

**Media, Militaries, and Militarism: Examining the Role of Social Media in Legitimizing and
Expanding the U.S. Military Regime**

By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. empire has asserted its influence domestically and internationally through the immense concentration of resources and funding into the military. For example, the United States has a larger military expenditure than the next ten highest spending countries combined (Peterson Foundation 2023). In order to continue to justify its legitimate existence and multidimensional expansion in the forms of increased personnel, funding, and international influence, the U.S. military stresses the significance of controlling its representation to the public (Carter and Weaver 2003; Moe 2011; U.S. JFCOM Joint Warfighting Center 2009; Wenger et al. 2019). This need to justify its existence as a legitimate institution and control self-representation became especially important to the U.S. military as a result of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in the 1960s–1970s. The anti-war activism eradicated conscription, which is the mandatory enlistment of adults into the military (Apostel 2011). Consequently, anti-war activism of the 1960s–1970s not only resulted in the creation of a “recruitment problem” after the eradication of conscription, but also created a legitimacy problem for the U.S. military (Apostel 2011). Alongside the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, there was growing dissent against the U.S. military’s proliferation in domestic society and warmaking in Southeast Asia, which significantly contributed to a lack of validity among Americans (Small 2002).

Recruitment materials have been a popular and strategic avenue through which the military has addressed these intertwined issues of recruitment and legitimacy. Scholars have studied U.S. military recruitment and representation in a limited context of television commercials and video games (Park et al. 2017; Speck 2020; Jester 2021). Additionally, research is also increasingly recognizing newer developments in military organizational approaches to

communicating with the public, turning to emergent social media platforms (Peralta and Caporusso 2020) and the Israeli military's use of Twitter (Jackson 2016; Manor and Crilley 2018; Massa and Anzera 2023).

While more research is beginning to highlight the link between the normalization of violence, media, and militaries, and the capacity of these themes appearing on social media (Carter and Weaver 2003; Jackson et al. 2021; Massa and Anzera 2023), there is a significant gap in empirical cases regarding the U.S. military's use of social media for self-representation. Thus, it is essential to understand and deconstruct narratives that downplay violence and aid in expanding military capacity through increased personnel, funding, and influence. This article examines the intersection of media, militaries, and militarism, using the case of the U.S. Army's growing presence on Instagram. Specifically, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of 50 randomly selected U.S. Army Instagram posts from the year 2021. The central question guiding my study is: How does the U.S. Army legitimize and pursue the expansion of its regime on Instagram?

The largest branch of the U.S. military, the U.S. Army, has an official Instagram page (@usarmy) with 2.9 million followers and over 4,500 posts as of March 2024. I argue that the Army on Instagram legitimizes its regime through normalization of violence, and expands the influence of its regime by exploiting networks of engagement. Particularly, evidence of normalization of violence saturates the sample, and is often achieved through vague mentions or outright omissions of the "enemy" or "adversary," and through integrating informal content, such as slang language and emojis to downplay serious or violent content. These strategies of presentation further U.S. Army efforts to actively expand the influence of its regime by building more active networks of engagement. Specifically, the Army Instagram frequently tags other

military Instagram accounts, uses military and non-military related terminology in hashtags, and invites viewers to engage with posts, which expands their network reach and aids regime expansion through their posts.

This study builds on and connects existing literatures of representations of militaries; military communications across media; and normalization of violence, media, and militaries. Research on recruitment materials has found various tactics to highlight specific portrayals of militaries while ignoring the sociohistorical and geopolitical realities of militaries (Jester 2021; Speck 2020; Apostel 2011). My study finds a staunch omission of the consequences and effects of the U.S. military regime on the world and sociohistorical and geopolitical reality. Normalization of violence found in diverse research on self-portrayals of militaries also saturates this study's sample of U.S. Army Instagram posts. Therefore, my study highlights the growing centrality of social media sites such as Instagram for achieving normalization of violence in order to legitimize the U.S. military, and offers new insight on the exploitation of networks of engagement for expanding the influence of the U.S. military regime. As communications continue to go digital and connect the globalized world, it is imperative to critically assess the manner in which state actors represent themselves and their own narratives.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

Representations of the U.S. Army in Recruitment Materials

The U.S. military, specifically the Army, has historically sought to present a curated image of itself through recruitment materials. Since the end of conscription, which is the state-mandated enlistment of individuals into the military, Army recruitment materials have attempted to portray the military as an appealing and legitimate life path for U.S. citizens. Thus, recruitment materials serve as an important vantage point from which to understand how the U.S. military represents itself. The significant changes in how the Army represents itself in recruitment materials has been descriptively examined by a number of scholars (Jester 2021; Speck 2020; Apostel 2011). Specifically, research on representations of the U.S. Army in recruitment materials has focused on the following: analyzing recruitment commercials' underlying messaging about the benefits of joining the military, gendered constructions within military commercials, and how different mediums impact the underlying recruitment messaging (Jester 2021; Speck 2020; Apostel 2011). In this section, I review research in each of these areas, and address how my study builds on existing work to further understand how the U.S. Army represents itself in a different realm—through social media posts on Instagram.

Contemporary Military Recruitment Commercials

Military recruitment commercials have been shown to use a variety of messaging strategies that are responsive to who the target audience is and the sociohistorical moment in which the commercials are broadcast. For example, Park et al. (2017) broadly assessed emergent messaging strategies within recruitment commercials from 2001 to 2014. Park et al.'s (2017) findings showcased how news coverage of death and violence during periods of war led to fewer

potential recruits being motivated to enlist, resulting in a need for the Army to be presented as an avenue for attaining clearly defined benefits during a time of multiple wars. Importantly, Park et al.'s (2017) findings exemplify how the Army has been found to center a narrative of the Army as a great career path with social service benefits for military members while simultaneously strategically omitting the realities of U.S. military conduct abroad. This strategic omission effectively invisibilized how increasing the amount of enlistees further facilitated U.S. involvement in multiple conflicts during the period in which the commercials were created and disseminated.

Another line of research within Army recruitment has focused on gendered representations within Army commercials and how they reflected the goals of the Army in a particular sociohistorical context. Scholars like Jester have illuminated how diversity and inclusion became a focal point in Army messaging between 2002 and 2018 across two major world powers, both the U.S. and U.K., and were used as a tool to turn focus away from the historical and current realities of the military industrial complex. Jester (2021) reasoned that the context of the military recruitment crisis in that period facilitated growth in representations of the U.S. Army that included women and people of color as equal members of teams as white men. Similarly, Speck (2020) recently demonstrated how gender was framed in U.S. Army commercials between 2008 and 2018. Notably, although women were allowed in combat roles during 2008 and 2018, females present in the commercials were typically situated in traditional gender roles (Speck 2020). Only 2.2 percent of combat roles in the commercials included in Speck's (2020) study were played by female characters, compared to 88.9 percent of civilian spouses being played by female characters. Jester's (2021) and Speck's (2020) work exemplify how militaries have attempted to leverage broader societal concerns for intersectional diversity

and inclusion in constructing a narrative about what their modern militaries represent. Just as Park et al. (2017) found commercials focused on individual benefits while ignoring the broader sociohistorical moment in which the commercials were created and disseminated, Jester's (2021) and Speck's (2020) studies found commercials focused on diversity and inclusion while not commenting on concrete military involvement in the various conflicts of the sociohistorical moment.

Variation in Army Representation across Different Mediums

Research has also examined variation in Army representation across different mediums. Apostel (2011) argued that in commercials analyzed during the Army Strong campaign, the visual focus was often on aspects such as fast vehicles “akin to aggressive sports footage” as opposed to the real-world experience of the Army soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan at the time. In analyzing the video game *America's Army*, Apostel (2011) asserted that the video game serves as a place to present the “sights and sounds of boot camp,” as well as portrayed the values and culture of the Army as a positive power with soldiers who follow strict orders. Additionally, the video game's training of players on using weapons and urban combat tactics was characterized as a minimization of reality and consequences of combat. These two mediums of commercials and video games proved to have a significance on how the Army carried out self-portrayal in ways the institution found to be favorable (Apostel 2011).

In summary, there is a growing body of research on the representations of the Army in recruitment materials, and how these representations can vary across mediums even in the same time period. Still, there is a dearth of literature on the representation of the Army on social media platforms, such as Instagram. Here, I bridge this gap by examining the content of 50 randomly selected Instagram posts and captions shared on the official Instagram page for the U.S. Army

from the year 2021. Specifically, my work shifts the focus of Army representation and self-portrayal towards social media and investigates how social media itself is used as a site by the U.S. Army to legitimize and pursue the expansion of its regime.

Social Media, Military Recruitment, and Military Communication

In this section, I discuss research at the intersection of social media, military recruitment, and military communication, and address how my study builds on this existing work with the empirical case of the U.S. Army's use of Instagram. Across the private and public spheres, the general transition to a focus on social media marketing efforts has been recognized by military entities, as the Army has also begun using social media to “advertise their activities, recruit cadets, and engage youth in their programs” (Peralta and Caporusso 2020). Research on the role of social media in contemporary military recruitment and representation, however, has a narrow focus. In particular, current research in this area focuses on the character and effectiveness of social media utilization by individual military recruiters. For example, Peralta and Caporusso (2020) found that 74.1 percent of recruiters in their sample used social media sites in their efforts, and were more successful in enlisting individuals than those recruiters that did not use social media in their efforts.

The shift to an emphasis on utilizing social media platforms has also led to an interesting attempt by the Army to seek out and learn from “military influencers.” In June of 2022, NPR's *Here and Now* podcast reported that the Army invited 13 social media influencers to the annual Army celebration held in Washington, D.C. (NPR 2020). The influencers were reportedly invited for the Army to gain insight on how to better “communicate with young people” (NPR 2020). One of the influencers in attendance was Army Sgt. Maj. Laurence Ogle, known as @infantryguru on Instagram and TikTok. As of March 2024, Army Sgt. Maj. Laurence Ogle has

264k followers on Instagram and 734k followers on TikTok. In discussion of his large TikTok following on the *Here and Now* Podcast, podcast guest Fem Oke notes that there are no official Army or other military TikTok pages because TikTok is classified as a security risk (NPR 2022). However, Oke claims that this has not stopped recruiters from having private TikTok accounts from which they attempt to recruit youth (NPR 2022).

There are also changes in organizational approaches to communication, and institutions are entering the realm of social media with increasing regularity, including the U.S. military. In 2011, what was originally termed as “strategic communication” was reclassified as “inform and influence activities,” which “create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the Army’s interests, policies, and objectives” (Moe 2011:5). This shift is highlighted by the United States Joint Forces Command, which emphasized the importance of strategic communication by the United States and allies in order to stimulate and maintain public support of military activity especially during long periods of involvement with conflict (U.S. JFCOM Joint Warfighting Center 2009).

The Army has identified the importance of controlling its own narrative. Thus, social media has become a necessary space to enter in order to monitor discourse about the regime and “to remain relevant in this new information domain” (Moe 2011:6). Given this importance and the relevance of social media within the context of the Army, research is increasingly examining organizational approaches to communication utilizing social media, for example, social media’s growing significance in information operations (IO) of the U.S. military (Marcellino et al. 2017), as well as for innovative outreach to potential recruits (Wenger et al. 2019). Yet, not much is known about the execution of social media utilization on the platform of Instagram. Here, I use

qualitative techniques to study how the U.S. Army uses social media platforms, specifically Instagram, to justify the military regime and expand the regime's influence.

Normalization of Violence, Media, and Militaries

There is an important body of literature on the normalization of violence in media and how this relates to militaries and militarism. Contrastingly, within this literature, there is limited engagement with how these themes manifest on social media platforms in particular. Critical media scholars, for instance, have centered the manner in which an audience is welcomed to consume content rather than focusing on measuring the degree to which such media successfully controls or steers audiences (Carter and Weaver 2003). In order to keep public support for armed military conflict, officials of the military and state have historically emphasized the necessity to “sanitize violence” (Carter and Weaver 2003:23). Increasingly, internet and communication technologies have become “part of the fabric of daily life for billions of people” (Jackson et al. 2021; Castells 2013). As Miskimmon et al. (2015) note, the changing “media ecology” has implications for communication patterns, in particular, fundamentally altering the mechanics of international relations (Jackson et al. 2021). Essentially, through information and communication technologies, state and non-state actors no longer need to solely work with media stakeholders to connect with their public audiences, and instead, are able to assume the role of media producers (Simmons 2011). As a result, Jackson et al. (2021) conceptualize “militarization 2.0” as “digitally mediated discourses and practices concerned with the use of Web 2.0 technologies to communicate that war and political violence are a commonsense, normal, and, at times, necessary solution to political problems” (1048–1049).

Due to the proliferation of information on the internet and the opportunity for state entities to platform themselves, scholars have recently discussed the possibilities for the

normalization of violence online by “ministries of foreign affairs; the embodied performances of celebrity leaders and insurgency groups; arms producers, the military video game industry, and private military and security companies” (Jackson et al. 2021:1047). Additionally, scholars have examined the use of the social media site, Twitter by the state of Israel’s military in order to construct narratives about specific conflicts in the occupation of Palestine (Jackson 2016; Manor and Crilley 2018; Massa and Anzera 2023). Massa and Anzera (2023) assert that Israeli Army self-portrayal prolifically normalizes militarism and violence through the “platformization” of conflict in Twitter posts mixed in with content such as personal soldier narratives and popular culture content.

Current research highlights the connections between normalization of violence, media, and militaries, and there is a growing body of literature around their intersection with the frontier of social media. Still, a focus on how these themes of normalization of violence, media, and militaries manifest in the case of U.S. military branches, particularly on Instagram pages is needed to develop a fuller understanding of the mechanisms through which the military is normalizing its violence in new forms of media. As the largest branch of the U.S. military and with the most followed and most frequently posting page, the U.S. Army’s Instagram page is a particularly significant case to examine.

CHAPTER 3

DATA AND METHODS

To assess how the U.S. Army utilizes social media platforms as mediums for legitimizing and expanding the military regime, I examined Instagram posts from the Army's official Instagram page: @usarmy. I focused on a randomly selected sample of 50 posts from the year 2021. To date, there is no study assessing the Instagram presence of any branch of the military. Considering the growing significance of social media to organizations and institutions including the U.S. military, a critical analysis of the utilization of platforms such as Instagram is significant to our understanding of how the military frames itself as legitimate and justifies its expansion as a global force.

Data Collection

The data source for this study is the U.S. Army's official Instagram page: @usarmy. The U.S. Army Instagram page has 2.9 million followers and 4,500 posts as of March of 2024 (see **Figure A**). The Army's Instagram count is the highest followed official military account, and has the highest number of posts. In 2021 alone, @usarmy shared 639 posts. To examine the self-portrayal of the U.S. Army on Instagram in 2021, I randomly selected and analyzed 50 U.S. Army's Instagram posts.

Figure A. Screenshot of the Army Instagram page



The year 2021 is significant for examining how the military legitimizes and justifies the expansion of its regime because it presents a unique moment in the contemporary “Global War on Terror.” 2021 marks 20 years since the initiation of a “Global War on Terror” which has been used for the justification of U.S. military conduct particularly in the Middle East (Zeidan 2024). Additionally, the final troops in Afghanistan were removed in 2021 as well (Zeidan 2024). Thus, the socio- and geopolitical significance around the year of 2021 offers a significant case in which to assess how the military branches such as the Army have been utilizing social media mediums to represent their legitimacy and expansion.

To collect the sample for this study, I used a random number generator to create an output of 50 numbers between 1 and 639 (inclusively). The generated list of random numbers was added to a Google Sheets spreadsheet. I then added the links for each randomly selected post number to create my data set for qualitative analysis.

Analytical Strategy

In this study, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of 50 randomly selected U.S. Army Instagram posts from the year 2021. Qualitative content analysis enables an exploration of “subtle and overt themes and messages,” and gives room for the emergence of themes directly from the data being analyzed (Gordon 2020:181). This study examines how the Army utilizes Instagram for regime legitimation and expansion, and qualitative content analysis is especially useful as it facilitates the investigation of “deeper and more complex cultural ideas and messages” within the content being examined (Gordon 2020:182). Additionally, qualitative content analysis is beneficial for its exploratory nature, which is significant in this case given that there has yet to be a study on the content of any U.S. military’s Instagram pages.

To implement qualitative content analysis of my data sample, I first analyzed the content of the photos, videos, and transcriptions of each post; the captions of each post; and how content interacted and, at times, stood contradictory to each other. After analyzing the content of every post in the data set, I returned to the posts and my analysis of each post and began to create codes for the themes that emerged from the data. Coded themes were combined under broader themes (see final code book in **Appendix A, Table 1**). With the broader themes and codebook well drafted, I returned to the data and added tags to posts.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through a qualitative content analysis of 50 Instagram posts on the official U.S. Instagram page (@usarmy), my results demonstrate that the U.S. Army legitimizes its regime through normalization of violence, and expands its influence by exploiting networks of engagement. The normalization of violence is often achieved through vague mentions of or blatant omissions of the “enemy” or “adversary,” and through the combination of informal content with violent or serious content. Additionally, the Army Instagram page expands the military regime’s influence through exploiting networks of engagement by regularly tagging other U.S. military pages in posts, through extensive use of military and non-military related terminology in hashtags, and by encouraging viewers to interact with posts’ contents. These themes deeply saturate the randomized sample, and often multiple themes are present in the same post, as will be shown in the following sections.

Normalization of Violence

The conduct of the military regime, which largely consists of training for or executing violent acts, is legitimized through normalization of violence. In order to justify the existence of the military regime as legitimate, the U.S. military engaged in normalization of violence through the @usarmy Instagram page in two key ways: 1) discussions or omissions of the “adversary” and 2) informal content paired with serious or violent content.

Discussions or Omissions of the “Adversary”

The U.S. Army’s official Instagram page normalized violence by emphasizing military’s weapons against the “adversary” or “enemy,” while omitting who the “adversary” or “enemy” is from the discussion across all posts of this character (see **Figure 1 to Figure 4**).

A majority of Instagram posts obscured or outright left out the real peoples and societies that are on the receiving end of the weapons firing, combat training, and special missions training that were centered in many posts. Posts also had content of training for enemy/adversary situations, and fast-paced weapons firing toward a target that was out of frame of the photo or video within the post. As seen in **Figure 1** below, the focus of many posts was on the immense weaponry at the institution’s disposal and the Army’s capacity to act, with a vague or missing explanation on where or against whom these actions would be utilized.

Figure 1

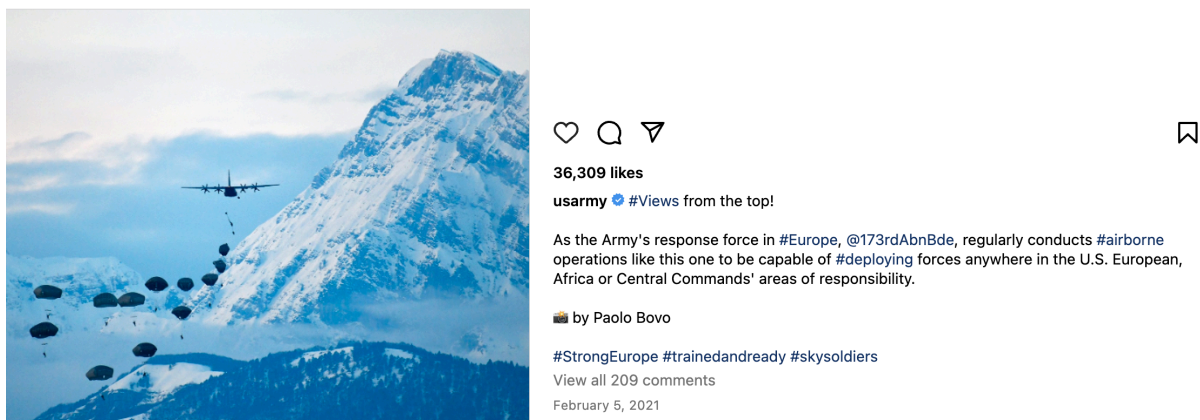
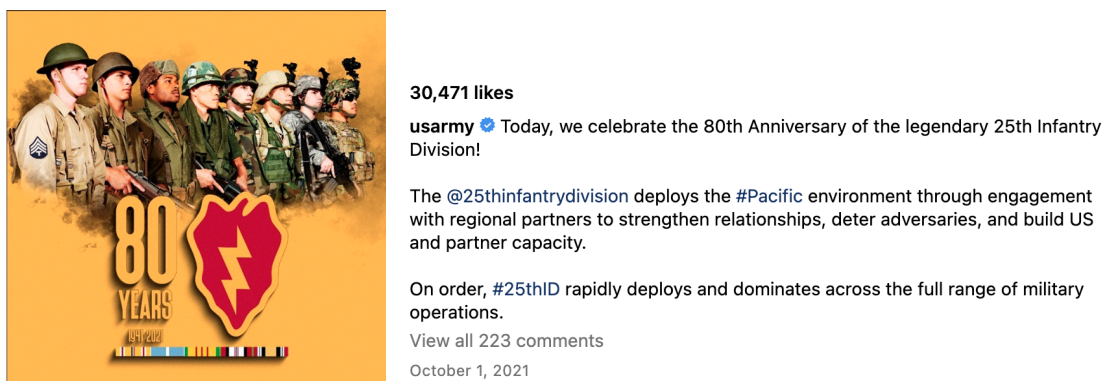


Figure 1 includes the photo and caption from a @usarmy Instagram post shared on February 5, 2021. This Instagram post is a photo of a plane in the mountains with over a dozen parachutes below it in the sky. The caption describes that this photo is of a frequently executed operation that can and will be carried out “anywhere” on several continents in areas of “U.S. responsibility.” This short caption is one example of the framing found within posts of the expansive reach of the U.S. Army: the post focuses on “deploying forces,” while omitting specific adversaries, omitting what the operations aim to achieve, and omitting what the effects of these actions will have on the places and societies on the receiving end. The active omission

of the specific adversaries and impact of violence inflicted by the army operations, while emphasizing the capacious capacity of the U.S. Army takes violence for granted; it normalizes violence against *anyone necessary* because it is the Army’s “responsibility.” Normalization of violent military conduct further justifies such actions and supports the portrayal of the Army as a legitimate regime.

Figure 2



Similarly, **Figure 2** includes the photo and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from October 1, 2021. The caption explains that the post is celebrating the 25th Infantry division of the military. The 25th Infantry Division is described as a unit established to “deter adversaries, and build U.S. and partner capacity,” in addition to being an entity that “dominates across the full range of military operations.” This post is representative of the broader trend within the sample of centering the Army’s capacity to act—or enact violence—across the world, while never clearly explaining who they are acting against and what the consequences of these actions are beyond domination. Though violence is only indirectly referred to here, the capacity to enact violence is embedded within the post’s broader narrative emphasizing being a part of a long and respectful tradition. This de-centering of the “enemy” and emphasis on the Army’s capacity to act, thus,

normalizes the violence enacted by the Army, which in turn legitimizes its regime and its conduct.

Figure 3

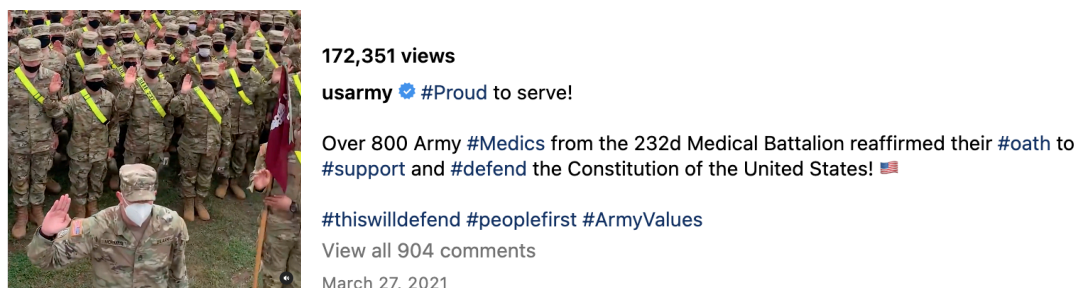


Figure 3 includes a screenshot of the video and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from March 27, 2021. The video pans over a large crowd of people in fatigues (combat uniforms), hats, and medical face masks, with their right hand raised for the pledge they are repeating. One man standing on top of something in front of them, much higher up than them, is reciting each line for everyone to repeat. Below is a transcription of the pledge in the video:

I [state your name] do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the constitution of the United States **against all enemies, foreign and domestic**. That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same and **I will obey the orders** of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me. According to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, so help me God. (emphasis added)

This pledge of allegiance requires that every person defends the U.S. Constitution against “all enemies.” One of the post’s hashtags, “#ArmyValues,” reinforces that the values of the Army in this pledge are to “obey orders.” Similar to previous examples discussed above, the “adversary” that the Army must defend against is not clear or defined with absolute discretion by the rationale or understanding of those who take the pledge. Still, the Army inculcates values of “obeying orders” from superiors and the President, without defining the boundaries of those orders. In doing so, this post normalizes violence by taking for granted the need for expanding

the capacity of the military “to defend the United States against *all* enemies, foreign and domestic,” even when the enemy is unknown to observers and perhaps to the soldiers themselves. As a result, the normalization of the violent intentions and capacity of the Army aids in the legitimization of Army actions and the regime as a whole.

Figure 4

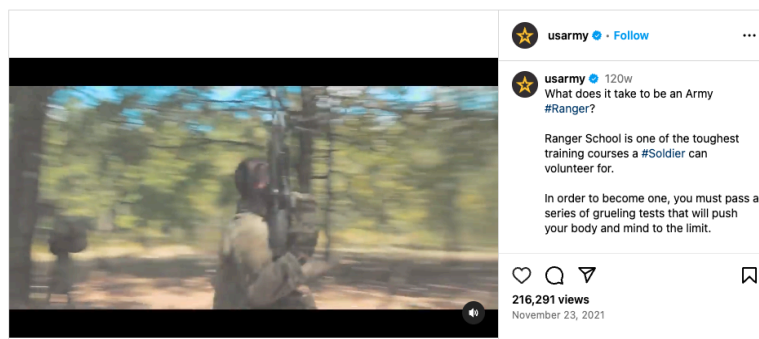


Figure 4 offers another example to understand how the U.S. Army Instagram page normalizes violence. Figure 4 includes a screenshot of the video and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from November 23, 2021. The video is an intense video montage of instrumental music that is introspective and perhaps motivational, along with a voiceover speech. The video footage has some scenes that are edited to look like a video game, showing a target and the word “ranger” appearing on the screen. There is a montage of different clips of ranger training where sometimes people are running in the dark, doing push ups, or running obstacle courses with brief animated descriptions in the video. There are also quick flashes of helicopters, bullets being shot, people working together to paddle boats, get through terrain, and more. Some clips are recorded from a distance, some are in a point-of-view style. As this fast-paced montage of clips is playing, there is a dramatic voiceover, parts of which are transcribed below:

You are great, you are special, **you are deadly** Because the only way we are going to get to the other side of this time of war is **to remind our enemy and the children of our enemy that there is a whole lot they can do with their lives rather than fight against the U.S. Army**—it is gonna end in tears every, single, time And if our **enemy's children** have a choice, they will see that there is no romance in war against our allies or against the United States, and they will see that if they choose the path that their fathers chose, **that they too will be erased from history**. God bless you, and may God have mercy on anyone stupid enough to engage you in an open field. **You are going to absolutely clean their clock.** (emphasis added)

It is particularly in this dialogue, narrated by medal of honor recipient David Bellavia, that normalization of violence is promoted through the obscurification of the enemy and centering of the Army's growing capacity. Mixed in with other characterizations, the narrator calls their audience of Army personnel "deadly" in the same instance as calling them special and great, thereby showcasing the (violent) capacity of the Army. It is this capacity for deadliness which contributes to the greatness and power of the Army. While an enemy is never named in this speech or in this post, the narrator asserts that the "enemy's" children will be "erased from history" if "they" were to engage in conflict with the United States or allies. Such a blatant assertion, again, reinforces the growing capacity of the Army, both in terms of who is considered as an enemy to be "erased" and in the means used to "erase" enemies ("absolutely clean their [the enemy's] clock"). The vague definition of the enemy sets no limits on who is considered the enemy, further depicting the expansive and unbounded domination of the United States over the ambiguous "other." As a result, the capacity for violence coincides with greatness, and the assertions of violence against any adversary framed as inherent to Army conduct normalizes violence. Normalization of violence, in this way, aids in justifying Army actions and legitimizing the Army regime as a whole.

Informal Content Paired with Serious or Violent Content

Informal content being paired with violent or serious content was a second mechanism through which violence was normalized in many posts. This theme is characterized by the combination of everyday, informal language, or informal social media terminology and emojis, with imagery of weapons, explosions, and serious content (see **Figure 5 to Figure 7**).

Figure 5



Figure 5 includes a screenshot of the video and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from March 15, 2021. The video is the repeated explosion of a military tank, which is being compared to the start of a new work week, as is evident in the caption: “**Blasting** into another #Monday like . . .” (emphasis added). This footage of training for future violent encounters normalizes violence through the informal caption, as well as hashtags referring to “#mondaymotivation,” “#mondaymood,” and “#happymonday.” That is, the use of mundane and informal captions and hashtags downplays the violence being captured and projected through the repeated explosion of a military tank by characterizing the explosion instead as a normal “Monday” occurrence, and manufactures a sense of excitement around tank explosions as motivating for the beginning of a work week. By normalizing violence in this way, the Army legitimizes its conduct and the existence of its regime.

Figure 6



Figure 6 includes a screenshot of the video and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from July 26, 2021. This post is a video with an intense drum instrumental and the faint sound of the helicopter in the video, and is described to depict some of the training done in preparation for future potential air assault actions. The caption of the post begins with helicopter emojis surrounding the hashtagged phrase “Air Assault!” The use of an exclamation point and emojis on a post platforming the training for future violent encounters and interactions is treated as informal and “exciting”. This informal caption and creation of excitement around training for violent encounters contributes to a normalization of violence that is central to justifying the military regime.

Figure 7



43,633 likes

usarmy 🇺🇸 🎆 Send it! 🎆

Sgt. Arturo Ramirez, assigned to @2dCavalryRegiment, fires a M777 Howitzer during a live-fire exercise, Grafenwoehr Training Area in Bavaria, Germany, July 22, 2021.

📷 by Kevin Sterling Payne

[View all 549 comments](#)

August 25, 2021

Similarly, the post in **Figure 7** from August 25, 2021 exemplifies the pattern of serious imagery of weapons firing combined with informal language in the caption. While the photo depicts a large artillery weapon, which was manufactured and being trained on to be used for future violence, the caption uses explosion emojis and a common video game exclamation: “Send it!” The use of emojis and informal language to downplay serious and violent imagery, and frame this violent content as invigorating, thus, normalizing violence. This normalization of violence aids in portraying the violence enacted by the Army as unproblematic and makes it easier to legitimize the Army’s existence as a state actor.

As shown through **Figures 1 through 7**, the Instagram page and posts normalize violence by 1) vaguely mentioning adversaries or omitting them altogether, effectively eliminating dialogue on the implications and consequences of the violent content depicted across posts; and 2) weaving together informal content and commentary with serious or violent imagery, effectively diluting the inherent violent nature of the content and framing it as exciting rather than problematic. This normalization of violence serves to legitimize the conduct of the U.S. military as natural or unalarming.

Exploiting Networks of Engagement

Social media platforms are designed for engagement. The Instagram platform exemplifies this through its central features, allowing users to “follow” accounts, “like,” “comment” and “share” posts, “tag” other user accounts, and use “hashtags” to link posts with others using the same hashtags. In examining this sample of 50 @usarmy Instagram posts, I find that the U.S. Army expands the influence of the military regime by exploiting networks of engagement. Posts often tag other military pages, effectively positioning the largely followed Army Instagram page as a “gateway” to a broader network of military Instagram accounts. Additionally, most posts use a wide array of hashtags—including both military and non-military related terms—allowing posts to land on military and non-military hashtag pages. Finally, posts invite viewers to engage with the post themselves, effectively integrating the viewer into the military network.

Posts Tagging Other Military Pages

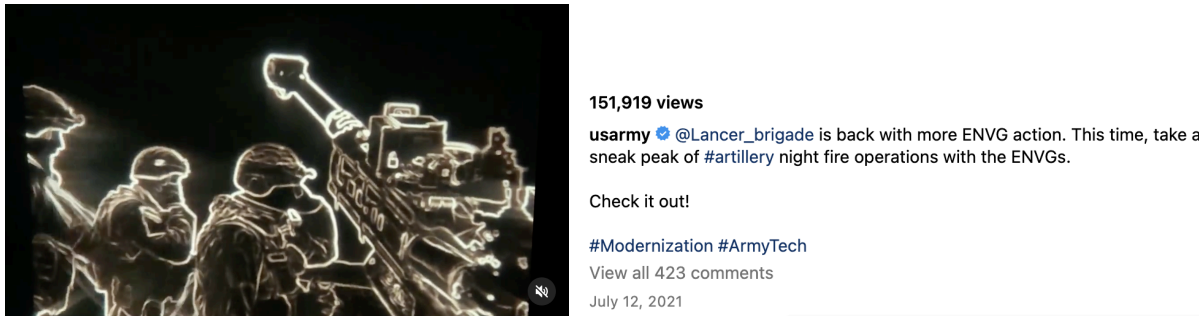
The external pages which the @usarmy Instagram page tag in their posts are often the pages of specific training locations, military organizations, and/or specific battalions or platoons within branches of the military. These pages all have less followers and post less frequently than the U.S. Army’s own Instagram page, showing that the U.S. Army’s Instagram page serves as a gateway into more niche areas of the broad military network proliferating online (see **Figure 8** and **Figure 9**).

Figure 8



Figure 8 includes a screenshot of the video and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from September 30, 2021. In this post, a military-related podcast is platformed, and the individual guest speaking on the podcast, Paul Reckhoff, is tagged in the post for viewers to be able to easily go to their own Instagram page. Paul Reckhoff (@paulrieckhoff) has just over 11,000 followers and over 9,000 posts as of March 2024. In his account, he identifies himself as a “Father, Activist, Author, Army vet” and podcast host among other positions. Additionally, his page has links to four other military-related pages. The largely platformed Army Instagram page acts as a gateway into further military content as it provides the opportunity for users to find more and more pages to follow. The Army Instagram’s network expands through each page that is tagged, serving as a gateway for more content which fits the representation that the Army finds favorable.

Figure 9



Similarly, the Instagram post from July 12, 2021 provided in **Figure 9** tags the Instagram page of the Lancer Brigade, a combat team based at Fort Lewis, Washington. The Lancer Brigade Instagram page has just under 16,000 followers and almost 800 posts as of March 2024. With this post, the Army’s Instagram page acts as a gateway to more specific content from a particular combat team. By connecting the combat page to the Army’s page, the Army utilizes Instagram to expand its regime through creating a network of diverse military related pages. Additionally, this network of military related content has the potential to appeal to a wider range of audiences, further promoting the possibility of engagement between viewers and military content pages, and in doing so, expanding the influence of the military regime.

Extensive Use of Hashtags

The extensive use of hashtags has been evident across the posts exemplified. In fact, 49 out of the 50 posts in the sample use hashtags. The one post in this sample that did not have any hashtags (**Figure 7**) nevertheless exemplifies exploiting networks of engagement through its tagging of the Instagram account of the specific cavalry regiment captured in the post’s photo. Many hashtags are of military-related terms, landing the posts on hashtag pages that will have other military-related content. Many hashtags are broader generic words or terms, landing the Army posts on hashtag pages in much more spaces that are not military related. The excessive

usage of hashtags in this way both connects the U.S. military to other (sometimes lesser-known) military networks and non-military networks, and in doing so, expands the reach of the military regime into more military and non-military related content spaces that exist uniquely on the Instagram platform.

Figure 10



Figure 10 includes a screenshot of the photo and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from April 4, 2021. Effectively, the use of hashtags such as #mortar and #armytraining will land this post on hashtag pages that will likely have other military-related content. Contrastingly, the use of broader, less descript hashtags like #CaptionThis and #targets will place this post on hashtag pages that have a variety of different content that is likely mostly not military or combat related. As a result, with the generic and excessive usage of hashtags, the U.S. military ensures that their content reaches a broad network of people, thereby expanding the military's influence.

Figure 11



32,154 likes

usarmy 🇺🇸 Army #helicopters, #freedom 🇺🇸 and #rainbows! 🌈

#USArmy paratroopers assigned @173rdABNBde, conduct sling load operations with a CH-47 Chinook helicopter from Illesheim, Germany, during exercise Eagle Talon.

📷 by Elena Baladelli

#ready2fight #trainedandready #armyteam

View all 198 comments

February 7, 2021

Similarly, **Figure 11** depicts another example of this trend of excessive hashtag use. Hashtag pages of posts using #armyteam and #ready2fight such as the post depicted in **Figure 11** contain majority military-related content. Alternatively, hashtag pages of posts using #freedom and #rainbows have a much more diverse general pool of posts. Thus, the U.S. military expands the influence of its regime by exploiting networks of engagement on Instagram through hashtags that land the military's (normalized violent) content on military-specific and general media pages.

Invitations for Viewer Engagement

The salient trend of inviting viewers to like, comment, and share a post encourages viewers to enter and interact with the military network proliferating on Instagram. By encouraging viewers to engage with Army Instagram content, the Army Instagram exploits networks of engagement to expand the influence of its regime. This is exemplified in the post from February 23, 2021, shown below in **Figure 12**.

Figure 12

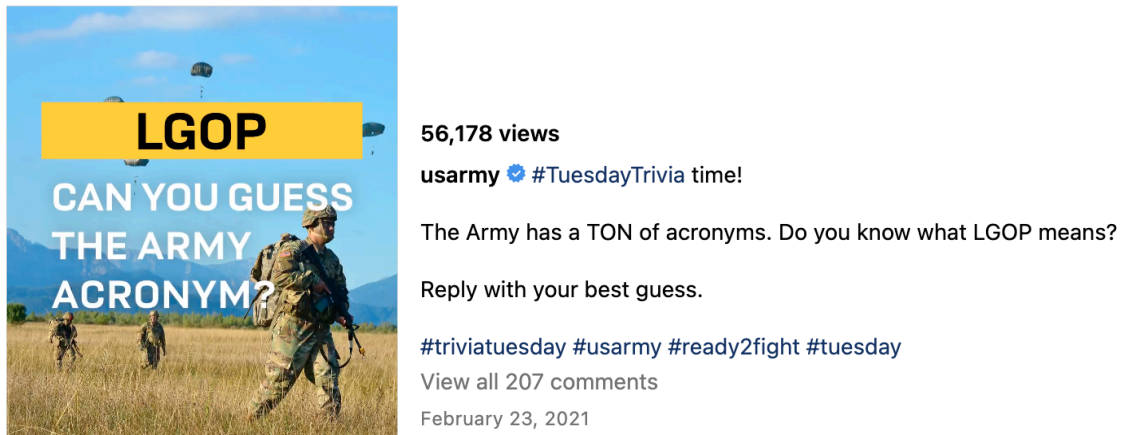


Figure 12 includes a screenshot of the photo and caption of a @usarmy Instagram post from February 23, 2021. The caption encourages interaction with the audience by framing the post as a “Tuesday Trivia” activity, asking people to comment what they think “LGOP,” which stands for “Little Group of Paratroopers,” means. As is evident in Figure 12, the post received 207 comments, indicating that people were engaging with, and to some extent, entering the military network. Effectively, by exploiting networks of engagement on Instagram through inviting viewers to engage with content, the Army Instagram page expands the regime’s influence.

Figure 13



44,012 likes

usarmy 🌐 #PopQuiz!

Everyone knows that you have to call for fire in order to bring the steel rain, but how many elements are involved in calling for #artillery fire and what are they?

You may have to phone a friend for this one!

👤 by Maj. Jason Welch

View all 277 comments

June 20, 2021

Similarly, the caption seen in the post from **Figure 13** is creating a game (“Pop Quiz”) around the photo of a military weapon firing. This invitation encourages viewers to comment their answers on the post by leaving a question in the caption. Additionally, the post encourages people to “phone a friend,” referring to the protocol to “call for fire” when shooting an artillery weapon in war. Likening a reference to war-making to “calling a friend” for assistance during a trivia game is also an invitation for engagement—it integrates everyday people into the military network. A total of 277 comments were entered in response to this post, demonstrating the exploitation of networks of engagement utilized on the Instagram platform for the purpose of expanding the regime’s reach to include viewers on Instagram.

As **Figures 8 through 13** make evident, the trends of tagging other military Instagram accounts, extensive use of hashtags, and invitations for viewer interaction exploit networks of engagement through the U.S. Army’s Instagram page. These networks of engagement, then, work more broadly to expand the influence of the U.S. Army regime and invite viewers into the military network through the Instagram platform.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article explores the intersections between media, militaries, and militarism, particularly examining how the U.S. Army legitimizes its regime and expands its influence on Instagram. Through qualitative content analysis of 50 @usarmy Instagram posts, my results illustrate that the Army legitimizes its regime on Instagram through normalization of violence and expands its influence by exploiting networks of engagement. Specifically, normalization of violence is achieved on Instagram through discussions or omissions of the “adversary” and informal content paired with serious or violent content. The Army also exploits networks of engagement on Instagram by tagging other military affiliated accounts, prolific utilization of hashtags, and encouraging users to engage with content.

Additional work is needed to expand our understanding on media, militaries, and militarism. My study provides an in-depth analysis of Army Instagram posts from the year 2021. While theme saturation was met well within this sample of posts, one limitation of this study is the small time frame within which posts were drawn from. To assess the manner in which the Army continues to normalize violence to justify and expand its regime within social media, assessing this trend over a longer period of time can offer important insights on relevant sociohistorical and political context that shapes or aids the normalization of violence. Moreover, my study on social media use by the U.S. military takes a critical media approach to how an audience is welcomed to consume content of a particular character (Carter and Weaver 2003). As state actors and government organizations continue to utilize social media platforms, more extensive research on such “platformization” of particular narratives is critical to continue examining, as international relations between allied nations and adversaries is increasingly more

available for the public to see (Massa and Anzera 2023). More research on the use of Instagram is important, as well as an analysis of the significance of variation across platforms within the realm of social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat. Another important avenue for future research is to examine how U.S. military social media content is being engaged with by the audience. While there is a dearth of critical research on the social media use of state actors such as the U.S. military, there is also a clear gap in our understanding of how users engage with such content. A systematic exploration of the comments on U.S. Army Instagram posts, for example, could begin to gauge the impact of the U.S. Army's efforts to legitimize and expand regime on their target audience.

The findings from this study extend our understanding of Army self-portrayal in the emergent medium of social media, particularly Instagram, beyond traditional forms of Army self-portrayal in recruitment commercial and video games (Jester 2021; Speck 2020; Apostel 2011). Themes found in representations of the Army in previous research include: focusing on the social safety net benefits and career trajectory potential of the Army while ignoring social-historical and geopolitical contexts of wars; realities of the impacts of war on individuals or society (Park et al. 2017; Apostel 2011); increased representation of women and people of color while still reinforcing gendered stereotypes (Jester 2021; Speck 2020); and day-in-the-life content in video games minimizing the realities and consequences of combat (Apostel 2011). My study also finds a clear and consistent omission of the impact of the U.S. military regime in the sociohistorical and geopolitical moment in which the posts were drawn from. Further, Instagram posts often focus on the Army's capacity and influence while omitting real peoples and places on the receiving end of U.S. domination, and downplay violent imagery using emojis and captions like #mondaymotivation, "Blasting into another #Monday like . . ." (see **Figure 5**).

Additionally, this study contributes to important work at the intersection of media, militaries, and the normalization of violence, as one of the first sociological studies to examine U.S. Army Instagram posts. The U.S. military has long emphasized the importance of controlling its own narrative (Carter and Weaver 2003; Moe 2011; U.S. JFCOM Joint Warfighting Center 2009; Wenger et al. 2019). The utilization of different mediums to disseminate a favorable narrative of militaries has been found to “sanitize violence” (Carter and Weaver 2003:23), communicate war as “commonsense” (Jackson et al. 2021:1049), and platform violent conflict to normalize violence and control the framing of such violence (Massa and Anzera 2023). My research illuminates the growing significance of Instagram as an important site where the Army continues to normalize its violence. Particularly, the U.S. Army Instagram normalizes violence through discussions or omissions of the enemy and by pairing informal content with serious or violent content. This deeply saturated theme coincides with findings of militaries communicating warmaking as “commonsense” and inherent facets of life (Jackson et al. 2021). Interestingly, U.S. Army Instagram posts normalized violence in part by omitting concrete details about sociohistorical and geopolitical conditions in which the posts were shared, while Israel’s Twitter account normalized violence in part by giving details about particular happenings in their military occupation of Palestine, utilizing their ability to speak directly to their audience and frame a narrative that reflected their ideal self-portrayal (Massa and Anzera 2023).

What is particularly novel about this case of Army self-representation is the frequency with which this messaging is disseminated. For instance, the @usarmy Instagram page shared over 600 posts just in the year 2021, posting more than once a day. The ability of state actors, such as the U.S. Army, to disseminate their own curated self-image directly to their target audience with no mediation is consequential. Considering this study’s finding that the Army

legitimizes its regime and expands the influence of its regime on Instagram by normalizing military violence and exploiting networks of engagement made possible on social media, more critical attention should be paid to militaries and militarism on social media.

APPENDIX A

CODEBOOK

Table 1. Codebook for data analysis

Code	Description	
Normalization of Violence	Discussions or Omissions of “enemy” or “adversary”	Refers to content mentioning “enemy” or “adversary.” Alternatively, content of training for enemy or adversary situations (i.e., weapons firing) with no mention of who or where the training will be used against.
	Informal content paired with violent or serious content	Refers to the combination of every day, informal language or informal social media terminology, emojis, etc. with violent imagery/imagery of weapons, explosions, serious content
Networks of Engagement	Tags other military Instagram pages	Refers to posts that tag (@) a military-related Instagram account in the caption. The account can be that of a military organization, military group (like a battalion), or individuals affiliated with the military in some capacity.
	Uses hashtags	Refers to the use of a hashtag for a term that is either military related or not military related.
	Invites viewer engagement	Refers to posts that ask/invite the viewer of the post to engage with the post by liking, commenting, visiting an external website, or sharing the post.

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