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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 'Commando' in popular television show The 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

an examination of case studies of the media representation of actual soldiers, and of the bronzed, buffed and tattooed imitators whose identity is based on the soldier brand that popular culture presents to millions of consumers.

The evolving brand of the soldier and changing popular culture that emphasises fitness and musculature have contributed to the popularity of these images of a hyper masculine male, a figure that has become pervasive. Hegemonic masculinity can adapt and resist change (Connell 2005), and the heavily muscled soldier of today differs significantly from the average soldier of the past. In earlier times, soldiers were not necessarily physically large and many slightly built soldiers were enlisted.¹ Yet late twentieth century mass media constructions of the action-man warrior personified by actors from Sylvester Stallone to Arnold Schwarzenegger have popularised the image of the muscled male soldier (Tasker 2002), and in the far more body conscious twenty-first century, such media constructions of the soldier's body have helped shape a new reality. Compared to other male workers, the role of the soldier requires a high degree of physical strength, and this creates a new highly masculine body (Godfrey, Lilley and Brewis 2012). Many of today's increasingly body conscious soldiers work hard to develop their physiques, to the point where the masculine military body as costume itself imperceptibly becomes part of the fashion of war (Smith and Gehrman, 2014). Soldiers are certainly more likely to be male, but the validity of this male dominated image is open to scrutiny in the more diverse military of today, when the body is a personal brand and a body-image centric culture should allow for differences.

To understand the significance of the new brand of soldier, it is necessary to consider the notion of branding and how it pervades contemporary society. Today's world is highly exposed to visual stimuli, and images of a given brand are continually put before us through an expanding range of media. As Harrison notes, brands need to be an accurate reflection of an organisation and its own performance, identity and the style that set it apart from competitors (Harrison 2011). Brands can reflect the identity of a commercial organisation or a public entity and can also relate to an individual who presents a specific identity or a specific unique persona. Personal brands need to be authentic and are not fixed, as they are linked to the evolution of the individual's interests and sense of identity (Rampersad 2009). In today's celebrity obsessed world, human brands and personalities can generate their own momentum. This allows the product of the soldier to be replicated as the muscled male image whether as actual soldier, Hollywood actor playing the part or celebrity

¹ The minimum 34 inch chest measurement for Australian First World War soldiers in 1914 indicates a very different male body (Carlyon 2001: 119).

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.

appeared dominated by assumptions that the traduced memory of female soldiers needed greater protection than that of male soldiers.

Baker died in a roadside bomb attack that killed two of her fellow (male) soldiers whose equally tragic deaths did not generate the same level of debate. It appears that the community accepts the life and death of male soldiers far more readily than the life and death of female soldiers. While this might change in time, the popular culture idea of the soldier is still greatly influenced by masculine stereotypes. The media avidly reported that Baker enjoyed both boxing and baking, reflecting the contrast between what in the civilian world were stereotypically masculine and feminine pursuits. For female soldiers, there is nothing especially masculine about undertaking boxing or other martial arts, but this takes on greater significance for a civilian audience, and was the initial focus of Sumner Burstyn's Facebook comment. As Butler says, gender is performative, and is a constructed identity (Butler 1999: 178-179). So too is the identity of the soldier, and while female soldiers know that they are soldiers, the community that surrounds them can be ambivalent. It seems that female soldiers will be obliged to continue to perform their roles for far longer before acceptance as part of the brand.

BRONZED BUFFED AUSTRALIAN MALES-BEN ROBERTS-SMITH AND THE COMMANDO

More than ever, the male muscled body is seen to exemplify the soldier. Soldiers have long been required to maintain physical fitness, but contemporary soldiers avidly pump iron, and lots of it, as a glance at the physique of Afghanistan war hero Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith demonstrates. In his official photograph on the Defence Department website, he is a figure far removed from earlier representations of the soldier and he constitutes a new iteration of the soldier brand. Roberts-Smith was one of three Australian soldiers awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia for his heroism in Afghanistan, and he attracted far greater attention than the other awardees. Both his family background as the brother of an opera singer and the son of a Supreme Court Judge differentiated him from the popular expectations about the ordinary Australian soldier, but what most clearly marked him apart was his muscular 202 centimetre form. He dwarfs all who appear in photographs around him, from whether his fellow Victoria Cross recipients, his wife and children, or the Queen. In 2012 he was the subject of a feature article and front-page cover in the magazine *Men's Health*. Such men's magazines play a key role in perpetuating the image of the ideal male and encouraging men to manipulate their

bodies to achieve this (Ricciardelli, Clow, and White 2010). The magazine both displayed his 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

who are fit, healthy and strong. Their bodies radiate energy as they motivate, assist, and drive the programs' contestants to lose weight and to perform feats of physical endurance that they did not believe they were capable of (Hadley 2012). One of the most popular cast members is Steve Willis, also known as The Commando. In the highly contrived context of so-called 'reality' television, his persona is military, and he frequently wears camouflage pants and a singlet in order to replicate the public's expectation of what a soldier should be. Willis is an actor who represents himself as a semi-military figure but as well as being a fit and muscular trainer, his profile reveals he actually was once a soldier, having formerly served in the Australian Army's Special Forces (<http://thebiggestloser.com.au/the-commando.htm>). His muscular physique and ability to drive those he trains on to greater feats conforms to the contemporary image of what a soldier is, or perhaps more accurately what the public believes a military fitness trainer is. If Willis actually was an Australian Army physical training instructor, his athletic form would be clad in a white polo shirt with rank badges and bright red shorts – but this would not match public expectations of the military fitness trainer. In *The Biggest Loser* he acts both as the soldier he was, and as the new entity of The Commando, a composite soldier-trainer based both on his past identity and what the producers choose to project his brand as. Of course, the Australian Defence Force also has female physical training instructors and it would be interesting to consider how successfully such a character would translate to the casting format of *The Biggest Loser*.

Those viewers of *The Biggest Loser* who see The Commando as a soldier, but who might not be convinced by a real military physical training instructor, take their understanding of what the soldier should look like from a range of sources, including film, video games and toys. Of the plethora of war films that chronicle the fictional version of the American experience of the Middle Eastern wars, Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winning Iraq War film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) exemplifies the muscular American warrior hero. The soldier's body is foregrounded in the film (Burgoyne 2012: 12-15), and Sergeant James (acted by Jeremy Renner) is a physically big character made larger by his oversized protective bomb disposal suit. The masculine image of The Commando is also supported by increasingly popular military style video games that also promote the image of the physically big soldier, and such games are popular among soldiers and would-be soldiers. This is set within the cultural base where male soldier toys used by young children have become increasingly distorted and misshapen to overemphasise the hyper masculine male form (Ricciardelli, Clow and White 2010). Thus the masculine soldier brand itself is further

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 (Gehrmann 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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