Affective Organizational Commitment as a Predictor of Military Enlistment Discussion and Recommendation

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Abstract

This exploratory study considered the relationship between affective organizational commitment, attitudes toward military advertising, attitudes toward the military and intentions with regard to enlistment in the military. A total of 155 participants participated in an experiment after which they filled out a questionnaire. Results indicated that attitudes toward the ad and attitudes toward the military influence affective organizational commitment. They also showed that affective organizational commitment predicts enlistment discussion and referral intentions. These findings as well as implications and future research opportunities are discussed.

Keywords: organizational commitment, affective commitment, brand attitudes, military advertising

Introduction

Like many large organizations, the branches of the United States Armed Forces have advertised and branded themselves to the American public. These persuasive messages may be precursors to the target audience's affective evaluations of the armed forces and ultimately influence their behavioral intentions as seen in actions surrounding enlistment decisions for themselves or as a career choice for friends or family. Another factor never before considered in this process that may be operant as a direct or mediating variable is the extent to which target audience members feel an organizational commitment to the military. This paper reports on exploratory research that introduces the organizational commitment construct into the attitude toward the ad--attitude toward the brand--purchase intention model. The context of the study was military advertising and behavioral intentions related to enlistment decisions.

Military Recruitment Advertising

The creation of the all-volunteer armed forces in 1974 launched an era of wide-reaching academic study of armed forces recruiting and advertising. Shyles & Ross (1984) found that the majority of late 1970s Army brochures focused on perceived measurable rewards such as education, job training and economic benefits. Another analysis of Army collateral materials revealed that more symbolic rewards, such as the status associated with membership in elite military units, were of importance as well (Padilla & Laner, 2002).

Other studies have looked at consumer preferences for military advertisements. Keck and Mueller (1994) found that television viewers perceive intended and unintended messages from Army television advertisements, concluding that "the political climate at a given period may be a critical factor which can impact cognitive responses" (p. 77). Miller, Clinton & Camey (2007) determined that preferences for military recruitment slogans can be discriminated by individual motivators (e.g. Maslow's Hierarchy) and manifest needs (e.g. achievement, autonomy, etc.), indicating target characteristics should be considered in the design of recruitment ads and slogans.

Of particular interest here are econometric analyses that have demonstrated advertising messages can increase enlistments (e.g. Dertouzos, 2009; Dertouzos & Garber, 2006; Epps, 1973; Morey & McCann, 1980) and can be very cost-effective tool for generating new recruits (Dertouzos, 2009; Warner, Simon & Payne, 2003). Hanssens and Levien (1983) concluded, however, that larger, macroeconomic variables such as unemployment can have a greater effect than advertising on recruiting success. In keeping with a hierarchy-of-effects model, advertising is best used to influence antecedents of the decision to enlist such as interest generation, which leads to enlistment inquiries (Hanssens & Levien, 1983). This thinking has led to consideration of potential recruits' attitudes and intention as enlistment precursors. One such example is Reichert, Kim and Fosu's (2007) reasoned-action approach to evaluating the effectiveness of Naval recruitment commercials that found exposure favorably influenced beliefs about the Navy (that "global force for good") but not interest in the Navy. It is clear, then, that such beliefs and intentions in the recruitment process mirror much of the attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention research found in the classic advertising literature.

Advertising Effects on Brand Attitudes and Intentions

Mackenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986) have suggested that shaping the consumer's attitude toward the ad (Aad) is an important way to understand their behavior. Most of the consumer attitude literature has attempted to confirm the link between ad attitudes and brand attitudes (Batra & Ray, 1985; Burke & Edell, 1986). This previous research illustrates the importance of advertising and its role in marketing communication campaigns. And the campaigns for the various branches of the military are no different. The recruitment process employs advertising to develop awareness and knowledge of the military branches and interest in enlisting. Marketing and advertising scholars have suggested that ads are seen as having an effect on brand attitudes by creating positive attitudes towards the ad itself (Mackenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Attitude toward the brand is generally regarded as an evaluation of particular brand attributes – those attributes can be evaluated either positively or negatively (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Furthermore, effective advertising has been shown to increase brand recognition and recall (Till & Baack, 2005). In this study, we look at individuals who are exposed to an ad in an experimental context, but also a control group that is asked to recall ads from the military.

When measuring attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intent Ang and Low (2000) found that ads perceived as good, creative ads were often evaluated more favorably and enhanced perceptions (though less than attitude toward the ad) for brand attitude and purchase intention. Similarly, Stone, Besser & Lewis (2000) demonstrated a link between creative commercials and how respondents evaluated the commercials. Essentially, if a commercial was perceived as creative, it was generally more well-liked. So, while much of this literature focuses on specific components of aided and unaided recall, it also shows the (potentially) strong link between attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase (behavioral) intention. For the purpose of this study, enlistment-related behaviors are the behavioral intention of interest. Both a Personal Enlistment Discussion and an Enlistment Referral Discussion are the intention measures for this study and should provide a clue to an ad's impact on the receiver of the message from the military (in this case, the Navy). This is the case for individuals who may see an ad (in this case the experimental condition) and individuals who are simply asked to recall a military ad and evaluate it (control condition). Essentially, a good, creative ad should lead to more positive evaluations of the ad, and to a lesser degree, more positive attitudes toward the brand and intention.

That the Navy, and for that matter, the United States military as a whole, have created their own brands suggests these variables deserve further examination under the parameters of the prevailing structural model of consumer attitude formation. So we find in this attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention context, that attitude toward the military (in this case, the Navy) is essentially a proxy for attitude toward the brand and where behaviors related to enlistment intention are essentially a proxy for purchase intention. For this study we defined enlistment intention in two ways: the first, what we call a Personal Enlistment Discussion, involves considering the military for the individual respondent; the second, recommending enlistment to others, or an Enlistment Referral Discussion. These variables will be discussed further in the Methods section.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment has been studied for many years by numerous scholars. While a consensus regarding the definition of organizational commitment has eluded the field, fundamentally the construct is based on the strength of an individual's identification with an organization (Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1979).

As conceptualized by Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982), organizational commitment consists of two key components: attitudinal and behavioral commitment to an organization. Attitudinal commitment is explained as the way people think about their own values and goals in relation to the organization to which they belong. Behavioral commitment is the process of becoming attached to an organization and the recognition of dealing with the potential consequences of belonging to an organization.

In response to the diversity of approaches to conceptualizing the construct, Meyer and Allen (1991) proposed three dimensions of organizational commitment – affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Their thinking was to reflect an individual's sense of belonging to an organization in terms of emotional, psychological and behavioral dimensions. The three main themes associated with organizational commitment, therefore, are the affective attachment to an organization, the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization and the perceived obligation to remain within an organization.

Organizational commitment has often been examined in the workplace setting where affective commitment is an "employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67). As such, affective commitment represents an employee's desire to stay with the organization because of a robust and powerful emotional connection to the organization (Snyder & Cistulli, 2011). Not surprisingly, many studies have looked at organizational commitment as it relates to employee turnover (e.g. Ferris & Aranya, 1983; Hom, Katerberg, & Hulin, 1979; Huselid & Day, 1991; Wiener & Vardi, 1980). In the organizational communication and psychology literature, high levels of affective commitment have been linked to a number of positive workplace outcomes. For example, Luchak and Gellatly (2007) observed that affective commitment is predictive of greater job performance. Not only are committed employees better performers, they are also less likely to disengage from their organizations (Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin, & Jackson, 1989; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 1993). In fact, Harrison, Newman, and Roth's (2006) meta-analytic study concluded commitment correlated positively with performance and negatively with both turnover and absenteeism. Moreover, employees with high levels of affective commitment are also more likely to commit organizational citizenship behaviors (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2006; Shore & Wayne, 1993).

The advertising literature has historically examined consumers' affective responses to advertisements and brands, and the impact of those responses on consumer purchasing intentions and behaviors (Gobe, 2001). Although affective commitment is a concept that is typically associated with the organizational communication and psychology literature, we believe that consumers' evaluative responses to advertisements and brands can lead consumers to develop commitment to those brands in much the same way that employees develop commitment to their organizations. Therefore, this research takes a unique and novel approach in its examination of organizational commitment by studying commitment to the U.S. military and within the nexus of attitudes towards the military as an institution, attitudes towards military advertising and behavioral intentions associated with enlistment decisions.

Hypotheses

As discussed above, advertisements are capable of eliciting emotional responses in consumers that, in turn, lead consumers to think and act in ways preferable to the advertiser (i.e., increased purchase intention and purchase behavior). We argue that these positive evaluations of advertisements and brands should result in a stronger emotional connection between the consumer and the brand. In the context of the present study, positive attitudes toward the advertisement and the military should result in feelings of greater affective commitment to the armed forces. Strong feelings of affective commitment to the military should predict positive behaviors demonstrative of lower levels of disengagement. In organizations, these behaviors include higher performance, lower turnover, and increased citizenship behavior. In the present context, we are interested in behaviors such as a willingness to discuss and recommend enlisting in the military. With that in mind, the following hypotheses were considered:

  H1: More positive attitudes toward the ad will result in higher affective organizational commitment.
  H2: More positive attitudes toward the military will result in higher affective organizational commitment.
  H3: Attitude toward the military will partially mediate the relationship between attitude toward the ad and affective organizational commitment.
  H4: Higher organizational commitment will result in higher likelihood to discuss enlisting with friends.
  H5: Higher organizational commitment will result in higher likelihood to discuss enlisting with family.

H6: Higher organizational commitment will result in higher likelihood of recommending enlistment to friends.

H7: Higher organizational commitment will result in higher likelihood of recommending enlistment to family.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of participants (N= 155, 60% Female, *M*age = 21 years) were undergraduate students from two universities located in the Northeastern United States. Participants were recruited via the Internet by email and Facebook and given extra credit in their classes for participation in the study.

Materials

The stimulus for this study was a 60-second ad developed by the United States Navy. Two focus groups evaluated several ads and this ad was chosen because it showed the greatest amount of diversity in terms of active shots of combat maneuvers, close ups of individuals of different races and genders and shots of people working together in dynamic environments. In other words, the groups indicated, this was a good overview of the military. This ad: "The Call to Serve," is part of the larger "A Global Force for Good" campaign. There were several different subjects of different sexes and races in the ad performing an array of military duties.

Design and Procedure

A convenience sample was recruited and links designating experimental and control conditions were randomly assigned. In the experimental group, an ad was shown in a pod of three ads (a soft drink ad, the Navy ad, and a detergent ad) to participants before they responded to questionnaire items. The control group completed a questionnaire without seeing any ads but subjects were asked to recall any ads from the military and answer the same questions as the experimental group.

Measures

Descriptives. Participants were asked their age and sex.

Affective Organizational Commitment. A six-item affective organizational commitment measure created by Meyer and Allen (1991) was used for this study. The items utilized a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (α = .80). Four of the items were retained for this study. The items were: "I really feel as if the armed forces problems are my own." "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the armed forces." "I do not feel emotionally attached to the armed forces." "The armed forces have a great deal of personal meaning for me."

Attitude toward the Ad. Participants rated their overall impression of the ad using a semantic-differential scale developed by Donthu (1998). The five-point scale (α =.90.) read as follows to members of the experimental condition: "To me, the advertisement I just saw was _____." The items were: unpleasant/pleasant, vulgar/refined, unlikable/likable, boring/interesting, tasteless/tasteful, bad/good, inferior/superior, unenjoyable/enjoyable, unattractive/attractive, worthless/valuable. For the control condition, the language was changed to reflect recall and appeared as follows: "To me, military ads I have seen were_____."

Attitude toward the Military. Participants rated their overall "brand" impression of the Armed Forces using a five point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) derived from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2009). The eight items (α = .89) were as follows: "I trust the United States Armed Forces," "I rely on the United States Armed Forces," "Members of the United States Armed Forces are honest," "The United States Armed Forces keep me safe," "I feel good when I see and ad about the United States Armed Forces," "I am happy with the United States Armed Forces," "I am pleased with the United States Armed Forces."

Personal Enlistment Discussion (PED). Participants responded to two five-point Likert scale items addressing their own possible enlistment in the Armed Forces. They were: "I would discuss the option of my enlisting in the Armed Forces with my friends" and "I would discuss the option of enlisting in the Armed Forces with my family."

Enlistment Referral Discussion (ERD). Participants responded to two five-point Likert-type scale items about recommending the Armed Forces to friends or family. The questions were: "How likely are you to recommend enlistment in the Armed Forces to a friend?" and "How likely are you to recommend enlistment in the Armed Forces to a family member?"

Results

We began analyzing the data by running correlations to test the initial relationships between the affective, normative, and continuance commitment and attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the military, personal enlistment decision and enlistment referral discussion (see Table 1). The results show that all three dimensions of organizational commitment are significantly related to attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the military as well as personal enlistment decision and enlistment referral decision. So, it appears in this case that using organizational commitment may be effective in illustrating the subjects' evaluation of the military, its advertising, and may impact their intention to discuss enlistment with friends and family. Interestingly, the only effect the ad stimulus seemed to have was on continuance commitment ($r = -.188$), and not surprisingly attitude toward the ad ($r = .299$). However, the primary focus for this analysis was on the affective components of organizational commitment.

To test our hypotheses we conducted a series of regression analyses. For Hypothesis 1 attitude toward the ad was the predictor and affective organizational commitment was the criterion. The model was a good fit to the data (F [1, 154] = 17.32, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .10$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Next, we tested attitude toward the military as a predictor of affective organizational commitment. Again, the model was a good fit (F [1, 154] = 43.14, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .43$), explaining an impressive 43% of the variance and supporting Hypothesis 2. A third analysis regressed affective organizational commitment on both attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the military. The results (F [1, 154] = 17.29, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .19$) supported Hypothesis 3 because the effect of attitude toward the ad turned insignificant (see Table 2) but did not fall to .00 ($\beta= .11$). This demonstrates partial mediation by attitude toward the military between attitude toward the ad and affective organizational commitment.

The remaining hypotheses, where affective organizational commitment was tested as a predictor of the types (friends or family) of personal enlistment or enlistment referral discussion were all supported as well: Hypothesis 4, where affective organizational commitment predicted whether or not participants would discuss enlisting in the armed forces with their friend, (F [1, 154] = 31.44, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .13$). Hypothesis 5, where affective organizational commitment predicted whether or not participants would discuss enlisting in the armed forces with their families, (F [1, 154] = 24.83, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .11$). Hypothesis 6, where affective organization commitment predicted whether or not participants would recommend that their friends join the military, (F [1, 154] = 59.96, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .23$). Hypothesis 7, where affective organizational commitment predicting whether or not participants would recommend joining the military to a family member, (F [1, 154] = 65.20, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .24$).

Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research

This exploratory study examined the interplay of the organizational commitment construct among the variables in the well-established attitude toward the ad--attitude toward the brand--purchase intention model. Military advertising and behavioral intentions related to enlistment decisions provided a unique context in which to test our belief that consumers' evaluative responses to advertisements and brands can engender commitment to those brands in much the same way that employees develop commitment to their organizations. Given that all of our hypotheses were upheld by the results of the statistical analyses, it's reasonable to conclude that the findings support our contention that affective organizational commitment may play a role in the attitudinal chain the follows from advertisement to brand to purchase (behavioral) intention. Specifically applied to the U.S. military and its recruiting efforts, organizational commitment was shown to be associated with and dependent on attitudes toward the recruiting ad and general attitudes towards the military. Moreover, affective organizational commitment proved a consistently significant predictor of all four measures of military enlistment discussion.

Having varying degrees of emotional commitment to one's organization is well established in organizational communication and psychology literature. However, we argue that some of those same measures of affective commitment can also effectively measure attitudes and intentions as they relate to one of the largest organizations in world – the U.S. Military. And, while not everyone belongs to the military, among Americans there appears to still be a strong sense of emotional attachment to our armed forces. Perhaps this is because of the ongoing wars overseas, or the recent assassination of Osama Bin Laden. Or, perhaps it is the respondent's patriotic attachment to their country and the strong U.S. Military, by proxy, represents the country as a whole. Most likely it is a combination of these things.

One of the limitations of this study is that this paper dealt almost exclusively with affective organizational commitment. The other realms of organizational commitment—normative and continuance—and deserving of further study and future research could more closely look at those dimensions (see Appendix 1 for correlations).

A second limitation is the relatively limited amount of data collected. A larger, broader sample that includes a greater number of "military" respondents with family and friends currently in the military might react differently to recommending or discussing military enlistment. Moreover, those responses may mimic individuals who have friends and family working for a traditional company or organization. Therefore, additional data needs to be collected and future research opportunities exist there.

Finally, the stimulus in one group in this experiment was a Navy ad and respondents in the control group were simply asked to recall a broadcast ad. As stated earlier, each military brand has done its best to create its own brand image and tone. This may be a limitation in that the ad that people are recalling might be from a different branch and though the message may be similar, the brand image and tone might be different. However, we contend that whether primed by an ad stimulus or by a question on a survey, the responses still accurately measure the attitudes that predict the affective organizational commitment levels of respondents.

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Table 1

Correlation Matrix

Organizational Commitment	Attitude toward...		Discuss enlistment with…		Recommend enlistment to…	
	Ad	Military	Friends	Family	Friends	Family
Affective	.319**	.425**	.367**	.331**	.478**	.493**
Normative	.425**	.561**	.214**	.174*	.368**	.359**
Continuance	.255**	.415**	.179*	.190**	.260**	.288**

** = significant at .01 level

* = significant at .05 level

Table 2

Regression of Affective Organizational Commitment on Attitude toward the Ad and Attitude toward the Military

	B	SE B	β
Attitude toward the Ad	0.011	0.01	0.11
Attitude toward the Military	0.062	0.016	0.365**

Notes: R^2 = .193, *p*<.001.