will begin by extending the conversation on gender in recruitment media, exploring any reliance on more traditional motifs of military masculinity, such as homosocial bonding, as well as attempts to include historically 'subordinate' masculine identities, with greater diversity of race, faith and sexuality. I then examine whether 'femininities' are constructed or elided by recent recruitment videos, in line with the statement "There are no 'female' soldiers in the British Army." Noting a consistent theme of the Army positioning itself decidedly distinct from and superior to the 'civilian' world, I end by unpacking this relation in more detail, which the existing literature has largely overlooked. Various factors are revealed to complicate, even contradict the Army's attempt to elevate itself above the 'civilian', from its prior reputation as the training ground for narrow military masculinities, to the gendered nature of the civil/military divide. The Army has arguably become more 'civilianised', such as through a shift from traditional constructs of 'combat' as 'fighting' towards a more 'peaceful' Army which only saves lives instead of taking them, while civil society is 'militarised' by infusion of military values; this further blurs the lines between the two spheres. By drawing out these messy, contradictory themes, I thereby aim to provide an overview of the Army's different positionings and identity constructions, without providing concrete conclusions about what precisely they are aiming to present nor whether they are successful in doing so, since the very messiness of it all prevents this.

Chapter 2: 'Gender' in Recruitment Media

Using the method of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and the framework of the co-constitutive dyads which provide the traditional narrative of the military as a gendered institution, this chapter will largely focus on the 2017-2019 *This Is Belonging* campaign. This was a multi-platform campaign employing television, radio, cinema and online digital spaces, as well as outdoor, experiential activities (Rech 2020, 1075). Particularly in 2018 and 2019, the campaign courted controversy from various audiences, particularly in being accused of 'political correctness' by aiming for greater diversity (of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and faith) in recruitment (Weaver 2018). Below, I analyse in what ways this campaign and related videos have (or have not) portrayed greater diversity in gendered identities within the military.

2.1 Making 'Masculinities'

Despite criticisms of 'political correctness', in some ways the *This Is Belonging* campaign emulates more traditional or hegemonic military masculinities. In line with the theme of 'belonging', homosocial bonding is present throughout. The very first 2017 TV advert initially shows a man alone, in grim, rainy conditions, but he is quickly met by a fellow soldier who pours him a cup of tea as more men sit down beside them (Army Jobs 2017a). There is no dialogue; the only text is the slogan THIS IS BELONGING, displayed in front of the video image, then replaced by the ARMY: BE THE BEST motto and "Find where you belong. Search Army Jobs" below. Stoic expressions are replaced by grins at the end, as one soldier playfully aims a large gun, while another affectionately ruffles the hair of the original soldier. The second similarly begins in brutal conditions (a patrol uphill in the snow), but the soldiers begin laughing and teasing one man's singing (Army Jobs 2017b). In the third, two white male soldiers jokingly debate the merits of cricket (Army Jobs 2017c). The fourth shows a driver repeatedly pranking a soldier as he tries to enter the back of the vehicle; when he finally succeeds, his fellow soldiers (including one woman) all pull him in, cheering and rubbing his

back (Army Jobs 2017d). Hence, humour as a form of bonding (or 'belonging') can be observed in each video. Humour is gendered: actively making jokes and being funny are seen as "manly" (Tidy 2021, 138). Banter in particular occupies a role in Western masculinity and the British military, characterised by teasing and boundary testing (*ibid.*), as seen in the videos, as well as by sexual bravado and in-jokes – not to be found in the *This Is Belonging* campaign, though women in bikinis or engaging with soldiers in a nightclub do feature in earlier British army videos (Jester 2021, 65). Humour in *This Is Belonging* 2017 thereby operates to construct a fun, homosocial environment.

The (British) military has been described as "one of the most intensely homosocial environments in contemporary society", created by communal bodily practices, from wearing the same uniform to laughing together (Welland 2013, 890). A key motif throughout the videos is bodily contact, non-verbal signs of affection like a hand on the shoulder or pat on the back. The description below all four videos reads "A sense of belonging may sound like a small thing. Yet it fuels you as much as food and water, because it doesn't just feed your body, it feeds your mind and soul." An interview with some of the creators of the campaign reveals they investigated people's motivations for joining and staying in the army, and beyond more obvious themes like military training and 'adventure', a "sense of strong bonds" was eventually established as key – which they then related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in which 'belonging' constitutes the third level, above only safety and physiological needs (Terry, Lally and Batten 2019). As Atherton states, performing military masculinities includes horizontal relationships within an otherwise hierarchical structure, thereby adding to the personal empowerment of these included (2009, 826). He adds that these activities are hypermasculinised, since "their successful iteration depends upon the exclusion of women and other [subordinate] men" (*ibid.*). Correspondingly, the *This Is Belonging* videos, particularly in this initial 2017 collection, are generally very male-dominated – which accurately represents

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the proportion of women in the UK Regular Forces, at 11.7% in October 2023 (Ministry of Defence 2023), but may not help potential female recruits to see themselves as 'belonging'. Moreover, the theme of 'belonging' more generally could shift the Army back towards constructing social cohesion instead of the more 'modern' task-based cohesion, by implying a focus on group ties and bonding rather than simply working together to 'get the job done', with corresponding, potentially negative implications for the inclusion of subordinate identities such as femininities.

Nonetheless, 'subordinate' masculinities have been actively represented within *This Is Belonging*. Baker (2023) has already examined the 2018 animated video, 'Can I be gay in the Army?' (Army Jobs 2018a), whose protagonist is a white gay man, permitting queer masculine desire to coexist in the homosocial military environment. This is deeply significant, given that homosociality typically relies on exorcising the homosexual – and sexuality in general, hence the exclusion also of women (Welland 2013, 890). However, following Baker's identification of the video's subject as 'safely' monogamous with an ostensibly 'civilian' partner (2023, 544), the borders of homosociality need not accommodate homosexual *behaviour* within, only the identity. 'Homonationalism' allows for the civil and military inclusion of a certain depoliticised gay constituency, to idealise liberal Western nations as ultimately heteronormative but gay-friendly and tolerant (Puar 2007). Moreover, the 2018 campaign included five live action videos alongside five animated ones, and 'Can I be gay in the Army?' was the only one without a clearly corresponding live action counterpart. Once again, we observe the potential limitations of what can be included in military narratives without disrupting the homosocial, heteronormative core. A carefully animated, monogamous gay protagonist was acceptable, but perhaps a live video version would be too 'real', with greater power to upset the asexuality of the homosocial environment.

The hegemonic 'warrior' masculinity is traditionally scripted as strong and hypermasculine, with emotion traditionally relegated to the 'private' or the feminine, not to be expressed. Indeed, Jester notes how 'emotional strength' is a term featured in American military recruitment advertisements but absent from British ones (2021, 65). Nonetheless, *This Is Belonging* intends to counter this narrative through animated videos such as 'Do I have to be a superhero to join the army?', and 'What if I get emotional in the army?'. The former describes how in 'civilian' life, the narrator was deeply unfit, but was still able to join the army, and being supported by his whole troop, was able to become much fitter (Army Jobs 2018a). A corresponding live action advert shows a team of soldiers cheering on their colleague as he strains to do a pull-up (Army Jobs 2018c). Once again, this reinforces the Army as grounds for homosocial bonding, while encouraging more recruits to apply. Meanwhile, even if it partly disrupts the hegemonic identity of a soldier who is somehow innately strong and tough, it still portrays the Army as the place to become stronger, thereby acting as facilitator of this hegemonic ideal.

The 'What if I get emotional' video similarly aims to quell nerves about any kind of enforced stoicism in the army, as the narrator expresses his prior worry "that any sign of emotion would be a sign of weakness", then reassures the viewer that "the army is family… There's always someone there to talk to, or even just to make you laugh," (Army Jobs 2018a). The description of the army as 'family' further reinforces the deep bonds of army life. This corresponds to interviews with male current and ex-military personnel, which reveal how the masculine notions of military solidarity and 'brotherhood' (or 'family') construct a 'safe' space to share emotions, but in a constrained way (McAllister, Callaghan and Fellin 2019). Also considering the gendered nature of humour (Tidy 2021), the video may fail to counter hegemonic masculinity discourses. General conversation and humour are not generally considered within the femininized 'emotions' that would be read as 'unmanly'.

The live action 'Expressing my Emotions' TV advert goes further in conveying a softer, more emotional side to soldiers (Army Jobs 2018d). A white, bald man in army uniform sits in a gloomy yet peaceful forest, with bird calls in the background. He opens an envelope containing a letter (presumably from home) with just 'Morning x' handwritten on it, and a teabag. He inhales the tea, and the screen reads EXPRESSING MY EMOTIONS. A younger man approaches him and hands him a cup of water, saying "you need some water for that." He replies, "cheers kid," sounding slightly choked up, then the video closes with the screen reading THIS IS BELONGING. This resounds with the army's focus on teambuilding, while constructing a tender, alternative discourse to the militarised hypermasculine figure who is not allowed to show emotion.

Meanwhile, race and faith are other dimensions of 'subordinate' masculinities which have been included within the *This Is Belonging* campaign, challenging the whiteness of hegemonic military masculinity (Jester 2021, 68). A corresponding pair of videos from the 2018 campaign, 'Keeping my Faith' and 'Can I practice my faith in the Army?', both solely focus on not just religion, but specifically practices which can be read (though are not explicitly stated) as Muslim, such as needing to pray at specific times, with a prayer mat. The voiceover of the animated video states how "There's always a quiet moment to… do your prayers… The lads would go out of their way to make sure I'm happy, part of the team," (Army Jobs 2018a). This is directly shown by the live action TV advert, which shows a (presumably) Muslim soldier washing in a stream (wudu) then praying, while the camera pans out to show his colleagues respectfully keeping watch (Army Jobs 2018b). A soldier who appears to be in charge raises a hand to prevent the others from reacting to a call on the radio, to allow the prayer to continue. The screen reads: KEEPING MY FAITH, then, as he gets up and everyone moves, THIS IS BELONGING. Once again, homosocial bonding is shown through bodily contact: a hand on the shoulder.

This deliberate inclusion of a Muslim soldier is particularly interesting considering postcolonial critiques of recent British wars. Spivak notably identified 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' as a prominent colonialist narrative (1988), which has since been observed as a hegemonic discourse of the US and UK's war in Afghanistan (Richter-Montpetit 2007). Islamophobia has been a consistent issue within British society, with the media particularly criticised for fuelling this (Richardson 2004). For example, a comment under a TalkTV discussion about the 'diversity and inclusion' goals of British Army recruitment stated, "As [sic] retired service person this is a crazy idea if you are recruiting people from the Islamic population you will be in for BIG TROUBLE" (inexplicably followed by a smiley-face emoji), with three supportive replies and 34 likes (via TalkTV 2024). While this view is hopefully not representative of the general British public (the channel notably recently ended traditional broadcasting in the face of poor viewer ratings (Weaver 2024)), it does highlight how *This Is Belonging* disrupts the colonialist, Islamophobic narrative of who belongs in the British Army and who is the 'Other' they are fighting against – but also that this move may not be entirely accepted. Meanwhile, from a critical perspective, Jester argues that including women and men of colour as equal to white men facilitates "the construction of armies as a liberatory institution for its personnel", as well as for oppressed women overseas (2021, 69). Much like the homonationalist narrative of the 'Gay?' video, constructing the British Army as progressive enables the portrayal of "a backward, violent Other" (*ibid.*).

Without wishing to be too cynical, given factors like the 'recruitment crisis' or the Army's need to legitimise its role and use of force, it is difficult to take these gestures towards being progressive and inclusive at face value. The *This Is Belonging* campaign has made clear efforts to disrupt and expand the traditional hegemonic military masculinity, through non-white or homosexual protagonists and acknowledging the importance of emotions. However, this all remains couched in more familiar expressions of military masculinity: the importance of

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humour, 'brotherly' relations (albeit replaced by a gender-neutral 'family'), homosocial bonding referenced by platonic physical contact. Significantly, women remain marginalised. The section below will analyse the rarer occasions where women feature as protagonists of British Army recruitment videos.

2.2 Removing 'Femininities'

Just one of the *This Is Belonging* videos has a female narrator, in 'Will I be listened to in the army?' (Army Jobs 2018a). The video opens with a pink and blue colour scheme, as the narrator states how she "grew up with brothers" and "always played sports", After initially dismissing the army as a career choice, perceiving it to be 'male-dominated', the narrator states her disillusionment with her 'normal job' as men talked over her, prompting her to reconsider and join the army. At this point the colour scheme changes to a 'gender-neutral' grey and pale green palate, while the narrator states "All that matters is you're good at your job… It feels good to finally have my voice heard." This constructs the Army as an egalitarian, almost post-gender space, in stark contrast with the sexist 'civilian' office space. Nonetheless, the narrator's references to her brothers and sports arguably relate to King's category of 'honourary men'. Since masculinity is positioned above femininity in the gender hierarchy, it is generally easier to portray traditionally masculine traits as 'gender-neutral'. This relates back to the theoretical/methodological difficulty in locating 'gender', or masculinities or femininities, within institutions like the military, while inevitably contributing to the production of 'sexgender' (Stern and Zalewski 2009). It is similarly difficult for the Army, a traditionally masculinised institution, to depict itself as 'gender-neutral'. Hence, it is interesting to observe its attempts to do so.

A more recent British Army recruitment video, from outside the *This Is Belonging* campaign, has continued these themes. 'A Soldier is a Soldier' opens with militarised paraphernalia and an unseen narrator stating, "what's it like, being a female soldier, I'm often

asked. I wouldn't know, I answer," (Army Jobs 2021). At the end of the video, the phrase is repeated, adding "I, am a soldier." This extends from the egalitarian depiction of the Army within 'Will I be listened to in the army?' of an army without sexism, to one ostensibly *without gender*, perhaps akin to Haraway's "utopian dream" of a "monstrous world without gender", achieved by moving beyond the Western tradition of hierarchical dualisms (2013, 116). Sandwiched between this narration is a variety of comparative images. An army boot stamps on a pouch reading 'BEACH BODY RATIONS' and 'Low Calories', while the voiceover states "I'm not issued 'Beach Body Rations',". The image cuts to a rifle with a small sparkly trigger, which changes to a regular trigger, picked up by a woman's hand, as the voiceover adds "Or rifles with easy-pull triggers for smaller hands." Finally, she adds "And you won't find any signs on the toilets out here because on operations, there's no such thing as the ladies' team,"; there is a shot of snow, and then a person's feet shown in brown boots with pink laces. A foot stamps, and the laces change to brown.

Therefore, the video aims to establish a clear dichotomy: not between men and women, but between (sexist, undesirable) civilian life and (egalitarian, desirable) military life. This follows a clear trend of the British Armed Forces presenting themselves as far better for gender equality than the civilian sphere; as far back as March 1999, the British Armed Forces Minister announced that "Every day is International Women's Day in the modern Armed Forces," (in Woodward and Winter 2004, 279). Even the video description uses the power of three to hammer this point in: "Equal pay. Equal Opportunities. Equal expectations." The video uses intertextuality to speak to specific cultural moments the intended British audience would likely recognise. For example, an infamous advert for weight loss meal replacements and supplements was banned in the UK for its controversial caption: 'Are you beach body ready?' (Bearne 2015), as written on the fake rations pouch and derided by the female voiceover. The rifle references how products are often designed and marketed differently for women than men,

which can be seen as patronising (as the video suggests), while thanks to a so-called 'pink tax' these products often also cost more.

However, once again we return to the problem of whether the 'gender-neutral' is possible, or if by being 'just a soldier', the video's narrator is instead constructed as an 'honourary man' (King 2016). Returning to the dearth of women within the live action 2018 *This Is Belonging* videos, it seems in these narratives, military masculinity is constructed in broader terms, to encompass elements traditionally coded as feminine such as emotions. Meanwhile, the narrator of 'A Soldier' is constructed as tough and capable. Following Hutchings, the concept of masculinity is flexible through a logic of contrast, allowing changes, for example to incorporate 'emotions', "to make sense in terms of familiar contrasts between higher and lower, normal and deviant and hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes (2008, 30). Complementary to this is the logic of contradiction: crucially, masculinity discourses are united in being not feminine (*ibid.*). Hence, to facilitate this evolution of military masculinities, women can no longer be depicted as expressing traditionally feminine traits. Likewise, it is interesting to note how the Muslim protagonists of both faith-related videos are male, or the 'Can I be Gay' narrator is a white man; perhaps depicting individuals with multiple marginalised identities would be considered going too far for diversity somehow, beyond what the military discourse can accommodate.

Just over a year before 'A Soldier is a Soldier' was published, the Army published a video to answer "common questions recruiters hear" about being a woman in the army (Army Jobs 2019a). For example, the question to "Will I have to share a room or tent with men?" is answered, as in *A Soldier*, that on operations "you may end up sharing accommodation" – yet it adds that *always* in training, and *whenever possible* on exercise or operations, "men and women will have separate accommodations." Meanwhile, the general images in *A Soldier* tend to portray extreme or uncomfortable conditions (snowing, flooding, mud), yet a question asked

in the other video is "Will I always be cold, muddy and uncomfortable?" implying that to many potential female recruits, such environs are not appealing – and the answer is also that "Most of your day-to-day life in the army won't involve this." Questions about access to period products also show that different bodies have different requirements. Therefore, while not all women may require a rifle trigger for smaller hands (just as how not all women get a period), this was perhaps not the best example of sexism – indeed, women often suffer due to products being designed for and tested on male bodies. For example, women in the Ukrainian Army have experienced issues in accessing correctly fitting shoes and uniforms since the Russian invasion of Crimea (Boersma 2016); yet equally, there was backlash after female Ukrainian troops were made to march in heels (Al Jazeera 2021) – the solution cannot be to treat all bodies the same, but forcing women to wear the traditionally 'feminine' shoe was also demeaning and inappropriate.

Moreover, a study on "gender differences in the physical demands of British Army recruit training" concluded that female recruits experienced additional cardiovascular strain, which "may increase fatigue and predisposition to overuse musculoskeletal injury" (Blacker, Wilkinson and Rayson 2009, 811). This further suggests that, beyond 'gender equality', treating all bodies *equally* does not necessarily treat them *equitably*. Meanwhile, although research into inappropriate behaviour in the British Armed Forces is overall lacking, a 2019 report found that "the data that does exist points to an unacceptable level of inappropriate behaviour and a sub-optimal system for dealing with it when it does occur,", and that female and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people were 'overrepresented' in the Service Complaints system, supporting the view that female and BAME personnel are disproportionately subject to bullying, harassment and discrimination (Wigston 2019, 4, 8). This suggests that the statement "A soldier is a soldier" serves to not only obscure differences between soldiers, but also the differential treatment of soldiers.

The balance between egalitarianism and denying difference between different identities is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find. Recent recruitment videos have aimed to present the British Army as so modern and egalitarian that gender differences do not exist, but in doing so, they have narrowed the range of acceptable behaviours from women, prompting them to perhaps become 'honourary men' instead (King 2016), to avoid emasculating the military (Pin-Fat and Stern 2005). In general, the influence of the hierarchical dichotomies through which the world can be understood is so strong that constructing a 'non-gendered' narrative, for example, is extremely tough. The Army has thereby attempted to emphasise not differences between men/women, but the military/civil. The final chapter will therefore unpack the Army's positioning within/against the 'civilian' world.

Chapter 3: Constructing the Combatant

Throughout its recruiting campaigns, the Army is consistently depicted as decidedly separate from and superior to the 'civilian' world. For example, in 'A Soldier Is a Soldier', and 'Will I be listened to in the army?', this arises through the 'sexist' civilian world, including workplaces like offices, being pitted against the Army, constructed as a modern, egalitarian employer where gender differences do not matter (Army Jobs 2021, 2018a). However, given that feminist scholarship has found that the "military identity is produced through its continuous separation from a civilian other, but also through gender" (Strand 2021, 46), is it possible for the Army to make the discursive move to present itself as gender-neutral by using this same separation from a civilian other? This final chapter thereby analyses how the Army is depicted in relation to the 'civilian' world, as against, above, within or replacing it.

Significantly, the 'civilian' is an expressly gendered category, reiteratively structured by the dyadic relation of men as protector/combatant and women as protected/civilian, constructing women as "the population who, by definition, take no part in the fighting" (Kinsella 2005, 266). This is exemplified by Pin-Fat and Stern's analysis of responses to the question 'who is Jessica Lynch', an American female soldier whose rescue in the Iraq War received intense media attention through a Pentagon-led propaganda campaign. The authors find her to be scripted as both "the possible 'masculine' soldier/hero and the impossible 'feminine' girl-next-door", a 'female Rambo' with private dreams of domesticity (2005, 28). This follows the co-constitutive dichotomies between men/women, protector/protected, political/personal, with women as the protected object of war, not its subject. The presence of women in British Army recruitment videos can thereby be read as a bold, disruptive move against these powerful dichotomies. Alternatively, the claim "There are no 'female soldiers' in the British Army" (Army Jobs 2021), alongside the visual accompaniments of moving from elements of the civilian/feminine – either problematic (e.g. diet culture) or relatively harmless

(pink sparkly laces) – to the aspirational military/masculine (a large gun, brown boot laces), successfully exorcises the 'female' from inside the military's boundaries.

The *This Is Belonging* campaign similarly distinguishes between the military and 'civilian' worlds by constructing the Army as an egalitarian utopia against the repressive 'civilian' sphere. In 'Can I practice my faith in the army?', the Muslim narrator describes how it became 'harder' to practice his faith as he grew up, stating "Many jobs wouldn't give you a chance to pray", as animated pub and office spaces are pictured onscreen (Army Jobs 2018a). Comparatively, the Army allows him to observe religious practices, even on operations. As Louise and Sangster criticise, the video depicts a simplistic, stereotyped Muslim community, while suggesting to young Muslim people that they will be mistreated in civilian society is unhelpful (2019, 25). In other videos from the campaign, allegedly only within the Army (and not in the 'civilian' world) can recruits improve their physical fitness, or express emotions.

Other recent recruitment videos have continued this theme. 'Army confidence lasts a lifetime' shows a young white male soldier determinedly marching forwards while various 'civilian' stereotypes try to entice him with questionable sources of 'confidence' (Army Jobs 2020). A very muscular man promises him "instant gains" through his "workout plan", while three other young people try to convince the soldier to "come out" and have a "quick drink". A final man announces an "unboxing" in celebration of "fast fashion", while "instant likes" are further proposed against an increasingly discordant soundtrack. Finally, the soldier is affectionately knocked on the back of the head by a black male colleague, who encourages him by saying "c'mon mate we're nearly there." The narrator states, "Lot of things can give you confidence for a little while. But confidence that lasts a lifetime? There's one place you'll find that." Yet again, the video depicts homosocial bonding, with racial (if not gender) diversity, in this case to provide encouragement, facilitating 'confidence'. Significantly, previous comparisons had largely focused on civilian work environments like offices or service jobs,

whereas the 'Confidence' video presents the Army as superior more generally. The Army is depicted as more than just an employer, and the focus is on the horizontal bonding between soldiers.

Meanwhile, 'Flood' is a recent advert released alongside the Army's latest slogan: 'Nothing can do what a soldier can do' (Army Jobs 2023a). In part this slogan references the importance of human soldiers in the face of advanced technology; a slightly earlier video, 'The Army of the Future', initially shows a cyborg running through a desolate wasteland, but as the screen reads 'the army of the future still needs you', human soldiers are also shown running through the wasteland (Army Jobs 2022). The 'Flood' depicts soldiers wading through waist-high water, with flooded cars. The protagonist, a black male soldier, identifies a family trapped in a car, personally rescuing and comforting the baby, while the mother is comforted by a white female soldier. This tenderness reinforces the importance of human connection, instead of cold technology. The scene can also be interpreted as disrupting the (white, male) hegemonic military masculinity, particularly given the tenderness expressed by both soldiers. However, since the protagonist/rescuer is still the male soldier, it may not be so disruptive of the 'heroic combat soldier' imaginary.

Meanwhile, within the 'Flood', 'nothing can do what a soldier can do' can also be interpreted as no *one* can do what a soldier can do', since soldiers are the only rescuers shown in the video. This was subsequently criticised by emergency service workers, given their lack of representation, which "[defies] the reality of civil-military operations where military personnel support, rather than replace civilian firefighters and medics" (ForcesWatch 2023). The advert also faced criticism from ex-military personnel. Richard Barrons, a former general, worried about misrepresentation: "There might be a sense that the Army is selling itself as that's what it does, it does flood relief, and not what an army really is which is an organisation that does industrial-scale violence, that kills people and breaks their stuff, faster than it can be

done to us, in the best interests of our nation, and in accordance with the law," (in ForcesWatch 2023). This points to broader tensions in the recruitment media regarding the Army's self-positioning in relation to the 'civilian' world. On the one hand, it aims to strongly differentiate itself from the 'civilian', presented as not only better than but entirely separate from. On the other hand, videos like 'Flood' show the soldiers taking on rescue roles, acting more like peacebuilders or civilian rescuers like firefighters than the idealised 'combat' soldier. Comparisons both against and within the 'civilian' sphere seem paradoxical, yet they can both be partly understood as resulting from the professionalisation of the military. The Army positions itself *above* 'civilian' jobs due to being in direct competition with these jobs. Meanwhile, any attempts to emulate or ingratiate itself *within* the 'civilian' sphere can be read as the 'domestication' of the Army (Rech 2020), or the militarisation of everyday life, to again make the Army seem more desirable, while also recognising that soldiers will need to reintegrate into 'civilian' life and likely need 'professional' qualifications. Hence, even as the Army attempts to cleanly demarcate the boundaries between the 'military' and 'civilian', they become increasingly blurred.

The 2019 *Your Army Needs You* campaign further contrasts the Army against the 'civilian' by presenting traits usually taken to be detrimental and arguing that they could be considered as positives in the Army. For example, one advert targets 'gamers' for their 'stamina'; another praises office 'pranksters' for their 'spirit' (Army Jobs 2019b). Another video shows two shop workers complaining about their colleague being too slow as she stacks trolleys and sweeps outside (Army Jobs 2019c). The video cuts to a helicopter, and a soldier states, "feels like a perfectionist to me", as if over the radio, and a soldier on the ground yells "always looking for someone like that here". Although not directly part of the *This Is Belonging* campaign, the adverts can be interpreted as expanding the theme of belonging beyond just

(homo)social bonding, with people belonging in the army by virtue of their desirable character traits – traits that the Army values far more than the 'civilian' world does.

The videos were accompanied by controversial posters in the style of the influential World War One recruitment poster 'Lord Kitchener Wants You', with slogans such as 'Snowflakes: Your Army Needs You and Your Compassion', or 'selfie addicts' for their 'confidence' (Mohdin 2019). The campaign was considered a success: by the end of its first month, visits to the Army Jobs website were up 93% year on year, and applications increased 71% (Parsons 2020). However, the face of the 'Snowflakes' poster (a young white man) said he planned to resign after his image was used allegedly without his permission[1], following right-wing criticism of the campaign and ridicule from colleagues and the public (Drewett 2019). More recently, a collection of retired senior officers wrote an open letter to the Secretary of State to express their 'disgust' at the Army's push for 'diversity', arguing that "Within a military culture, what is to be sought above everything else is the delivery of 'Fighting Power' in order to defeat the King's enemies, together with the greatest uniformity of excellence and diversity of opinion," (Thompson et al. 2024). Ironically, this argument also serves to differentiate the Army from the 'civilian', but by arguing that the Army should not prioritise matters like 'diversity' above 'defence'. The retired officers collectively have not served since around the late 1990s, but their criticisms highlight the difficulty faced by the Army in navigating between traditionally hegemonic military masculinities and new potential identities. Moreover, their prioritisation of 'Fighting Power' further points to the significance of 'combat', evoking its conventional construction as boots-on-the-ground, 'fighting enemies'.

Thereby, the alternative constructions of 'combat' within recent recruitment media further convey the apparent existential crisis of the Army. In trying to investigate Richard

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[1] The Ministry of Defence responded that "the volunteers gave their permission to appear on TV and in the posters and were fully informed about the striking language and how it would resonate with young people with a wide variety of valuable skills." (Burgess 2019)

Barrons' statement regarding the Army's role as "an organisation… that kills people", I was unable to find how many people (scripted as either civilian or combatant) have recently been killed by British soldiers, only finding various statistics on deaths *within* the British armed forces. Hence, it was impossible to assess how accurate his depiction of the Army is, in terms of how many soldiers have taken lives; regardless, a detailed comparison between the representations in recruitment media and 'lived experiences' of soldiers is beyond the scope and framework of this paper. That said, it is notable that the campaigns at times used the stories of 'real people' (as in 'Can I be Gay in the Military?'), ostensibly presenting a 'truer' depiction of life in the military, while also deliberately moving away from depicting specific army roles (Terry, Lally and Batten 2019), leaving greater uncertainty or even misrepresentation over what soldiers *do*. Barrons' notion of soldiers as those who *take* lives (while risking their own lives) is clearly in sharp contrast with the civilian rescues in recent British Army recruitment videos, such as 'Flood', where instead of taking lives, they are saving them. Relating back to the ideal of 'combat' in connection to the *heroic* soldier (Millar and Tidy 2017), these scenes of rescue could portray a reconstruction of 'combat' as that which makes *heroism* possible, through depictions of the (still masculine) heroic soldier/'combatant' saving lives instead of taking them.

Guns are a ubiquitous motif in British Army recruitment media, and perfectly emulate this potential existential crisis. As Jester outlines, guns are a "military reminder", without which the advertisements could be for "orienteering or camping", while by being held but not used, they represent "the possibility of violence whilst positioning this as undesirable or unlikely," (2021, 63). In this way, guns are a signifier for 'combat', which divides the military from the civilian sphere, while not using them avoids potentially alienating (presently civilian) would-be recruits and contributes to the positioning of the Army as life savers rather than life takers. Comparatively, retired colonel Richard Kemp claimed that the passive *This Is Belonging*

campaign would not encourage recruitment: "the main group of people who are interested in joining… are going to be attracted by images of combat" (in Weaver 2018). For the hawkish general, mere presence of guns is not sufficient to signify 'combat'; perhaps he wants shots fired, or a greater array of weapons displayed.

Further reinforcing the significance of 'combat', Welland writes, "That soldiers can wield legitimate violence in part defines them as soldiers. Underlying this, there is an implicit assumption that violence that is legitimate is also controlled," (2013, 896). Hence, discipline is deeply important for the British Army, "purported to be essential for combat effectiveness" (*ibid.*, 895). She situates discipline within the British military masculinity, implicitly juxtaposed against a hysterical, out-of-control woman, but also against an excessively violent, hypermasculinised soldier; discipline therefore ensures the 'right' amount of masculinity for the liberal soldier (*ibid.*, 897). Alongside jovial and jokey behaviour, discipline is apparent throughout the recruitment media, such as with soldiers responding immediately to hand signals, no dialogue necessary (e.g. Army Jobs 2018b).

Meanwhile, Atherton notes how the barracks are both highly regulated and domesticated (2009). A recent recruitment video, titled 'GRWM: Army Edition', conveys these practices of discipline and domestication, as it follows a young white male soldier as he gets ready, making his bed and getting dressed (Army Jobs 2024). All of his movements are performed exactly and with care, from neatening his opened curtains to positioning his beret. GRWM stands for 'Get Ready With Me' and is typically used as a video title by social media influencers and bloggers. The military, traditionally hypermasculine, must also encompass these 'feminine' modes of practice associated with the domestic, such as cleaning and cooking (Atherton 2009, 827). Likewise, although the soldier featured in the 'GRWM: Army Edition' video is male, most 'GRWM' videos on social media are by women. Unlike the dominance of male soldiers in recruitment media generally, the use of a male protagonist here could thereby

be considered as breaking gender stereotypes. Alternatively, these inclusionary, domesticated videos can be seen as the "active militarisation of civil society" (Manchanda and Higate 2019, 30). Through its title and casual, portrait format, the 'GRWM' video can thereby be considered as an effort to 'domesticate' the Army as defined by Rech (2020), in the sense of the militarisation of everyday life.

The militarisation of civil society can also be seen in recent British Army ads which utilise second person. For example, 'You Belong Here – Evacuation' actively invites the viewer in, with the voiceover asking "What's your gut saying. Do nothing? Or help?", as scared civilians are helped by soldiers and airlifted out of a field (Army Jobs 2023b). This immersive advertisement emulates what Stahl terms "the interactive war", within which "recruitment… has expanded beyond its normal boundaries to become a generalised cultural condition" (2010, 48). While this still includes the appeal to join the military, the interactive war more broadly invites "virtual recruits", "a product of the demilitarization of the citizen as subject of the military on the one hand, and the remilitarization of the citizen as the object of the military on the other" (*ibid.*). Louise and Sangster similarly criticise the promotion of individual fulfilment and diversity in the Army for depoliticising its military purpose, distracting from scrutinising the legitimacy of military action (2019, 5). Hence, militarisation is normalised and depoliticised, and civic attention is turned away from questioning the military, and the borders between the military/civilian spheres are further blurred.

By examining how the British Army presents itself in relation to the 'civilian', once again the 'messiness' and internal contradictions of the recruitment media become apparent. What could be a simple message of greater gender or racial equality within the British Army than in the 'civilian' world is complicated by many factors, from the Army's own reputation as a bastion for a narrow, hegemonic military masculinity, to the very gendered nature of the traditional military/civilian divide. Furthermore, even as the Army attempts to position itself

as superior to and decidedly distinct from the 'civilian', it simultaneously aims to present itself as 'peaceful' and thereby perhaps more 'civil', through depicting life-saving rather than potentially life-taking events. This points to intense messiness and contradictions within the recruitment media, possibly even constituting an 'existential crisis' of the British Army. It can also be conceived as shifting the normative ideal of 'combat' away from its traditional notion as simply 'fighting', focusing more on a broader notion of 'heroism'. Finally, the inclusionary, domesticated or interactive elements of recruitment videos also point to the (re)militarisation of the 'civilian' sphere, further upsetting any attempts to construct clear borders between the military/civilian.

Conclusion: Lingering in Anxiety

This thesis opened with the description of a British Army recruitment advertisement, that "There are no 'female soldiers' in the British Army. Just soldiers." (Army Jobs 2021). I have since explored the depictions of 'soldiers' across recent British Army recruitment campaigns to convey the discursive impossibilities of constructing soldiers as 'just soldiers'. Instead, multiple intersecting identities are exposed, implicitly or explicitly relying on their dichotomised Other for meaning, such as military/civilian and masculine/feminine. The 'masculine' warrior identity is expanded beyond the white, straight hypermasculine, to incorporate different races, faiths and sexualities, while emotions are welcomed and helping is prioritised over 'combat'. However, these discursive moves may sit uncomfortably with both conservative and leftist viewers, who for different reasons could view the military as misrepresenting itself. Meanwhile, the 'feminine' is overall unsuccessfully incorporated – "There are no female soldiers in the British Army."

This is further complicated by the Army's uneasy positioning within/against the 'civilian', historically co-constructed with the 'female' against the male-military. On the one hand, the Army is consistently presented as superior to the 'civilian', yet its role as a liberal military force in 'peacetime' is unclear, particularly since the recruitment discourses have moved away from traditional imaginings of 'combat' towards a civilised/'civilianised' 'peacebuilder' identity. At the same time, the expansive recruitment campaigns can be seen to 'militarise' everyday life, through their accessible, inclusionary messaging and dissemination through social media.

However, acknowledging Stern and Zalewski's assessment of the 'failure' of feminist IR (2009), I argue that critical scholars and recruitment media creators face a parallel problem regarding gendered identities. As critical scholars have shown, the theoretical framework of hierarchical dyads does powerfully correspond to the broader Western understanding and

construction of the world and identities within. However, while trying to investigate and expose these constructions, perhaps inevitably we contribute to their power, further reifying and materialising them. The analytic strength of these constructed gendered hierarchies also ostensibly presents just two options for recruitment messaging: they can show women engaging in traditionally 'masculine' endeavours and be criticised for exorcising femininity, or by showing women with feminine traits would be criticised for furthering sexist stereotypes. This mirrors the "creative tightrope" that the creators of the *This Is Belonging* campaign professed to walk, between "glorifying war or being soft and politically correct" (Terry, Lally and Batten 2019). Critical scholars have likewise struggled to decisively assess whether the more 'progressive' messaging of the Army's recruitment campaigns can be accepted, or if this is a fundamental misrepresentation of the institution.

By welcoming Stern and Zalewski's invitation to "linger longer in anxiety" (2009, 625), this thesis has not professed to find a solution to these problems. Nor has it attempted to decisively determine the extent to which British Army recruitment media can successfully disrupt these dichotomies. This follows in the footsteps of other scholars who have critically analysed British Army recruitment media, recognising its 'messiness' through being able to be read simultaneously as either progressive or regressive (Baker 2023, 456), without aiming to 'problem-solve' the military's discursive power (Jester 2021, 70). However, through a novel discussion of how certain dichotomies shape and are shaped by discourses within the recruitment videos, I hope to have furthered this difficult yet deeply important conversation about gender and the military.

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