

The U.S. Military Veteran in News Photographs: Representation and Stereotypes

Commenters have expressed concern over media content related to military veterans, saying journalists fail to provide the public with an accurate understanding of what it means to be a veteran. Nevertheless, few studies have examined the representation of veterans in news media content. The present study analyzed 740 photographs shared by regional news outlets on the popular social media platform Twitter. Coders documented the representation of veteran groups (gender, race, and service period) and stereotypes concerning veterans (homelessness, charity, and trauma) in the images. Results showed that the photographs rarely communicated stereotypes about veterans. Photographs overrepresented female veterans, although male veterans remained the significant majority. Minority veterans were underrepresented. Photographs most often contained images associated with World War II.

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An estimated 20 million military veterans live in the United States (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016), representing an estimated 7.3% of the American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Despite the prevalence of veterans, a disconnect exists between military and civilian society in that the public does not understand experiences of military service members, veterans, and their families (Pew Research Center, 2011a). The military-civilian divide may carry significant consequences for veterans, potentially complicating reintegration into civilian society (Smith & True, 2014) by nurturing inaccurate assumptions about the consequences of service and what veterans need to be successful in the civilian world (Philipps, 2015). The military-civilian divide, also studied in countries such as the United Kingdom (Strachan, 2003), has been attributed in part to the end of compulsory enlistment in the Armed Forces (Hines, Gribble, Wessely, Dandeker, & Fear, 2015). The mass media may also be partly responsible, presenting the civilian public narrow representations of what it means to serve in the military.

The number of people who have a close friend or family member who served in the Armed Forces is declining (Livingston, 2016). This means fewer people learn about military service, including its positive and negative consequences, through personal experience or the experience of close others. It also introduces an increased likelihood that people are learning about the military and service members through sources such as news reports, advertisements, television shows, and movies. It is therefore important we understand how the mass media represent military veterans and service members, given that media exposure can shape thoughts, emotions, and behavior concerning social and demographic groups (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). While limited in breadth, recent research suggests that news media frequently portray veterans as “wounded heroes” who were damaged by their service, need and deserve the community’s help, and stand a greater likelihood of perpetuating violence against themselves or others (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Rhidenour, Barrett, & Blackburn, 2017; Wilbur, 2016). The present study expands upon the existing literature by examining the visual representation of U.S. military veterans in

photographs shared by news outlets in each of the 50 states. Informed by cultivation theory, the study focuses on two types of portrayals that have been deemed problematic in how the public perceives military veterans: representation (in terms of demographics) and stereotypes or common associations concerning veterans (National Veterans Foundation, 2017; Philipps, 2015).

First, this study examines whether the photographs shared by regional news outlets accurately reflect the demographics of the U.S. military, building off a line of research that shows that the real-world prevalence of women and minorities is frequently misrepresented in the mass media (Collins, 2011; Mastro, 2009). Second, it investigates the prevalence of images associating veterans with homelessness, traumatic physical injury, and charity, three common assumptions concerning veterans and the consequences of service that may be detected in photographs. Such areas have been deemed problematic by veterans (Philipps, 2015) and veterans' organizations (Lieberman & Stewart, 2014), who are concerned about the effects these messages might have on the general public's attitudes toward veterans and military service. The results may inform strategic communication and journalistic practices related to military veterans. Further, the results provide an understanding of which veteran demographic groups are represented by news media photographs, which might help organizations develop messages that better target racial/ethnic groups and female audiences. Finally, the results provide the foundation for future research concerning how mass media coverage affects beliefs, emotions, and behavior related to military veterans, including public attitudes toward veterans and veterans' identity.

Literature Review

The Veteran Population in the United States

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs anticipates a decline from 20 million veterans in 2017 to 13.6 million in 2037 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017), due in part to the end of compulsory service, commonly known as the draft. In addition, the demographics of the U.S. military are changing. The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2016) estimates that 1.8 million female veterans are living in the United States, representing about 10% of the veteran population. The organization estimates that women will represent about 18% of the veteran population by 2045 (NCVAS, 2016). Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2017) anticipates that the prevalence of

veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups will increase to 33% in 2037. In 2017, minorities represented 23% of the veteran population.¹

In addition to race and gender, veterans often are identified by the conflict in which they served (or did not). In 2017, veterans from the Gulf War era represented the largest cohort (at 7.27 million people), followed by Vietnam era veterans (6.65 million), Korean conflict veterans (1.47 million), and World War II veterans (624,000; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017).

Veterans in the Media: Representation and Stereotypes

The changing demographics of the U.S. military underscore the importance of studying media portrayals of veterans. People who lack direct experience with members of social/demographic groups are more likely to be influenced by mediated contact with members of those social groups, compared to people who personally know a member of the out-group (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Outcomes of contact depend in part on two factors: the sheer frequency with which members of the social group appear and the qualities embodied by group members when they do appear. The present study contributes to the literature by first examining how often different genders, races, and conflict cohorts (i.e., World War II, Vietnam) are represented in images of veterans shared by U.S. news media. Given the dearth of research regarding veterans in the media, it draws upon the existing literature related to women and racial/ethnic representation in the media.

Gender and Racial Representation in the Media.

Women are underrepresented in both entertainment and news content; stand greater chance of appearing in gender-stereotyped story forms, such as human interest stories; and often appear in roles that are based on stereotypical gender roles, such as victim or homemaker (Collins, 2011; Desmond & Danilewicz, 2010). Traditional U.S. gender roles run contrary to the values of the Armed Forces, as illustrated by the work of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Women Veterans, which produces its own media-based campaigns to highlight the stories of female service members. One campaign, labeled "I Am A Veteran," seeks to challenge the notion that female veterans are "the wife or daughter of the 'actual' Veteran" (Center for Women Veterans, n.d.).

Regarding race and ethnicity, both African Americans and Caucasians are often overrepresented in media content compared to

their real-world populations, but when it comes to news, African Americans are overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims and police officers (Mastro, 2009), essentially associating African Americans with negative instead of positive roles. Meanwhile, Latino Americans and Asian Americans are underrepresented in U.S. media content compared to the actual population. Like African American characters, Latino characters are more likely to appear in crime-related programming (Mastro, 2009).

Media Stereotypes of Veterans. In addition to demographics, the present study investigates the frequency with which news photographs illustrate stereotypes concerning military veterans and negative consequences of service. Stereotypes are conceptually defined as a generalized belief associated with a social group (Bodenhausen, Todd, & Becker, 2007), and the mass media represent a major contributor to the spread of stereotypes in modern society (Stangor & Schaller, 1996). Both news organizations and the American cinema have been criticized for storylines in which veterans return home as “ticking time bombs” primed to perpetuate violence against themselves and others (e.g., Merry, 2015). In the news realm, recent studies of newspaper content found that the text of U.S. newspapers often perpetuates stereotypes concerning military veterans by primarily portraying veterans as “wounded heroes” who did great deeds, deserve respect, and warrant civilian help because they returned home mentally and physically traumatized. Stereotypes may “grow up from a kernel of truth” (Allport, 1954, p. 22). An estimated 1 in 10 veterans alive today experienced serious injury while serving (Morin, 2011), and physical trauma represents a significant predictor of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Baker et al., 2009). In addition, stereotypes may represent positive or negative information. For example, individual service members may indeed be heroes, embodying a positive stereotype that associates service with heroism. Stereotypes are problematic because they generally ignore individual characteristics, informing prejudice (positive or negative attitudes) and discrimination (differential treatment) toward social groups. Stereotypes may be internalized by the people they target, influencing self-esteem and behavior (Corrigan, Larson, & Rüscher, 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995), which could have consequences for veterans. Regarding media coverage of veterans, Rhidenour et al. (2017) examined four years of Veterans Day newspaper coverage (2012–2015) and determined that news organizations framed veterans as heroes or victims of wartime

experiences or the health system. Similarly, Wilbur’s (2016) examination of 183 newspaper articles found that newspapers often described veterans as “broken and disoriented” and attributed the damage to combat rather than personal flaws. Stories often described veterans as experiencing confusion upon reintegration into civilian society. Finally, themes of victimization emerged in an analysis of articles published between 2003 and 2011 in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015). The researchers examined coverage of veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom, finding that 9 out of 10 articles under examination contained reference to veterans being victimized during conflict or at home. Finally, Parrott, Albright, Dyché, and Steele (2018) found that news organizations often employ three frames when discussing military veterans, focusing on victimization, honor, and charity.

Why Media Representation Matters

Cultivation theory (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009) proposes that the mediated world informs audience members’ perceptions of the real world. People who watch large amounts of television begin to see the real world through a skewed lens, one reflecting the content they regularly encounter on the screen (Morgan et al., 2009). While the theory initially focused on the medium of television, cultivation theory may also help explain the consequences of long-term exposure to other forms of mediated content such as newspapers (e.g., Arendt, 2010). The cultivation effect appears to occur through the repetitive association of concepts in memory, which render concepts more readily available (Shrum, 1996). Along these lines, repetitive long-term exposure to news photographs in which veterans are portrayed as male and homeless should nurture an association in which these concepts more readily come to mind than, comparatively, cognitive associations in which veterans are female and/or active contributors to the good of a community.

Cultivation researchers examine key aspects of mass mediated messages such as who appears in the content (e.g., gender, race) and how they are represented (e.g., criminals, victims, employment). Cultivation theory helps explain the mass communication of homogenous messages to heterogeneous audiences, including messages about minorities that are designed by and communicated for the majority (Morgan et al., 2015). The intention of the present study is to perform cultivation work that begins by “identifying and assessing the most recurrent and

stable patterns” (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 680) so that future work may explore the effect of these cultural representations on people’s perceptions of social reality related to veterans. Indeed, the representation of female veterans and veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups might carry ramifications for veterans through its influence on the civilian population. For example, when asked to call to mind an image of a veteran, a person whose knowledge comes through news and entertainment might be unlikely to call to mind a female, assuming this demographic is infrequently represented in news photographs. Anecdotally, a female Air Force veteran’s experience made international headlines when she parked in a “veteran’s only” spot at a grocery store in North Carolina and received a note on her vehicle that read, “Maybe you can’t read the sign you parked in front of. . . . This space is reserved for those who fought for America . . . not you” (Alter, 2015). The veteran told reporters:

I think they took one look at me when I got out of my car and saw that I was a woman and assumed I wasn’t a veteran and assumed I hadn’t served my country. They have this image of what today’s American veteran is, and honestly, if you’ve served in the United States military, you know that veterans come in all shapes and sizes.

Similarly, a female Navy veteran received a note when she parked in a reserved space outside a grocery store in another city in North Carolina. That note read, “This parking is for Veterans, lady. Learn to read and have some respect” (Stump, 2016).

Female veterans who participated in one qualitative study commented that the public is surprised to learn they are veterans (Huynh-Hohnbaum, Damron-Rodriguez, Washington, Villa, & Harada, 2003).

Given the fact the mass media create homogenous messages that reflect the culture in which they are crafted, one might expect women veterans and veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups to be misrepresented in news content much the same way they are misrepresented in other mass media fare. Therefore, the present study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Female veterans will be underrepresented (in comparison to their real-world prevalence) in the photographs shared by regional news organizations on Twitter.

H2. Veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups will be underrepresented (in comparison to their real-world prevalence) in the photographs shared by regional news organizations on Twitter.

In addition to gender and race, the study examined the following:

RQ1: How prevalent are the different conflict cohorts in the photographs shared by regional news organizations on Twitter, and how does this compare to the real world?

As noted, veterans and veterans’ organizations have expressed concern about stereotypes. The potential significance of such associations was illustrated by the veterans’ organization Got Your Six. In a survey commissioned by the group, researchers showed respondents an image of a man sitting on the street, disheveled and dirty, holding a sign that said, “Please Help, God Bless.” While 87% of respondents described the man as experiencing homelessness, 46% described the man as a military veteran (Lieberman & Stewart, 2014). In reality, about 9% of the homeless are veterans (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). Given the potential role of the media in nurturing such stereotypes, the present study examined the following:

RQ2: How prevalent are stereotypes about veterans (homelessness, physical trauma, charity) in the photos shared by the news publications?

In addition to underrepresenting women, the mass media often perpetuate gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms by representing women as homemakers or caregivers who need protection, an association that contradicts values of the Armed Forces. Therefore, the present study also examined the following:

RQ3: How prevalent are gender stereotypes about female veterans in the photos shared by the news publications?

Method

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to examine the hypotheses and research questions. The study examined photographs shared by regional news organizations in the 50 United States when they posted stories about veterans on the social media platform Twitter. A list of publications (one per state) appears in Table 1. At the time of data collection, Twitter permitted its users to share 140-word text messages and

Table 1 News Publications Examined in Content Analysis

State	Publication	Followers
Alabama	al.com	244,000
Alaska	Anchorage Daily News	63,900
Arizona	azcentral.com	326,000
Arkansas	Democrat-Gazette	59,900
California	The Mercury News	187,000
Colorado	The Denver Post	366,000
Connecticut	Hartford Courant	133,000
Delaware	Delaware Online	95,800
Florida	Tampa Bay Times	211,000
Georgia	Atlanta Journal-Constitution	850,000
Hawaii	Honolulu Star-Advertiser	61,900
Idaho	Idaho Statesman	65,400
Illinois	Chicago Tribune	929,000
Indiana	Indianapolis Star	224,000
Iowa	Des Moines Register	134,000
Kansas	Kansas.com	54,800
Kentucky	Courier-Journal	68,100
Louisiana	The Advocate	74,600
Maine	Sun Journal	32,400
Maryland	Baltimore Sun	265,000
Massachusetts	Boston Globe	638,000
Michigan	Detroit Free Press	378,000
Minnesota	Minneapolis Star Tribune	301,000
Mississippi	The Clarion-Ledger	129,000
Missouri	The Kansas City Star	214,000
Montana	Billings Gazette	28,600
Nebraska	Omaha World-Herald	121,000
Nevada	Las Vegas Review-Journal	45,000
New Jersey	The Star-Ledger	208,000
New Mexico	Albuquerque Journal	61,800
New York	New York Post	1,270,000
North Carolina	The Charlotte Observer	218,000
North Dakota	Inforum	32,400
Ohio	Cleveland.com	101,000
Oklahoma	The Oklahoman	44,100
Oregon	The Oregonian	259,000
Pennsylvania	Philadelphia Inquirer	241,000
Rhode Island	Providence Journal	96,700
South Carolina	The State	83,600
South Dakota	Argus Leader	47,000
Tennessee	Tennessean	234,000
Texas	Dallas Morning News	550,000
Utah	Deseret News	86,200
Vermont	Burlington Free Press	50,700
Virginia	Richmond Times-Dispatch	91,400
Washington	Seattle Times	512,000
West Virginia	The Herald-Dispatch	12,200
Wisconsin	Journal Sentinel	55,600
Wyoming	Casper Star-Tribune	8,844
Total:		10,768,944

visuals, called tweets, with other users, called followers. The study examined Twitter because it is a popular social media platform among the general public (Pew Research Center, 2017), and newsrooms generally share the same content on the platform as they do the publication website and the print version of the publication (Pew Research Center, 2011b), whereas image-focused platforms such as Instagram appear to be less popular tools for regional news outlets. Regional news outlets were defined as publications located in metropolitan areas whose coverage is primarily local, state, and regional (e.g., *al.com* in Alabama, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in Georgia, *The Oregonian* in Oregon).

Previous analyses of content related to military veterans (e.g., Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Rhidenour et al., 2017) have focused on the text published by elite outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, which enjoy large readerships and exert influence over the story topics covered by other publications in the United States. The *Times* and *Post* attract a primarily wealthy, well-educated, and politically liberal readership (Pew Research Center, 2016; Washington Post, 2017), and journalists working for the newsrooms are generally afforded greater resources (money and time) than reporters and photographers working for other publications (The New York Times, 2017). Therefore, the present study focused on regional publications in each state in an effort to produce a more diverse sample in terms of news resources, editorial reach, and readership demographics. In addition, regional publications cover stories concerning military veterans that might not attract the attention of national news organizations, such as local parades commemorating veterans or feature stories about community residents who served in the Armed Forces.

In terms of procedure, the primary investigator compiled a list of regional news publications while taking into account circulation numbers, Twitter

Table 2 Prevalent Characteristics in News Photographs of Veterans

Characteristic	Prevalence in Photographs
Male	<i>n</i> = 352 (86% of all photos)
Female	<i>n</i> = 55 (14% of all photos)
White	<i>n</i> = 334 (82% of all photos)
Minority racial/ethnic group	<i>n</i> = 74 (18% of all photos)
Homeless veteran (The individual appears homeless: disheveled, poor, unkempt clothing, clutching panhandling sign, etc.)	<i>n</i> = 10 (2% of all photos)
Physically injured veteran (The individual appears with physical wounds, missing limbs, etc.)	<i>n</i> = 35 (9% of all photos)
Veteran receiving aid/assistance/charity (The individual is receiving charity through an organization or another person; the individual is perhaps in line at a social service outfit).	<i>n</i> = 45 (11% of all photos)
The American flag (The Stars and Stripes appears in the image).	<i>n</i> = 45 (11% of all photos)

followers, and the size of the metropolitan areas represented by the publications. Next, the primary investigator used the advanced search function on Twitter to search each news organization's account for posts that included the terms "veteran" or "veterans." A random number generator was used to select 20% of tweets from each publication for analysis (e.g., 20% from the Journal-Constitution, 20% from The Oregonian, etc.). This approach ensured a random sample that included all newspapers. The search produced 2,311 veteran-related tweets that featured photographs, dating from 2008 to the time of data collection, June 2017. The primary investigator produced PDF copies of the content for coding because the temporal nature of the internet means content can change or disappear over time. Duplicate images were excluded.

Once data were compiled, the primary investigator trained two graduate students to use a coding protocol in which coders indicated the presence/absence of characteristics within each photograph, including variables related to gender, race, the conflict in which they served, and stereotypes. Table 2 provides a list of characteristics.

The research team conducted an initial trial run using content taken from a publication not within the data set. Based on the results, revisions were made to the protocol to clarify operational definitions. Coders then coded 230 tweets that were randomly selected from the publications to determine intercoder reliability, meeting the recommended benchmark of testing 10% of the sample (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). Reliability was excellent for all variables (Krippendorff's α of .88 to .97). Having established the reliability of

the protocol, coders independently rated an additional 510 images for a total sample size of 740 (32% of the population).

Photographs served as the unit of analysis. The images were examined to determine whether they were locally produced (e.g., shot by the publication's photographers or submitted for publication) or if they represented content from a wire services or media chain such as Gannett. The majority of images (*n* = 584, or 79%) appeared to be locally generated, judging by the location of the subject matter, copyright stamps, photo credits, and other indicators.

For the hypotheses and first research question, coders documented whether each of the following appeared in the photographs by using 0 = *absent* and 1 = *present*: male veteran; female veteran; White veteran; veteran from a minority racial/ethnic group; and references to World War II, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, or the Gulf wars. In addition, coders separately documented the presence/absence of people who appeared in uniform, as well as their demographics in regard to race and gender. This approach was employed because one could not be sure whether the people pictured were active service members or veterans. More than one variable could appear in an image.

For the second research question, which focused on stereotypes concerning veterans in general, coders documented whether the following appeared in each photograph using the 0 = *absent* and 1 = *present* rating: a physically injured veteran, a veteran receiving aid/assistance/charity, or a homeless veteran. Coders also documented the prevalence of common media stereotypes concerning women for the third

research question, including images in which female veterans were portrayed within traditional gender roles, such as homemaker or family caregiver. This was examined to determine whether news photographs conflated stereotypes (e.g., woman as caregiver) and counterstereotypes (e.g., woman as military service member).

H1, H2, and RQ1 examined whether news photographs accurately reflected the demographics of the real-world U.S. veteran population. To answer the question, proportions were compared for the groups represented in the photographs to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. Given the fact the news content covered a decade on Twitter, Census Bureau statistics were used to calculate averages (in terms of veteran gender and race) for the period so that proportions could be more accurately compared. For example, the Census Bureau estimated that 1.3 million veterans were female in 2008 (6.7% of the veteran population), compared to 1.59 million in 2016 (8.6% of the veteran population). The calculation produced an average veteran population of 20.4 million for the period, with 7.6% or 1.55 million being female and 92.4% or 18.9 million being male.

Results

H1 proposed that female veterans would be underrepresented in news photographs when compared to the real world. It was not supported by the data. In total, 407 photographs clearly portrayed veterans.² Male veterans represented the majority ($n = 352$, or 86%), compared to female veterans ($n = 55$, or 14%). In the real world, male veterans ($n = 18.9$ million, or 92%) also outnumbered female veterans ($n = 1.64$ million, or 8%). A chi-square test indicated a significant difference in the proportions, $\chi^2(1) = 19.90$, $p < .001$. This indicated that the news photos underrepresented male veterans and overrepresented female veterans.

In addition to veterans, coders documented the presence in the photographs of 102 male and 13 female service members who appeared in uniform and/or marching. These images were excluded from the previous analysis to ensure an accurate comparison of proportions because the images contained no indication that the people photographed were veterans (i.e., no longer serving in the military). Nevertheless, including these images in the analysis did not change the results. Women remained overrepresented, while men remained underrepresented.

H2 proposed that veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups would be underrepresented in news

photographs when compared to real-world demographics. It was not supported. In terms of race, White veterans appeared in more photographs ($n = 334$, or 82%) than veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups ($n = 74$, or 18%). In the real world, White veterans ($n = 17.2$ million, or 84%) outnumbered veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups ($n = 3.1$ million, or 15%). A chi-square test indicated that the difference was not statistically significant $\chi^2(1) = 1.21$, $p = .27$.

Again, coders counted photographs separately in which service members from minority racial/ethnic groups appeared when they could not determine whether the individual was a veteran or currently serving. The sample contained 26 images in which service members from minority racial/ethnic groups appeared and an additional 101 images in which White service members appeared. The inclusion of the additional images did not change the results.

RQ1 considered the prevalence of service cohorts in the images published by news organizations. In terms of the conflicts in which veterans served, World War II was referenced most often ($n = 83$, or 20%), followed by the Gulf wars ($n = 46$, or 11%), Vietnam ($n = 38$, or 9%), and Korea ($n = 17$, and 4%). This contradicts reality, in which World War II veterans represented the smallest cohort of living veterans throughout this time period. The data showed that the following combinations appeared most often: White, male, World War II ($n = 53$, or 13%); White, male, Gulf War ($n = 22$, or 5%); White, male, Vietnam ($n = 21$, or 5%); racial minority, male, Gulf War ($n = 11$, or 3%); White, male, Korea ($n = 8$, or 2%); and racial minority, male, World War II ($n = 5$, or 1%).

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the second research question, which sought to determine the frequency with which visual stereotypes concerning military veterans appeared in news photographs. Ten photographs (2%) portrayed a veteran as homeless. Thirty-five photographs (9%) included an image of a veteran with physical trauma. Forty-five photographs (11%) portrayed veterans receiving charity, aid, or assistance from others.

Finally, the third research question examined gender-related stereotypes in photographs of veterans. Overall, traditional gender stereotypes were absent within the content. Instead, female veterans and service members most often appeared in uniform ($n = 13$) or in posed portraits ($n = 18$).

Discussion

The present study sought to examine two forms of representation related to veterans in news images: representation in terms of population and representation in terms of common cultural stereotypes. The findings provide the foundation for future experimental and survey-based research examining how news photographs inform audience members' mental representations of military veterans, their interpersonal relationships with veterans, how veterans perceive themselves in terms of identity, and veterans' perceptions concerning how they are viewed by the civilian population.

In terms of representation, three significant findings emerged. First, regional news organizations in each of the 50 states overrepresented female veterans in the photographs they shared on the social media platform Twitter. Context is needed here, however, as male veterans greatly outnumbered female veterans within the news content, reflecting the demographics of the U.S. military in which 9 out of 10 service members are male. Nevertheless, we interpret the finding as an indication that photographs published by regional news outlets recognize female veterans despite concerns that the public often does not.

In addition, the analysis found few stereotypes related to women about traditional gender roles within news content. Female service members most often appeared in much the same manner as male veterans: in uniform or in portraits accompanying news stories. The finding is significant when one considers mass media's inclination to ignore women as characters in entertainment programming and as sources in news stories that do not subscribe to traditional gender norms.

Second, the study found that news media accurately represented veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups in their images, in terms of population size. The findings are not in line with previous research concerning the representation of racial/ethnic minority group members in the mass media, including studies related to news content that show African Americans are underrepresented in socially respected roles (e.g., police officer) and overrepresented in socially condemned roles (e.g., criminal; Mastro, 2009).

Third, the study determined that World War II veterans were significantly overrepresented within the news content, despite the fact that they represent the smallest living cohort throughout this time period. The largest real-world cohort,

the men and women who served in the Gulf wars and Vietnam, appeared far less often in the news.

In addition to representation, the study examined the prevalence of stereotypes concerning military veterans that can be visual: traumatic physical injury, charity/aid/assistance, and homelessness. Photographs of homeless veterans were largely absent from the sample, while physically traumatized veterans and veterans receiving assistance each appeared in about 1 out of every 10 images. These findings are interesting because the mass media are often faulted for perpetrating the stereotypes. Visually, this does not appear to be the case for this sample of regional news outlets. Future research should examine other forms of media content, especially entertainment television and Hollywood films, to determine the commonality of images associating veterans with homelessness, physical (and/or mental) trauma, and other stereotypes.

There is a dearth of research examining the relationship between media exposure and thought, emotion, and behavior related to military veterans (e.g., Griffin & Sen, 1995). The area is ripe for future research, and the results presented here provide the foundation for a number of studies involving civilian, recruit, and veteran populations. In general, short- and long-term exposure to mediated images can nurture or mitigate audience members' stereotypes and prejudice concerning social groups (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996) and also influence pro- and antisocial attitudes and behavior (Johnson, Olivo, Gibson, Reed, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2009). Scholars suggest that media content might be especially influential when audience members lack experiential or other direct knowledge concerning social groups (Bissell & Parrott, 2013; Schiappa et al., 2006), the sort of knowledge gap that is evident between the civilian population and military service members. The literature in media cultivation suggests that long-term exposure to images of military veterans will activate related concepts in the audience members' memories, nurturing greater accessibility and likelihood of the association being used in subsequent decision making (Shrum, 1996). Further, the images we encounter might shape our perceptions of veterans through the creation or reinforcement of exemplars (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009).

The potential implications for veterans, military recruits, and the civilian public are numerous. While veterans are generally held in high regard by the American public (Kleykamp, Hipes, &

MacLean, 2018), they may encounter challenges when searching for civilian employment (Stone & Stone, 2015) or even parking in the local supermarket (Alter, 2015) based on public assumptions concerning veterans. News consumers should more readily call to mind a diverse veteran population when they regularly encounter images of women and veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups in the news. Such a finding would be in line with research regarding first-order cultivation effects (Shrum, 1995), in which people who consume large amounts of media content subsequently overestimate the prevalence of occupations (e.g., doctors, lawyers) and other characteristics (e.g., violence) in the real world.

In regard to military recruitment, researchers in the field of career psychology (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) have identified a number of factors that predict whether someone will pursue a career, including self-efficacy and outcome expectations. A young woman who encounters women in the military via media may be more likely to explore the military as a career. Conversely, an individual who witnesses predominantly negative consequences of military service via media content may be less likely to pursue service in the Armed Forces. Indeed, a representative from the Department of Defense expressed concern to *Stars & Stripes* about the role of news reports and Hollywood in challenging recruitment for the all-volunteer military, saying that negative media reports can be especially problematic when potential recruits do not have a parent who served in the military to challenge the negative media content (Cahn, 2018).

In addition to effects, this study's results raise questions concerning media processes. Journalism scholars (e.g., Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) have outlined a hierarchy of factors that influence whether issues (and people) make the news. The organization in which photojournalists work might shape the stories they cover or the way they cover stories (e.g., Fox News versus MSNBC). While journalists attempt to remain objective while covering stories, removing their individual attitudes from consideration while reporting, their personal identity might have an implicit influence on how they cover the news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). The subject warrants additional research into the processes behind the creation of news content related to veterans. Research suggests that the public endorses separate attitudes toward service members and the conflicts in which they fight in such a way that public opinion might condemn a conflict while praising the people who serve (Pew Research Center, 2011a). Nevertheless, research

suggests at least some social desirability is being expressed when people are asked about their attitudes toward veterans (Kleykamp et al., 2018). Do our attitudes emerge in whom we recognize and celebrate? Did the photojournalists gravitate toward World War II veterans, rather than Vietnam veterans, because of personal assumptions and attitudes? Or, perhaps, did the World War II veterans show up for a newsworthy community ceremony such as a parade while other veterans did not? The questions merit investigation in an analysis of the processes informing the work of photojournalists. Likely, the photojournalists whose work was examined covered newsworthy events within their communities, such as parades recognizing Veteran's Day or Memorial Day. The data show that 280 out of 740 photographs (or 38%) were shared in the months in which those holidays are celebrated.

Advocates who are interested in communicating persuasive messages related to veterans would likely benefit from making themselves available to journalists for these regional publications. For example, people who want to nurture an association between women and military service could connect working journalists and female veterans, permitting the veterans to serve as sources for stories about everything from community service to governmental policy. Meanwhile, journalists should concentrate on providing audience members well-rounded representations of what it means to be a veteran in modern America, which could include reference to veteran status in profiles of local community members such as business leaders and educators.

It is important that we continue this line of inquiry because it provides empirical evidence to support or refute common knowledge concerning U.S. military veterans and the cultural products about them. Indeed, while veterans are often associated with homelessness, the present research found that regional news publications rarely pictured military veterans as homeless or suffering physical trauma. This suggests that the associations probably originate elsewhere, perhaps in other forms of media content or through aid campaigns. In addition to understanding media messages about veterans and potential exposure effects, advocates would benefit from better understanding how effectively to change cultural narratives concerning veterans.

Limitations

The study contained limitations. The quantitative approach limited the nuance we were able to

draw from the content. For example, 197 images portrayed the American flag. The data lack information concerning the context in which the flag was portrayed. The flag might appear at a graveside, on the arm of a soldier, outside a school, or in a parade. Context matters.

Similarly, the study's insight is confined to specific visual stereotypes. Additional stereotypes that might have emerged in the content were not documented because of the study design.

Conclusion

By using a quantitative approach, the study documented the prevalence of veteran cohorts and stereotypes within the photographs published by regional news outlets that are seen by millions of people each day, providing an empirical foundation for future work examining potential media effects. Data suggested that female and World War II veterans were overrepresented, while veterans from minority racial/ethnic groups were accurately represented overall. Data also suggested that news photographs communicated stereotypes about veterans in isolated instances. Additional research should examine images associated with veterans in: (a) prestige publications such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*; (b) international publications to permit cross-cultural comparison; (c) television news shows, which draw millions of viewers each day; and (d) entertainment content, such as television and film. It is important that we understand media representations of veterans not only to gain insight into public attitudes toward veterans but how media content and public attitudes influence veterans' own sense of identity.

Funding

The research presented in this article was funded by a grant from the Institute for Communication and Information Research, College of Communication and Information Sciences, the University of Alabama.

Notes

¹ VA defines minority veterans here as "all races/ethnicities except non-Hispanic White Veterans." The U.S. Census Bureau provides more conservative estimates regarding the prevalence of veterans who are female or racial minorities in the United States. According to estimates from its American Community Survey, women represented about 9% of the veteran population in 2017, while racial minorities represented about 18% of the veteran population. Data from 2017 are the newest available at the time of writing (2018).

² The study examined photographs that accompanied news tweets concerning veterans, rather than strictly examining photographs of veterans. Therefore, the randomly selected images sometimes featured subject matter such as American flags, active-duty military personnel, etc.

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