

REVIEW ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING MILITARY RECRUITMENT ADVERTISING

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Abstract: This article aims to comprehend military advertising, and suggest a methodology to evaluate its effectiveness. Recruitment advertising is a subject not widely researched. It is radically different from commercial advertising that promotes products (goods or services). This is because military advertising aims to promote a decision – an irrevocable, life-changing choice. Hence, recruitment campaigns have to be designed and fielded in a manner distinct from the usual commercial promotions. Similarly, easy ROI calculations used to assess the efficacy of commercial advertisements may not be useful to evaluate the success of military publicity. This article endorses a combination of multiple methodologies to measure effectiveness of military recruitment advertisements.

Keywords: Advertising, Effectiveness, Military, Recruitment.

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INTRODUCTION

Military recruitment advertising is the practice of using paid media to persuade potential candidates to enlist in armed forces, functioning as a critical tool for all-volunteer militaries (Fransen, 2019; Jester, 2019). This paper attempts to understand: what military advertising is, themes used for military advertising in developed countries, and the best metric to measure its success.

Military recruitment advertising sells a job opportunity to a potential candidate audience, distinguishing it from product advertising that sells consumer goods or services. Its aim is to advertise military opportunities and persuade prospective recruits to join a branch of the military (Fransen, 2019).

Recruitment advertising is therefore designed to serve two functions: increasing first, the propensity to choose military service, and second, the likelihood of an individual choosing one service over another. These marketing efforts are directed toward catching the attention of the target audience, encouraging them to consider enlisting (Fransen, 2019).

The practice is designed to insert the army into people's "consideration set," as a former US Army Deputy Chief of Personnel described it (Jester, 2019). Recruitment advertising may use recruiting staff or personnel from the armed forces offering something that appears unique and special (Fransen, 2019). The primary role of advertising is to support recruiting by influencing youth attitudes about military service (Fransen, 2019).

Following the end of conscription in the United States in 1973, advertising strategies became more important than ever as the military shifted to an all-volunteer force model (Ghilani, 2013; Ghilani, 2020). Historically, professionals from commercial advertising and public relations fields have played an important role in the planning and development of military recruitment campaigns (Maartens, 2020; Maartens & Bivins, 2020).

In India, military advertising and state-sponsored publicity campaigns evolved alongside the nation's political trajectory.

From the colonial recruitment drives of the British Empire to modern state-launched multimedia drives, military messaging has consistently served as an instrument of national integration, patriotic mobilization, and public relations. While official recruitment advertisements are designed to attract capable young citizens into the armed forces, they also function as powerful cultural artifacts that shape public perception, instil nationalist sentiment, and project state power (Nakra, 2023).

RECRUITMENT THEMES

In the 1970s, post-conscription, US recruitment advertising shifted from patriotic duty to promises of individuality, exotic travel, and personal growth (Maartens, 2020; Strand & Berndtsson, 2015). US Army advertisements also co-opted social movement language, targeting racial minorities and women by positioning service as a non-racial meritocratic utopia (Ghilani, 2020). A content analysis of 125 US military commercials found the majority employed transformational rather than informational strategy, using high-involvement message strategies (rational, ego, social) (Park et al., 2017).

US Army commercials presented occupational motivations more frequently than institutional motivations, though information about the recruiting process and military lifestyle - the top two information needs of potential recruits - were not addressed prominently (Park et al., 2017). Appeals to biblical texts, national cultural symbols, and historical continuity also serve as key mechanisms of influence in US military advertising (Yasnikov, 2025).

On the other hand, peacetime recruiters in Britain appealed to material benefits like pay, travel, and recreational opportunities rather than abstract concepts of duty (Maartens, 2020). Recruitment messages in UK also draw on the war-fighting tradition, while Swedish advertising presents soldiering as connected to altruistic activities and peacekeeping (Strand & Berndtsson, 2015).

Both Swedish and British recruitment discourses focus on marketized rhetoric and images of individual self-fulfilment and self-enterprise (Strand & Berndtsson, 2015). Recruitment campaigns in both countries sell

the dreams of consumers rather than

products, tailoring messaging to the demands, attitudes, and dreams of young potential recruits (Strand & Berndtsson, 2015). Canadian recruitment campaigns used themes of rescue and helpfulness to evoke culturally popular imagery while legitimizing an increased combat focus (Wegner, 2020).

Recruitment testimonials in US and Swedish campaigns share a common narrative grammar of lack, hardship, agency, and growth, promising that soldiering can redress personal deficiencies and transcend racialized, gendered, and classed limits (Stern & Strand, 2024).

Originating as a propaganda poster during the First World War, "Uncle Sam Wants You" became an icon of American recruitment history. Its legacy remains potent after decades of distance (Ghilani, 2013). Another successful campaign was the US Army's effort from the 1980s, which also saw revival in 2024, with the caption "Be All You Can Be". It was one of the most iconic advertising slogans in American history, and rebranded military service around self-actualization and individual potential (Ghilani, 2013; Yasnikov, 2025).

The campaign sacralised military service through appeals to biblical texts and constructed historical continuity through references to key national events (Yasnikov, 2025). Marketing campaigns like this were one reason the quality of the armed forces increased between the late 1970s and mid-1980s (Fransen, 2019).

In 2019, the US Army launched their "Warriors Wanted" campaign, targeting Generation Z (aged 17–24) using social media and digital advertisements (Gauthier, 2023). It succeeded in drawing youth to enlist by presenting the Army as an opportunity for self-actualization empowered by connections to American cultural identity, using provocative taglines, sanitized combat imagery, and targeted digital advertising (Gauthier, 2023).

The "Fight" campaign (Canada, 2006–2008) also merits note for successfully re-branding the Canadian Armed Forces as combat-capable while preserving popularly held beliefs about the military's role through

rescue and helpfulness themes (Wegner, 2020). The key for successful recruiting strategies lies in aligning with the wants and needs of individuals in the target demographic (McCullough, 2016).

MILITARY ADVERTISING IN INDIA

The structured use of military propaganda and recruitment appeals in the Indian subcontinent originated during the British colonial era. It was effectively employed by colonial administrators to secure manpower and loyalty. During the First World War, the British government launched extensive propaganda programs across India to encourage participation and cultivate favourable attitudes toward the war effort (Nakra, 2023).

Colonial authorities distributed illustrated posters, pamphlets, and newsletters throughout towns and rural recruiting hubs. These materials frequently framed military service through appeals to imperial duty, martial traditions, and loyalty, urging populations to fight for both India and the broader British Empire (Nakra, 2023). Concurrently, cinematic and photographic exhibitions were utilized to portray the alliance between the imperial centre and Indian troops, reinforcing the narrative of a benevolent imperial hierarchy (Nakra, 2023). These early campaigns established foundational techniques of emotional appeal, heroic imagery, and duty-bound obligation that would later influence post-colonial military communication strategies.

Following independence, the newly sovereign Republic of India inherited a professional military apparatus but faced the complex task of national consolidation. Initially, military recruitment relied largely on traditional print media, institutional outreach, and established martial community structures. The armed forces were framed as defenders of a democratic, secular republic rather than instruments of imperial expansion.

However, as the nation encountered external conflicts in 1962, 1965, and 1971, public information strategies adapted to foster national solidarity. Print advertisements in newspapers and magazines emphasized national security, career stability, and civic duty, steadily building a respected

institutional image for the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

In the twenty-first century, military advertising in India underwent a radical transformation driven by rapid technological advancements, internet penetration, and the emergence of digital media channels. Modern recruitment campaigns are no longer confined to static newspaper classifieds or roadside billboards; instead, they leverage television commercials, targeted social media advertisements, and official digital platforms (Nakra, 2023).

Contemporary military advertisements are carefully calibrated to appeal to the aspirations of tech-savvy youth (Nakra, 2023). Campaigns produced by the Ministry of Defence and individual services frequently highlight adventure, high-tech equipment, professional prestige, and personal transformation. For instance, promotional videos distributed on digital platforms depict military personnel scaling glaciers, operating advanced aviation technology, or engaging in tactical operations, framing military life as an extraordinary adventure distinct from ordinary civilian existence (Nakra, 2023).

These advertisements invoke themes of patriotism, sacrifice, and national honour (Nakra, 2023). By tapping into the high societal regard enjoyed by the armed forces – supported by public opinion surveys indicating overwhelming popular respect for military institutions – recruitment campaigns successfully position military service as the ultimate expression of citizenship and devotion to the motherland. Furthermore, tangible benefits such as guaranteed career stability, comprehensive medical care, and such other perks are prominently featured to attract recruits from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Nakra, 2023).

CINEMA AND PATRIOTISM

An indispensable dimension of military advertising and narrative construction in India is its deep intersection with popular cinema. Bollywood and regional film industries have long served as cultural extensions of state narratives, producing war epics and patriotic dramas that romanticize military life (Nakra, 2023). In recent years, there has been a surge in high-budget

military films such as *Uri: The Surgical Strike* and *Shershaah*, which celebrate contemporary military operations (Nakra, 2023).

These cinematic productions function symbiotically with formal recruitment advertising. By blending dramatic storytelling with real-world geopolitical events, films generate intense emotional resonance, reinforcing public support for defence forces and encouraging youth to enlist (Nakra, 2023).

Scholars note that while these cultural products successfully foster national unity and honour the genuine sacrifices of soldiers, they also tend to present a monolithic, uncritical portrayal of military engagements (Nakra, 2023). Complex geopolitical nuances, institutional challenges, and the darker realities of conflict are frequently sidelined in favour of heroic narratives (Nakra, 2023).

MEASURING SUCCESS

Measuring the effectiveness of advertising has long been a major challenge for marketers, economists, and researchers. As media channels have multiplied from traditional print and broadcast to complex digital ecosystems, the metrics used to evaluate campaign performance have expanded correspondingly. Determining whether advertising expenditure successfully shifts consumer perception or drives financial return requires a diverse range of key performance indicators.

These metrics span traditional exposure counts, digital behavioural actions, econometric returns, and advanced neuroscientific indicators. Evaluating and comparing these measurement approaches reveals how modern organizations assess promotional impact across cognitive, behavioural, and financial dimensions.

EXPOSURE AND REACH METRICS

Traditional advertising measurement primarily relied on quantifying audience exposure. Reach measures the total number of unique individuals or households exposed to an advertisement at least once during a specific campaign window. Frequency tracks the average number of times an individual within the target audience is exposed to the advertisement.

Together, these two figures calculate Gross Rating Points, a standard industry benchmark used in broadcast and print media planning. While GRP provides a basic understanding of market visibility, it has some limitations. It merely quantifies audience contact rather than actual cognitive processing or behavioural change. High reach and frequency ensure brand familiarity, but they fail to capture whether consumers actually noticed, understood, or responded favourably to the promotional message.

BEHAVIOURAL AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT METRICS

The rise of digital advertising introduced granular behavioural metrics that can track direct audience interaction in real time. Click-Through Rate measures the proportion of users who clicked on a digital ad relative to the total number of users who viewed it. Conversion Rate evaluates the percentage of users who complete a desired action, such as making a purchase or filling out a contact form, after interacting with an advertisement. Cost Per Acquisition calculates the total financial expenditure required to acquire a single paying customer through a specific campaign.

These behavioural metrics offer superior precision compared to exposure counts because they record explicit consumer actions. Lewis et al. (2013) note that digital platforms and experimentation platforms enable firms to measure true causal effects on consumer purchasing behaviour rather than relying solely on intermediate proxies like clicks. However, digital engagement metrics can sometimes suffer from attribution challenges, such as overvaluing the last interaction in a multi-touch customer journey or failing to account for offline brand lift.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC RETURN METRICS

To justify promotional budgets to executive leadership, organizations rely heavily on financial and economic return metrics. Return on Ad Spend calculates the revenue generated for every monetary unit spent on a specific advertising campaign. Return on Investment offers a broader evaluation by incorporating total campaign costs, operational overhead, and profit margins to determine overall financial profitability.

Customer Lifetime Value estimates the total net profit a business expects to generate from a customer throughout their entire relationship with the brand.

Comparing financial metrics reveals their dual utility and constraint. Return on Ad Spend is highly actionable for short-term campaign optimization, but it frequently ignores long-term brand equity development. Conversely, Customer Lifetime Value captures the enduring value of brand loyalty fostered by advertising over years, though it relies on predictive modelling and historical assumptions. Integrating economic metrics with immediate behavioural tracking provides a more balanced financial assessment.

NEUROSCIENTIFIC AND IMPLICIT METRICS

Beyond conscious behavioural and financial outcomes, contemporary advertising research increasingly utilizes neuroscientific and implicit metrics to evaluate subconscious cognitive and emotional engagement. Techniques such as electroencephalography, eye tracking, galvanic skin response, and facial coding capture physiological responses to promotional stimuli (Giakoni, 2022). For instance, it has been demonstrated that electroencephalography metrics can reliably assess cognitive processing and emotional engagement during video advertisement exposure (van Diepen et al., 2024).

Similarly, Guixeres et al. (2017) established that neuroscience-based metrics significantly predict ad recall, liking, and subsequent viewing rates on digital channels. These implicit metrics overcome the biases inherent in traditional self-reported surveys, where consumers may struggle to articulate their true emotional reactions. By measuring subconscious attention and arousal, brands can refine creative content during the pre-testing stages to maximize emotional resonance and memorability (Guixeres, 2017).

COMPARISON OF METRICS

Each category of advertising effectiveness metrics serves a distinct strategic purpose and operates at a different level of the consumer decision journey. Exposure metrics measure market presence and top-of-funnel

awareness, making them essential for broad brand building. Behavioural metrics track immediate digital interaction and conversion efficiency, offering tactical agility for digital marketers. Financial metrics connect promotional expenditure directly to revenue and profitability, satisfying organizational accountability. Finally, neuroscientific metrics evaluate subconscious cognitive engagement, providing deep creative insights before substantial capital is deployed.

Relying on a single metric category inevitably creates blind spots. An advertising campaign may achieve high click-through rates and favourable exposure statistics while failing to generate sustainable long-term profitability. Conversely, a campaign focused strictly on short-term return on ad spend might underinvest in brand equity metrics that secure future customer lifetime value. Consequently, effective marketing measurement requires a comprehensive dashboard that combines exposure, behavioural, economic, and implicit indicators.

RECRUITMENT ADVERTISING

The evaluation of advertising effectiveness has traditionally relied on a well-established framework of commercial metrics, including Return on Ad Spend, Click-Through Rate, conversion rates, and short-term sales lifts. Developed primarily for the consumer goods, retail, and digital commerce sectors, these quantitative tools assume a direct, transactional relationship between marketing stimuli and consumer purchasing behaviour.

However, these conventional evaluative models break down entirely when applied to military recruitment advertising. Military recruitment does not sell a commercial commodity or a subscription service; rather, it invites individuals into a total institution demanding profound personal sacrifice, multi-year legal contracts, and potential exposure to mortal danger (Nakra, 2023).

Consequently, applying traditional commercial metrics to military recruitment advertising creates severe analytical distortions, overlooking the unique psychological, temporal, structural, and ideological dimensions inherent in military service.

PRODUCT VERSUS DECISION

In commercial marketing, advertising effectiveness is measured by how efficiently a brand reduces friction in the consumer decision journey. A digital ad for apparel or software aims to lower cognitive barriers, encouraging an immediate, low-risk transaction that can be easily reversed through returns or cancellations. In stark contrast, military recruitment advertising promotes an irrevocable, life-altering vocation. Enlisting in the armed forces involves strict physical standards, rigorous psychological screening, binding service contracts spanning years, and the ultimate acceptance of bodily harm or death in service to the state.

Traditional digital metrics such as click-through rates or cost per acquisition are fundamentally unequipped to measure this extreme level of commitment. A prospective recruit may click on a recruitment video after being captivated by cinematic portrayals of adventure and technology, yet never complete the application process due to the daunting reality of military life.

Conversely, an individual who never interacts with digital ads may enlist influenced by family tradition or patriotic socialization (Nakra, 2023). Measuring success merely by digital clicks or online form submissions captures momentary curiosity rather than genuine willingness to serve, rendering standard conversion funnels misleading.

TEMPORAL DISCONNECTS AND ATTRIBUTION CHALLENGES

Commercial advertising effectiveness relies heavily on short attribution windows. Digital marketing analytics can track a consumer from ad exposure to checkout within minutes or days, allowing algorithms to attribute sales directly to specific creative assets. Military recruitment, however, operates on an extended, highly non-linear temporal horizon.

Exposure to military advertisements often begins during early adolescence through billboards, television commercials, and popular war films (Nakra, 2023). These early impressions gradually build brand equity, patriotic sentiment, and institutional prestige over many years.

A citizen might decide to enlist years after viewing a campaign, influenced by a cumulative tapestry of cultural messaging, economic pressures, and patriotic appeals. Standard multi-touch attribution models fail across such vast time scales. It is practically impossible to mathematically isolate which specific recruitment advertisement converted a civilian into a soldier years later, invalidating the causal certainty that commercial metrics claim to provide.

THE FALLACY OF FINANCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

A foundational pillar of commercial advertising evaluation is Return on Ad Spend, which calculates immediate revenue generated relative to marketing expenditure. This financial calculation is impossible to replicate in military recruitment. Soldiers do not generate direct financial revenue for the state in a commercial sense. While economists attempt to quantify the broader economic impact of government employment or defence spending, these macroeconomic models cannot be cleanly mapped onto individual recruitment campaigns.

Evaluating military advertising through a strict cost-per-hire or cost-per-acquisition lens also distorts organizational priorities. If a military branch evaluates its advertising effectiveness solely by minimizing the cost per recruit, campaigns may be pressured to lower standards, target vulnerable socioeconomic groups with exploitative economic promises, or rely on superficial sensationalism. National security and defence preparedness cannot be evaluated through quarterly profit-and-loss statements, making commercial financial metrics fundamentally incompatible with military institutional goals.

THE DUAL MANDATE OF RECRUITMENT AND STATE PROPAGANDA

Commercial advertising generally has a singular objective: driving profitable consumer behaviour for a specific brand. Military recruitment advertising, conversely, operates under a dual mandate that conflates personnel acquisition with ideological state propaganda (Nakra, 2023). Recruitment campaigns on television, billboards, and digital media are designed not only to attract active applicants, but also to cultivate broad

public goodwill, instil nationalist pride, and project state power (Nakra, 2023).

Public opinion surveys consistently demonstrate that military institutions enjoy exceptionally high levels of public trust and prestige compared to other state bodies (Nakra, 2023). Recruitment advertisements actively maintain this favourable public image by emphasizing honour, bravery, heroism, and technological modernization while systematically omitting the institutional hardships, bureaucratic struggles, and grim realities of armed conflict (Nakra, 2023).

Because these advertisements shape societal militarism and citizen loyalty among millions of non-recruits, measuring their success purely by the number of enlistment contracts signed ignores their primary ideological function as instruments of state legitimacy.

ASSESSING MILITARY ADVERTISING

The most direct economic metric for evaluating the effectiveness of military recruitment advertising is, of course, marginal cost per enlistment, which directly compares advertising's cost-effectiveness against alternative recruiting tools (Dertouzos, 2009). This metric captures both the volume of enlistments produced and the economic efficiency of the spending, enabling direct comparison with recruiters (Dertouzos, 2009).

Media-specific response functions with S-shaped curves and flexible lag structures allow estimation of advertising effects separately for each medium, providing a granular productivity measure (Dertouzos & Garber, 2006). For digital campaigns, cost per completed action (survey participation, enlistment inquiry) serves as an analogous efficiency metric (Teo et al., 2018). However, one serious limitation is that this can be measured only after a particular advertisement has been launched, and completed its planned run.

There is the need for a unique, multi-dimensional framework beyond commercial metrics to account for the unique psychological, temporal, and ideological nature of the military service (Nakra, 2023). Assessing the effectiveness of military recruitment advertising requires a rigorous,

multi-tiered framework that transcends standard commercial metrics. Because military enlistment involves life-altering personal commitments, extended decision horizons, and broader state legitimization, evaluation models must integrate quantitative econometric testing, neuroscientific pre-testing, and sociological audits (Nakra, 2023).

The first pillar of this methodology is longitudinal cohort tracking and time-series econometrics. Unlike commercial goods where purchases follow immediate ad exposure, military enlistment decisions mature over years through cumulative cultural messaging (Nakra, 2023). Researchers should track demographic cohorts across adolescence and early adulthood, utilizing time-series models to correlate regional advertising intensity with eventual enlistment rates while controlling for socioeconomic variables such as local unemployment and educational costs.

The second pillar involves geo-targeted field experiments to establish true causality. By dividing demographically comparable recruitment districts into distinct test and control markets, defense agencies can deploy varying creative messaging strategies or media spend levels. Measuring subsequent lift in official recruitment inquiries, digital applications, and local office walk-ins provides empirical validation of campaign performance without relying on flawed short-term digital attribution models.

The third pillar incorporates neuroscientific pre-testing to evaluate creative assets before capital deployment. Utilizing electroencephalography, eye-tracking, and biometric monitoring during the ad design phase allows researchers to measure subconscious cognitive processing, emotional engagement, and attention (Giakoni, 2022). Studies confirm that these neurophysiological metrics significantly predict ad recall, emotional resonance, and subsequent viewing rates *, ensuring that campaigns effectively evoke themes of courage and duty (Nakra, 2023) without alienating prospective recruits.

The fourth pillar is regular sociological brand equity and propaganda audits. Because military recruitment advertising functions

dually as personnel acquisition and state propaganda (Nakra, 2023), evaluations must track societal trust, institutional prestige, and public awareness of service realities. Periodic national surveys ensure that promotional messaging maintains long-term public trust and institutional integrity (Nakra, 2023). By combining longitudinal tracking, geo-experiments, neuromarketing, and sociological audits, defense organizations can accurately measure both immediate recruitment efficacy and enduring societal impact.

CONCLUSION

The history of military advertising in India illustrates a continuous evolution from colonial recruitment tracts to sophisticated multimedia campaigns that blend digital marketing with cinematic heroism. By harnessing powerful symbols of patriotism, adventure, and sacrifice, military advertising successfully maintains high public esteem and drives recruitment (Nakra, 2023). At the same time, critical analysis reveals that these promotional narratives often present a sanitized view of military life, emphasizing glory while omitting systemic challenges (Nakra, 2023). There is a need to match the promotional message with aspirations of the target audience.

Traditional methods for measuring advertising effectiveness are inextricably bound to commercial transactions, short-term attribution, and financial profitability. Military recruitment advertising operates in an entirely different domain, defined by life-altering personal commitments, extended temporal decision horizons, unquantifiable institutional value, and nation-building (Nakra, 2023).

Relying on commercial metrics such as click-through rates, cost per acquisition, or return on ad spend fails to capture the profound psychological and sociological dynamics of military service. Evaluating military recruitment requires moving beyond commercial analytics toward comprehensive sociological, longitudinal, and qualitative frameworks that account for the true complexity of national defence and public life.

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