

Issue on War Rhetoric

Retoryka wojny

2/2015

REAKCJE | REACTIONS

KATARZYNA MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA

UNIwersytet Opolski

MOLEKK@UNI.OPOLE.PL

PATRYK LISZTWAN

Wyższa Szkoła Filologiczna, Wrocław

PLISZTWAN@WORLD.PL

The persuasive power of visual and interactive materials of the American military recruitment system

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Poland. The content of the license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/>

KATARZYNA MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA

UNIwersytet Opolski

MOLEKK@UNI.OPOLE.PL

PATRYK LISZTWAN

WYŻSZA SZKOŁA FILOLOGICZNA, WROCLAW

PLISZTWAN@WORLD.PL

The persuasive power of visual and interactive materials of the American military recruitment system

The United States Armed Forces recruiting system has evolved from simple stations to a modern-day persuasion machine which provides the nation with a large number of servicemen annually. In 1822 the General Recruiting Service, on which the whole recruitment system is based, was introduced, marking the beginning of United States Recruiting Command (www.usarec.army.mil). The first recruiting offices were called *rendezvous* and their role, namely recruiting young people to serve for their country, has not ever been changed. Since 1973 the recruiting stations were allowed to recruit only volunteers. Today the stations can be found in all large cities as well as some smaller towns. The system of recruitment to the United States Armed Forces has undergone various developments becoming one of the most efficient systems in the world. As the contemporary culture is, to a large extent, a visual culture, one can assume that the world's top military recruitment system would take full advantage of the visual and interactive communication technologies. Apart from traditional genres, such as posters and illustrated brochures, it is worth looking in more detail at films, websites and interactive materials that are currently distributed by the military. At the same time, the main means of persuasion will be spotlighted in the context of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2007) and Cialdini's typology of techniques of influence (2007).

Visual materials such as recruitment promotional films contain various rhetorical and persuasive elements. The television spot issued by the United States Army entitled *Army Strong* provides a potential recruit with a thirty-second-long enumeration why the Army is the best choice as a career path. Among other advantages, the presenter mentions the possibility of changing the future or being a role model for other people. The spot utilizes the rule of authority (Cialdini 2007, 157–172) very efficiently, as the depicted soldiers not only operate various high-tech

weaponry or vehicles, which contributes to the projection of their credentials, but also are representatives of high rank positions within the force. Ranks comprise the core of the army values and the hierarchical structure of the institution. Furthermore, servicemen wear uniforms and those two elements combined create the perfect environment for the authority technique to work efficiently. In terms of persuasion, the fact that only some high positions are exposed, while the majority of less advantageous and authoritative jobs within the army is not shown, is an example of the “card-stacking” manipulation technique. The spot also presents servicemen as young, attractive and in perfect physical condition to employ the rule of liking (Cialdini 2007, 126–153).

The *Army Strong* film also incorporates a combination of Aristotle’s pathos and ethos: through the appeal to positive emotions, it refers to potential candidates’ patriotism and sense of duty, as higher values that balance the egoistic and materialistic aspects of service. This is mainly because the loud, energetic music used in the spot arouses enthusiasm. This may also be considered manipulative, as the appeal to strong positive emotions may impede the common-sense reasoning that the army is also about risk, sacrifice, pain and death.

Another televised spot, published by the United States Air Force, is *The Best Job in the World*. Created in the same filmic convention, it presents a solitary soldier surrounded by the most advanced military instalments, such as space stations or shuttles. This is to prove that the job as an Airman is the most exciting, rewarding and extraordinary, or, as the title suggests, the best job in the world. The recruitment film contains a fallacy of composition. Due to this error of logic one may assume that all jobs in the air forces are spectacular because of the image that has been presented to them.

Recently, the United States military has issued another film entitled *Faces of Strength*. This ten-minute clip not only uses various persuasion devices and techniques, such as authority, commitment and consistency or liking, but also incorporates the social proof (Cialdini 2007, 87–90), by presenting testimonies of soldiers who received medals for their heroic actions in recent military operations. All television spots made recently involve enhanced visual effects, quick pace and montage, clear narrative, confident voiceover and appealing music.

Not surprisingly, The United States Armed Forces maintain various websites, which are very important recruitment tools, as they provide diverse information about the service, facilitate contact with recruiters and contain a vast amount of persuasion devices. The first website one may encounter while seeking information about the United States Armed Forces is *goarmy.com* which was designed solely for recruitment purposes. Thus, potential candidates will find here general descriptions of possible service locations, career paths, training, vehicles,

equipment, ranks and insignia. The site also emphasizes the benefits of the service such as money bonuses, educational opportunities, health care, family services and programs after service. This type of persuasion does not incite emotions; instead it appeals to logos by including important reasons why to take up an army job. In the same vein, there are two separate well-developed sections presenting soldiers' life (www.goarmy.com/soldier-life.html) and information for parents (www.goarmy.com/parents.html) that are aimed to dispel multiple audience's possible doubts surrounding the service.

Goarmy.com also employs interactive elements such as the virtual advisor sergeant Star, which is an artificial intelligence interface designed to answer most frequently asked questions. The website utilizes various persuasion devices in order to appeal to potential servicemen. For instance, the rule of authority (Cialdini 2007, 157–172) is employed throughout the entire portal, as one encounters images of random soldiers in uniforms, mostly of higher ranks. Moreover, most of the depicted male and female soldiers seem to be of young age and multiple race, which shows how the site uses the rule of liking (Cialdini 2007, 126–153) in an attempt to convince the young adults among visitors that the people of army are similar to them. Additionally, the technique of social proof (Cialdini 2007, 87–90) can be easily identified in sections for parents where one finds testimonials of current soldiers and veterans with their families. *Goarmy.com* also makes an attempt to persuade viewers by the rule of scarcity (Cialdini 2007, 178 – 182) presenting the idea of specialty tabs which are pinned to uniforms. According to the website, they symbolize “Unique training. Unique skills. Wearing the tab is an honor for those Soldiers who have earned it.”

Apart from *goarmy.com*, there are websites of all main branches of the United States Armed Forces. *Army.mil* is the site of the largest component of the military – the Army. The main emphasis is put on the news about the events connected with the land forces and general information about the branch. *Navy.com*, a website which belongs to the United States Navy, and *uscg.mil* of the Coast Guard follow this pattern and provide visitors with official information about the branch and current events, but also provide detailed insight into the life in both branches and have a separate well-developed section for those who wish to join.

On the other hand, *Marines.com*, the United States Marine Corps site, presents much more appealing image to potential soldiers. Recruits may find all information required to join the branch and are given the opportunity to broaden their knowledge about the very rich history of the Corps. At first sight *Marines.com* creates the impression that the viewer sees something not easily available and ultra-modern. The Marine Corps' recruiting slogan: “The few, The proud” seems to intensify the feeling taking advantage of Cialdini's (2007, 178–182) rule of

scarcity. The site also employs the rule of authority (Cialdini 2007, 157–172) as the Marines appear to be very well trained, focused, determined and knowledgeable. *Marines.com* also values commitment and consistency (Cialdini 2007, 43–64), as being a Marine means becoming a part of a branch that looks after its members even if they leave the Corps. Marines motto "Semper Fidelis" seems to reaffirm this belief.

The United States Air Force is unique in terms of their online presence, as they have two websites: the official *af.mil* and the unofficial *airforce.com*. The former offers news, detailed information about the branch and links to social media sites whereas the latter employs a more persuasive approach by presenting the benefits of joining the Air Force or the life within the branch, and a vastly developed career section where potential candidates get familiar with the career possibilities. Even though *goarmy.com* was designed as the main recruitment tool, there are recruiting facilities in the websites of each branch of the United States Armed Forces.

Video games have long been one of the most popular interactive media; hence, the United States military must have seen a great possibility to recruit new soldiers through this form of entertainment. Games provide what no other media can, namely, very realistic soldier experience in which everyone can check their abilities on a virtual shooting range or become a fire team leader and command the smallest unit within the army to the battlefield. Between the years 2000 and 2012 many video games were released: some were focused on realistic simulation and some on pure entertainment and plot. There are such productions as the series entitled *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* in which a player embarks on various missions including classified operations. The main aim of the series is to entertain by uncomplicated, first perspective shooter action game which does not have any traits of a simulation. Military operations in these products are largely fictional but the equipment, vehicles, aircraft, weapons and uniforms have been designed to reflect the authentic counterparts within the armies of the world. Not surprisingly, armies typically presented are those of the United States and the United Kingdom with the main focus on the former. One may assume that games such as *Call of Duty*, although made for profit, seem to promote the United States Armed Forces ethos and brand.

Modern Warfare series is very popular with players due to many aspects such as appealing graphics, immersing gameplay and very good multiplayer mode, but one should acknowledge that this series also uses the techniques of persuasion. For instance, to gain popularity the game employs the rule of scarcity (Cialdini 2007, 178–182) by including classified operations commenced by the special forces units like Delta force or Navy seals. Those missions are often referred to as black operations due to their high degree of secrecy. Even though they were

frequently presented by the Hollywood cinematography, the games allow individuals to virtually participate in the operations. What was once limited to only few excellently trained soldiers, owing to games, has now become available to wider public. Furthermore, the rule of commitment and consistency (Cialdini 2007, 43–64) ensures that gamers keep on playing the game for a long time. Players fight together on a virtual battlefield in the multiplayer mode where the team work and commitment is highly valued by other participants. Importantly, team work is rewarded within the game script itself as new weapons or maps may be unlocked only in due course after achieving pre-established goals. In yet another project, Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* set of games, in contrast to *Call of Duty*, puts emphasis on simulation of the soldier and conducting operations undetected by the enemy personnel. Besides more realistic features built in the game, the series offers intriguing espionage plots and military intelligence management.

In contrast to the above fictionalized video games, *America's Army* is one of the most realistic simulations of an army life and very effective recruitment tool. Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski, director of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis at West Point and the father of two teenage sons, has realized that the popularity of video games could contribute to the recruitment process of the United States Armed Forces. What makes *America's Army* different from other first person perspective shooters available on the market is the realism. The weapons and equipment were modeled after their counterparts in real life; the accuracy depends on the stance and one may be killed after being shot once. What is more, the player may follow a path of a career in several branches within the Armed Forces and work to enhance the statistics in categories like loyalty, honor or personal courage. A mechanism ensuring appropriate behavior within the game has been implemented and, for instance, friendly fire is not tolerated. *America's Army* offers an insight to a military life and provides a wide range of information that a potential candidate would like to have in a pleasant and convenient way as the game is available for free to download at the official website (www.americasarmy.com). It can be observed how this project involves the ethos of the army values, the logos of the career and service development and the pathos of excitement, adventure and entertainment.

One should also take into consideration the fact that, at the time of the game release in 2002, recruitment officers had problems in providing candidates with reliable information as there were fewer and fewer war veterans to talk about the army life from their perspective. The game is also a way of presenting the army life in a more realistic way to contradict Hollywood film industry's image which has been created over the years. *America's Army* as the military's tool facilitates the contact between players and recruiters by offering links and telephone

numbers scattered throughout the interface. The United States Armed Forces have created a very efficient way of communicating with potential servicemen which also happens to be a realistic and enjoyable video game.

References

Aristotle. 2007. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cialdini, Robert. 2007. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Harper Business.

The United States Air Force. Best Job in the World. In: <http://www.ispot.tv/ad/7Ypz/us-air-force-best-job-in-the-world>

The United States Army. Army Strong. In: <http://www.ispot.tv/ad/7kji/us-army-army-strong>

The United States Army. Faces of Strength. In: <http://www.army.mil/media/amp/?bctid=188616829>