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Bronzed, buffed and tattooed:

the new brand of soldier shaped and shipped by popular culture

ABSTRACT

A new brand of soldier is emerging from today's popular culture milieu, and this challenges how we perceive, understand and define the modern-day professional soldier. Images of the sculpted physique, often tanned and stenciled, adorn the screen and page with increasing frequency from 'Command' in popular television show Biggest Loser to the hyper-masculine characters in The Hurt Locker. This paper will examine the evolving 'brand' of the soldier and the parallel wave of bronzed, buffed and tattooed lookalikes. While a growing percentage of soldiers are female and while physical fitness is valued by female soldiers and male soldiers, masculine images dominate the representation of the soldier, and tensions arise when women appear to transgress this space. We explore examples of gender stereotypes and military branding in contemporary popular culture, including the response to the death of New Zealand soldier Jacinda Baker in 2012, and the public image of Australian Victoria Cross recipient Ben Roberts-Smith.

KEYWORDS

masculinity
military
female soldier
branding
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A new brand of soldier is emerging from today's popular culture environment. This new brand impacts upon the way the modern-day professional soldier is seen and defined in mass media constructions of the soldier image, constructions that serve to shape public opinion. Images of the massive sculpted physique of the modern soldier, often bronzed and tattooed, dominate mass media. While a growing percentage of soldiers are female and while physical fitness is valued by female soldiers and male soldiers alike, the representation of the soldier remains dominated by masculine images, and tensions arise when women are seen to transgress this space. This paper will assess the evolving 'brand' of today's soldier through

television fitness trainer representing a version of the military fitness trainer to a screen audience.

WOMEN AND THE BRAND: JACINDA BAKER

Contemporary first world armies are no longer the preserve of the male soldier, yet constructed masculinity has continued to dominate the soldier brand in popular culture, in some cases with disastrous results.² Women deploy on operations with men and in an environment where nearly all military jobs are open to women (Cawkill et al 2009)³ they face increasing risks of becoming casualties. In contrast to their former roles in combat support or combat services support there is increased probability of women becoming engaged in the high-risk combat domain of war, a fact that is compounded by the fluid nature of the battlespace in the early twenty-first century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the United States 10 to 14 percent of veterans are female and casualty statistics reflect a growth in female casualties (Hassija et al 2012).

Compared to the United States, Australia and New Zealand had smaller numbers of troops actively engaged in the war on terror and far fewer casualties, but the public focus on Lance Corporal Jacinda Baker, New Zealand's first female soldier killed in Afghanistan, shows the participation of female soldiers in war is still a culturally sensitive issue (Campbell, Harper and Shuttleworth 2012). Canadian-based New Zealand filmmaker Barbara Sumner Burstyn was undiplomatic in her Facebook comments about the death of Baker, incorrectly suggesting the medic had killed innocent people and had helped invade Afghanistan for its oil.⁴ These ad hominem comments made just after Baker's death were widely seen as being in poor taste and lacking consideration for Baker's family and friends. They caused a widespread public outcry and rapid online responses by over 20,000 people and were condemned as erroneous by commentators from across the political spectrum, resulting in a speedy apology by Sumner Burstyn. But the online criticisms of Sumner Burstyn were conducted in a disturbing environment of threats of sexual violence and assault ('Apology over female soldier comments' 2012'; 'Barbara Sumner-Burstyn and the war in Afghanistan' 2012). Much of the community response was disproportionate, violent, and

² Wadham (2013) explores the nuances of the Australian Defence Force masculine bonding culture in the context of the 2011 Skype scandal, in which an officer cadet having consensual sex was filmed without her permission or knowledge.

³ For example in 2009, in Australia 92% of defence force jobs were open to women (Cawkill et al 2009: 16, whereas in New Zealand all defence force jobs were open to women (Cawkill et al 2009: 27).

⁴ The New Zealand military deployment in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Province was tasked with reconstruction and development, rather than war fighting.

imposing tattooed physique and described the fitness routine that he followed (Cordingley 2012). But the emphasis was on a body shaped for the utilitarian purpose of war, rather than for the visual gratification of others or for his own personal satisfaction.

Roberts-Smith had become a national icon as a representation of the brand of the modern soldier hero, and his status as an icon was further strengthened when he was named Australia Father of the Year in August 2013. His physically powerful muscular form was obviously admired by many but was not immune to mockery. In one instance flippant criticism of his physical form was to lead to popular reaction against those seen to be unjustifiably denigrating this popular and likeable national hero. In 2012 the hosts of Channel 10's television program *The Circle* were to face a barrage of hostility after presenters Yumi Stynes and George Negus jokingly disparaged both Roberts-Smith's intelligence and his sexual abilities. These comments were not based on known facts, an interview with him or on any of his public statements, but on the presenters' perception of who he might be based on a photograph of his muscled soldier body undertaking resistance training in a swimming pool. The ridicule was not of Roberts-Smith as a person but of Roberts-Smith as a representative muscled soldier body, drawn from implicit assumptions about overly muscled men. Community outrage led both presenters to apologise quickly as advertisers withdrew their sponsorship for the program (Levy 2012). Although Roberts-Smith himself was reportedly surprised by the comments, he was unconcerned, and subsequently spoke to the presenters and accepted their personal apology (Styles and Clarke 2012). As a hero he might have a public identity, but he was also a private individual. While the pejorative comments had been made by both a male and a female presenter, the majority of public response and online abuse was directed at the female presenter focusing on her gender and her partly Asian ancestry, raising concerning questions about both sexism and racism (Freedman 2012). The apparent level of community concern regarding this issue far outweighed any concern that Roberts-Smith expressed, and it seems strange that so many members of the public felt a need to 'protect' such a physically big man who was not only an elite Special Air Service soldier and a popular national hero, but also a soldier who had convincingly demonstrated his ability to defend himself and others in the face of far more dangerous threats than casual media comments.

It is not only the strong muscled figure of the actual soldier that is celebrated in contemporary Australian representations of the new soldier brand. Popular weight loss and fitness reality Channel Ten television show *The Biggest Loser* (2013) has a team of trainers

replicated and given strength through its promotion in the world of fictional media and entertainment.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary world, it is often more about looking like the brand of a soldier or performing like a soldier than actually being a soldier, and the soldier brand has become so desirable that individuals even falsify their identity to assume that of the soldier. A noted United States example was high profile former Marine Captain Rick Duncan, one of numerous anti-war veterans of the Iraq War. Unfortunately for those whose elections he supported, it was revealed that Duncan was actually Richard Strandlof, a civilian who had faked his military identity (Gehrman 2010: 75-76). The brand of the soldier was intensely appealing in the contested world of American politics, where military masculinity embedded in past military service granted higher levels of legitimacy for the anti-war activist.

In a muscle conscious popular culture it is apparent that the hyper masculine muscular soldier has become the dominant variant of the soldier representation. At a time when female soldiers are inspired by the career of soldiers such as Jacinda Baker and when female soldiers are increasingly taking on more roles and are facing greater risks in combat, it is ironic that the image of the muscular male soldier has only continued to grow in significance. This is a figure far removed from the popular representation of the soldier in earlier conflicts, but is one that will retain significance through the mass popular culture images of Ben Roberts-Smith as a real hero, and The Commando and other actors as his soldier avatars.

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