

(Dis-)Empowered Military Masculinities? Recruitment of Veterans by PMSCs Through YouTube



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Abstract State militaries are a central, but not the only site for the construction of military masculinities. In this chapter, we examine how Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), which increasingly provide security-related services to armed forces and recruit former military employees, partake in the construction of these masculinities through their social media use. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the YouTube recruitment videos aimed primarily at veterans by two major U.S.-based companies – DynCorp International and CACI – we illustrate how these PMSCs, while affirming traditional notions of military masculinity, challenge its traditional meaning as well by fashioning the rival ideal of the ‘corporate soldier’. In addition to upgrading the otherwise marginalised masculinities of veterans by allowing them to be hero warriors, disabled, and civilian employees all at the same time, this ideal also boosts the corporate masculinity of these companies and enables them to define themselves as both legitimate contractors and superior security providers.

Keywords PMSCs · Recruitment · Veterans · YouTube

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1 Introduction

Social media, developed initially for private consumption, is also increasingly being used by security actors, including armed forces, private security companies, humanitarian NGOs, and terrorist networks. Scholars have therefore started to pay attention to the role Twitter, Instagram or YouTube play for these actors in the promotion and legitimisation of their respective causes.¹ However, the way in which gender is implicated in how these new forms of communication are employed has not been a subject of much research thus far.² This is surprising for a variety of reasons. Firstly, as Blower (2016, 89) notes, “cyberspace affords the projection of a new range of identity possibilities”. Given that users can insert their voices in a much more unmediated fashion than ever before when posting content – they can choose to remain anonymous or make use of sound, visuality or algorithms – identities, including gender, are likely to be asserted or challenged in an unprecedented manner (van der Nagel 2013).

Secondly, the void in the literature on social media is puzzling since, as existing research shows, gender matters for security actors in their appeal to diverse audiences. Feminist scholars in particular have identified the armed forces as sites where military masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed (Brown 2012).³ Yet militaries are no longer the only constitutive sites of military masculinities, nor are conventional institutional practices alone formative. Instead, Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) are increasingly implicated in the (re-)definition of military masculinities. On the one hand, this starts with the promotion of their services, which range from compound and people protection to reconnaissance and combat, to clients, including armed forces (Joachim and Schneiker 2012, 2018). On the other hand, as we illustrate in this paper, PMSCs (re-)construct military masculinities by appealing to and seeking to hire former military personnel, who “define ... the employee base of the private military industry” in significant ways (Singer 2003, 76).

Based on a content analysis of YouTube recruitment videos predominantly aimed at veterans by two major U.S.-based PMSCs – DynCorp International and CACI – we detail how these companies affirm traditional notions of military masculinity, while also challenging it with a corporate rival ideal; an ideal which is coupled to business masculinity and allows veterans to be hero warrior, disabled, and civilian employees all at the same time.

The contribution is structured as follows: firstly, drawing on feminist literature, we define the concept of military masculinity and subsequently develop a set of theoretical assumptions regarding the relationship between social media and gender identity politics. Secondly, we present the empirical results of the qualitative content analysis we conducted of the YouTube recruitment videos by CACI and

¹ See Schneiker et al. (2018), Shim and Stengel (2017), Geis and Schlag (2017), Bjerg-Jensen (2014).

² For exceptions, see, for example, Jester (2019), Shim and Stengel (2017).

³ See also: Stiehm (1989), Enloe (1983), Kronsell (2005), Morgan (1994).

DynCorp International. Thirdly, we conclude with a summary of the findings regarding the masculinity constructions deployed and circulated by the two PMSCs as well as a discussion of their implications for the literature on social media, PMSCs, and gender.

2 Military Masculinities

Military masculinity is not just relevant in the context of the armed forces, nor is its meaning fixed. Instead, with the growing relevance of non-state actors related to matters of security and the changes that many armed forces are undergoing as a result of, for example, their professionalisation, the sophistication of weapons' systems or increasing out-of-area missions, the scope conditions of this gendered identity and what it connotes are in flux. In line with these developments, we propose a definition of military masculinity which conceives of it as plural and dynamic in character as well as being a product of social construction. On the basis of this definition and drawing on social media studies, we furthermore develop a set of assumptions as to how military masculinity may be deployed by PMSCs when appealing to ex-militaries on YouTube. While one line of research suggests that these companies can be expected to depict such masculinity in a rather traditional and stereotypical manner, other research leads us to assume that they rely on different, multiple, and perhaps even new variants of military masculinity as social media provides ample opportunities to construct identities.

According to gender scholars, military masculinity encompasses a range of possible positions, identities or performances (Connell 2000) because it is shaped by and intersects with other identity-forming categories, including race, ethnicity or class (Higate and Henry 2016).⁴ Moreover, the multiple expressions of this masculinity are reflective of power relationships. According to Heeg Maruska (2010, 238), *hegemonic masculinity* "is one type of identity construct, at the top of a hierarchy that includes subordinate masculinities and femininities". By comparison, *subordinate masculinities* are "oppressed, exploited, and subject to overt control by more dominant forms" (Hinjosa 2010, 181). They are again different from *marginalised masculinities*, which "consist of constructions that are neither dominant nor subordinated, but relegated to being dominated by more powerful forms of masculinity even while they receive a greater share of the patriarchal dividends than subordinated masculinities" (ibid.). In addition to mirroring power relations, masculinity constructs are also "intimately intertwined with the institutions in which individuals are embedded" (ibid.). The armed forces are thus still a central, albeit not the only, site for the construction of military masculinity, which offers "men unique resources

⁴See also: Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994), Higate and Henry (2016), Petersen (2003).

for the construction of a masculine identity” and as such has significantly shaped its definition throughout time (ibid., 180).

Traditionally, hegemonic military masculinity resembled what Elshtain (1995) refers to as the *just warrior* model and equates with “the brave, physically strong, emotionally tough warrior hero” (Woodward and Winter 2004, 289). However, it is also characterized by self-discipline, self-reliance, and heterosexual desire.⁵ Owing to changing circumstances (Woodward and Winter 2004), this “warrior masculinity”, while still present today, has undergone certain changes (Duncanson 2009, 66). Especially since the end of the Cold War, it has been subject to a “slight feminization through the construction of a tough and aggressive, yet tender-hearted, masculinity” (Niva 1998, 118; Jester 2019). This finds expression, for example, in what Duncanson (2009, 70) refers to as a “peacekeeping masculinity”. The latter is linked to “everyday practices” – for example, in the context of peacekeeping missions – “such as building friendships, drinking coffee and chatting” as well as “to bravery and effective soldiering” (ibid.).

Furthermore, “a move towards ‘smarter’ armed forces, equipped with technologically sophisticated weapons and intelligence systems” (Woodward and Winter 2004, 295) also contributed to the reconstruction of military masculinity where “the possession of professional skills and expertise” are now seen as characteristic markers (Woodward and Jenkins 2011, 258). Finally, the transition of many armed forces from conscription to professional all-volunteer forces has given rise to what Strand and Berndtsson (2015, 233), based on a study of recruitment information from the Swedish and British armies, refer to as the “enterprising soldier”. This soldier is no longer solely motivated by the “mental and physical challenge”, the “opportunities to travel”, “the excitement”, “taking risks”, and “wanting to make a difference” or “doing something good” which armed forces have to offer, but is also interested in pursuing a career, growing “professionally and personally”, and “assuming responsibility” (ibid., 239–243).

While professionalisation, the integration of women into the armed forces, changes in war-fighting technology, and the increase as well as the growing complexities of international (military) interventions have contributed to the (re-)construction of military masculinity, thus far little attention has been paid to the privatisation of security, which is also a more recent trend concerning the armed forces. Since PMSCs, which are a central dimension of this trend, increasingly perform services for armed forces and hire former military personnel, they can be expected to also co-constitute military masculinity. In order to address this void in the literature, we analyse which masculinities these companies deploy and how they define them.

The YouTube recruitment videos by PMSCs aimed at army veterans offer a particularly good window to capture their conceptions of military masculinities. Firstly, such efforts to attract employees involve, as Brown (2012, 152–154) notes, “overt

⁵ See, for example, Higate (2003, 2007), Higate and Hopton (2004), Hockey (2002), Padilla and Riege Laner (2002).

image making and an attempt to sell particular pictures of military service” in addition “to advertising that is steeped in ideas about masculinity and femininity”. Secondly, ex-militaries are a particularly interesting group because they unite conflicting masculinities within them (Bulmer and Eichler 2017). While they are celebrated for their past heroism during their time in the military – thus matching the hegemonic ideal of military masculinity – they also frequently suffer from physical or psychological injuries and have trouble reintegrating into civilian life, i.e. exhibit characteristics of subordinate (military) masculinities. Therefore, it is of interest to examine on the basis of which masculinities PMSCs appeal to veterans. Finally, social media such as YouTube provides researchers with excellent laboratories as to how masculinities are deployed, since the unique features of these new forms of communication allow for ample opportunities to construct identities (Blower 2016; Davis 2018).

3 Identity Construction and Social Media

Social media provides users in an unprecedented manner with a myriad of ways of how to present themselves online. Contrary to traditional media outlets, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or YouTube do not require any intermediaries. Instead, they can be auto-controlled and permit users to interact directly with each other (Stier et al. 2018). Furthermore, the special effects, sound, and video functions of many platforms enhance the possibilities for self-identification (Waters and Jones 2011). According to existing research related to gender and social media, the preciseness with which identities are depicted may, however, vary. Some studies find that these virtual platforms encourage the depiction of identities in a rather traditional and stereotypical manner, thus reinstalling and affirming them. Others, by comparison, find that social media lends itself to the reconstitution and transformation of identities.

With respect to the latter strand of scholarly works, post-structural feminists, for example, emphasise that these new forms of communication hold the potential to escape oppressing and limiting gender identities and to construct more egalitarian and empowering ones. Based on the examination of blogs written by women, Blower (2016, 100) finds that “the medium has encouraged women to reformulate processes of self-realization [and] enables them to explore the self as fluid and plural and from multiple perspectives”. In a similar vein, Webb and Temple (2015, 640) in their survey on “social media and gender” conclude that these new forms of communication provide “a space of gender liberation where gender can be performed, conceptualized, and theorized in innovative ways”.⁶ Davis (2018, 2) also recognises the potential of social media platforms, which, compared to “traditional media ... , give the user power” insofar as he or she “can use social media to create and

⁶See also: Bailey and Telford (2007), Hans et al. (2011), Loureiro and Ribeiro (2014).

distribute their own self-representations to the public” (ibid.). Studying the use of Instagram by women over forty, Davis (2018, 2) found that the platform provided opportunities for “... resistance to the cultural norm”, which dictates that they “should only self-identify as non-sexual mothers and caretakers”. Finally, based on her analysis of posts by girls, Senft (2008) considers it possible for these users to upset the dominant, stereotypical definitions of “girl” and perhaps even “challenge gender-based constraints that hinder social equality” (cited in Webb and Temple 2015, 639; see also Bailey et al. 2013).

Although cognizant of the possibilities of identity (re-)construction, scholars also found evidence to the contrary. In the eyes of Ringrose (2011), social media platforms tend to reinforce stereotypical depictions of gender identities. Men are most likely to be shown as dominant, active, and independent, while in the case of women their attractiveness and dependence is emphasised (Rose et al. 2012, cited in Davis 2018). Emmons and Mocarski (2014) arrive at similar conclusions when studying the depiction of athletes on social media platforms. Compared to their male counterparts, who are generally shown in active performance roles and are “more likely to look away from the camera and be in motion”, female athletes most often appear in non-active positions and are “more likely to pose for photos and smile” (125). Similarly, Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2015) observe that social media stimulates self-objectification among female users. Moreover, according to Sills et al. (2016), quite often a celebration of male sexual conquest, slut shaming, and the sexualisation of women can be found on different platforms, which may in turn have offline effects, for example by perpetuating a rape culture. Studies examining the role of race and ethnicity on social media are also suggestive of the reinforcement of traditional identity types. Rather than observing a “new” and “color-blind racism”, scholars found evidence of an “old” form of racist discourse to have re-surfaced, which “explicitly imputes racial difference and exclusion” (Cisneros and Nakayama 2015, 108).

When following the debate on social media and gender, analyses of whether these forms of communication encourage the re-constitution of gender constructs or, instead, affirm more traditional ones, several things are noticeable. To start with, there appears to be primarily a focus on women and how they are depicted, while men or masculinity are, for the most part, treated as a baseline for comparison rather than a subject of study per se. Furthermore, scholars have mostly examined the social media use by individuals and how they conform to or challenge existing gender norms. However, although potentially fundamental, corporate actors and their depiction of gender roles via social media in the course of, for example, corporate branding or recruitment, are – apart from few exceptions – yet to be addressed in the literature (e.g., Jester 2019).

Against this backdrop, we examined the YouTube recruitment videos aimed specifically at veterans issued by CACI and DynCorp International, two U.S.-based PMSCs. Both companies are contractors of the U.S. government, offering a broad range of security and military-related services (Isenberg 2009; Military Times 2017). Although these PMSCs also appeal to prospective employees through Twitter (Joachim et al. 2018) or offline and through word-of-mouth (Petersohn 2018), we

limited our analysis to the videos of both companies aimed at veterans. Unlike other social media channels, they provide a much richer form of data to examine the (re-) construction of masculine identities. Because they are based on audio and sound, YouTube videos are particularly powerful tools for corporate actors to build an “identity and strengthen their relationship with external stakeholders” (Waters and Jones 2011, 253).⁷ According to Waters and Jones (2011, 249–253), who examined the use of videos by non-profit organisations, such platforms “put a human face on the organization” and create “a strong mental impression of the organization in the public’s mind” because they permit their users “to tell their story in a powerfully, emotionally connecting way”.

CACI’s video is titled “Deploying Talent – Creating Careers” (CACI 2013). It is 4.46 min long and consists of sequences from interviews with three CACI employees: Denyse, a recruiting manager; Jared, a field engineer; and Stand, a hiring manager. Denyse is a coloured woman, and Jared and Stand are white men. The video starts with stills combined with overlying text regarding the situation of veterans, followed by alternating interview sequences with the respective spokespersons. The DynCorp video, titled “Proudly Employing Those Who Served”, consists of a 3.41-min presentation that combines a sequence of interviews with a veteran named Clint with scenes from both his military service and the company’s various activities (DynCorp 2012). The video starts with Clint’s personal history, beginning with his decision to join the armed forces after 9/11, followed by a description of his experiences serving in Iraq and the injury he sustained while stationed there.

In order to determine which types of masculine identities both companies construct and how they do this, we conducted a computer-assisted, qualitative content analysis of the CACI and DynCorp videos using MAXQDA. Following the transcription of the two videos, we coded sound and visuals separately, which increased the number of observations. We coded deductively based on the attributes that scholars associate with the different hegemonic military masculinities. In consideration of what are deemed traditional types of masculinity, the codes we used included *patriotism*, *comradeship*, *adventure*, *common experiences*, and *honour*.⁸ With regard to what researchers consider a corporate variant, the codes included, among others, *benefits (salary, pension, etc.)*, *upward mobility*, and *positive working environment*.⁹ In contrast, the codes for the feminised versions of military masculinity ranged from *compassion* and *caring to emotional* (Joachim et al. 2018). This deductively generated list of codes was inductively supplemented throughout the analysis by means of modifying or adding codes, especially to capture subordinate military masculinities. These do not figure very prominently in the literature – with the exception of homosexuals or new recruits, who are referred to as ‘ninnies’. Both videos by CACI and DynCorp were coded several times by three trained individuals.

⁷ See also Devereux (2017), Boateng and Okoe (2015).

⁸ See, for example, Gareis et al. (2006), Tomforde (2010), Johansen et al. (2014).

⁹ See, for example, Strand and Berndtsson (2015), Levy et al. (2007), Eighmey (2006), Joachim et al. (2018).

4 YouTube Recruitment of Veterans by PMSCs and the Construction of the ‘Corporate Soldier’

Western societies rarely “offer an established manner of assessing the veteran experience in union with civil society” after deployment and military service (Gustavsen 2016, 23). PMSCs, however, claim to be able to fill this void and to relate “to what the veterans have been through” (ibid.). Similar to “settled cultures”, where the return of soldiers from military conflict or their societal presence is a more frequent occurrence, these companies promise ex-militaries “a distinct repertoire of established cultural resources to frame the[ir] experiences” in the form of masculinities (ibid., 32). They boost the subordinate masculinities of physically and psychologically impaired veterans by affirming their former hegemonic military masculinity and by coupling it with business masculinity, which ex-militaries are promised to acquire upon their entry into the private sector. Therefore, due to the identity (re-) construction involved, online recruitment of former military personnel is not only a functional necessity for PMSCs, but also politically consequential and indicative of broader identity shifts in state-society relations (Kronsell 2005).

4.1 *Upgrading Marginalised Masculinities Through the Affirmation of Traditional Military Masculinities*

According to Gustavsen (2016, 21), it is important for veterans to “find positive meaning in [their] experiences” in a conflict zone, especially if they return with physical and emotional injuries. Both CACI and DynCorp International provide this positive affirmation with respect to the current status and the past experiences of ex-militaries. CACI is most outspoken in this respect. Referring to itself with feminine attributes such as caring and emphatic and as being cognizant of veterans’ marginalised masculinities, the company prides itself on being especially understanding of “the vulnerabilities many service members feel when they realize that the transition from the military to the civilian sector becomes a reality” (CACI 2013, 1.01–1.13). Acknowledging that over “320,000 of our nation’s 1.6 million deployed service members have suffered from traumatic brain injury” (CACI 2013, 0.03–0.09) and that the “unemployment rate for wounded warriors is 50 % higher” compared to “the average citizen” (CACI 2013, 0.15–0.19), CACI proudly states that it has “successfully hired hundreds of disabled veterans and wounded warriors into the organization” (CACI 2013, 2.20–2.24).

In much the same manner, DynCorp asserts that it “is committed as a whole to supporting wounded warriors” (DynCorp 2012, 2.59–3.02). At first sight, these statements by the two PMSCs do not appear to be in line with the findings in the social media literature. Rather than being presented in a stereotypical manner as strong and courageous, veterans are depicted with reference to their injuries and frailties. These are, however, not perceived as impediments, but instead as assets

from which the companies can profit not only with respect to their public image, but also in terms of human capital.

Although hiring veterans is not unusual and is common in other sectors as well, former members of the armed forces – whether they be “ex-Green Beret, ex-Paratrooper, ex-General, and so on” – are particularly sought-after employees in the private security industry (Singer 2003, 76). It is not only their skill-set and their training that makes them a perfect match for the security industry, as is conventionally claimed by industry representatives (Ramos 2013), but also, as the YouTube videos suggest, their multiple masculinities. In addition to acknowledging that ex-militaries are vulnerable and needy (Ortiz 2012), both PMSCs also affirm their traditional military masculinities based on heroism and bravery. The DynCorp video shows soldiers carrying a stretcher with a wounded comrade and saluting in front of the American flag, while former veteran and now employee Clint shares his traumatic experiences from his deployment, including an incident where “another Marine, sitting next to [him], was killed in the blast” (DynCorp 2012, 1.06–1.14). Hence, compared to other civil employment sectors, where the masculinities veterans acquired in the armed forces do not fit neatly with what is required on the job and therefore requires them to retrain (Ramos 2013), the private security industry does not expect veterans to strip themselves of their military identities. Instead, DynCorp encourages veterans to “continue [with] the same dedication to service and honor and values” (DynCorp 2012, 3.08–3.13). Similarly, CACI honours the “proven leadership, values, job skills, and work ethic” of its prospective employees (CACI 2017) as well as their “brother mentality” (CACI 2013, 3.45–3.52). The fact that ex-militaries can join these companies as they are without having to break with their past is, in addition to such statements, also conveyed through the personal narratives in the videos by the two PMSCs.

According to Denyse from CACI, everything she “learned in uniform” can be “mastered during [a] career with CACI” (CACI 2013, 2.07–2.14). Clint of DynCorp praises his company for upholding the same values he was taught during his military service, including “principles”, “honour”, “values”, “commitment and dedication” (DynCorp 2012, 2.34–2.38). He continues by stating that “we talk about leadership in DynCorp. It’s part of our corporate dialogue. And I think it’s important. I know from my experiences in the Marine Corps it’s all about principle and order and values and dedication” (ibid., 2.26–2.37). Clint’s and Denyse’s personal observations regarding the fact that their military identities can be linked unproblematically with their identities as civilian employees is, on the one hand, given further meaning through imagery. For instance, in DynCorp’s recruitment video, employees are depicted next to and working as a team with U.S. soldiers, helping them lift cargo or repair a machine (DynCorp 2013, 1.50–1.57). On the other hand, the linking of these two identities is reinforced through language, for example by the military jargon with which CACI addresses veterans and affirms their military identity: “In [the] Air Force, we say ‘Check 6! Who has your back?’ You know, if you’ve served, you understand what it means to have somebody’s back. So, imagine that [...] a veteran is now a CACI employee – that person has your back. You know? They do!” (CACI 2013, 3.55–4.14).

Based on their YouTube videos, both PMSCs conceive of military masculinity as an integral part of and compatible with veteran's employment in the security industry. The skills and values that ex-militaries acquired in the armed forces are as valuable and essential for these companies as are the stories and myths surrounding them – that is, the romanticising and the “significant status” enjoyed by those “who have served (honorably)” (Dandeker et al. 2006, 164).

4.2 Coupling and Upgrading Military Masculinity with Business Masculinity

At the same time as they are affirming the military masculinity of veterans, PMSCs are also redefining and further upgrading this masculinity by linking it to civilian and especially business masculinity. Working for a PMSC allows for both: “the ‘possibility, application and control of violence’ – which used to be also ‘the very condition for military service’” – but also to pursue “self-fulfilment, self-enterprise, and personal growth” (Strand and Berndtsson 2015, 234). Rather than merely being a soldier motivated by values, such as a sense of duty, veterans become ‘corporate soldiers’ who are engaged in an enterprising activity equivalent to that of a business person.

Studying the treatment of veterans in Sweden, Strand (2018, 6, in reference to Duncanson 2009) observes that the construction of soldiers and veterans as “masculine warriors” is “complemented with, and perhaps challenged by,” other forms of identity. This also applies to ex-militaries who are recruited by PMSCs. Their “military identities” are “produced by, and reproductive of, a neoliberal regime of government, enacted through rationalities and techniques of the market” (ibid., 3). The statements by Jared of CACI are illustrative in this respect. When “looking for a job” he could do and a company “that would hire military people”, CACI was a place that not only offered him “a lot of career path choices”, but also valued him as someone who had “served in the U.S. military in Iraq” (CACI 2013, 0.25–0.30), thus acknowledging the “very valuable experience that [many of its employees] had” (ibid., 4.15–4.18).

Clint of DynCorp, a wounded and disabled veteran, equally felt that DynCorp appreciated both “his experiences and [his] limitations”, welcoming him “with open arms” (DynCorp 2012, 2.50–2.57). Thus, when he started working for the company, he was certain that he “was in the right place” (DynCorp 2012, 2.38–2.29). Statements such as these can be found throughout the YouTube videos by CACI as well as by DynCorp and suggest that the business masculinity veterans acquire is and remains tightly linked to military masculinity. As was already illustrated in the previous section, the pursuit of a civilian career with a PMSC such as CACI or DynCorp does not require veterans to let go of their past. Instead, the “meaningful job opportunities in fields closely aligned with their military occupational specialties” (CACI 2017) or the “great new careers in technology” as well as “exciting

opportunities for experienced professionals, college graduates, and vets” – as CACI also emphasises on other social media channels such as Twitter (Joachim et al. 2018, 305) – build upon the skill-set and the values these ex-militaries acquired in the armed forces.

Although CACI and DynCorp are only two, albeit market-leading, companies in the booming and growing security market, reflections of industry representatives suggest that the coupling of the business and the military identity matters beyond these two illustrative cases. In an article published in the journal *Security*, for example, Jerold Ramos, a U.S. Navy veteran lists several reasons as to why, in his view, veterans are desired employees of the private security industry. In addition to training, “high-tech experience with sophisticated systems and software”, and “adaptability” when it comes to “evolving circumstances”, these reasons include veterans’ ability to “transition quickly from one assignment or focus to another”, their “leadership qualities”, their “commitment to service”, and their “dependability” (Ramos 2013, np). Furthermore, according to White (2017, 14), PMSCs associate “reputational benefits” and “human resource functions” with these former members of the armed forces.

5 Conclusion

In scholarly literature, veterans, given their past, are quite frequently conceived of in a dichotomous fashion as either being in need of protection or as warrior heroes (Kronsell 2012; Dyvik 2016; Åse and Wendt 2018). Our analysis of PMSCs online recruitment campaigns aimed at ex-militaries suggests that such a conception of their masculinities needs to be revised when it comes to the private security sector. Rather than being kept separate, the two identities are reconstructed and become tightly linked when former military employees transition from the armed forces to PMSCs. While showing appreciation for the marginalised masculinities especially of disabled and emotionally traumatised veterans, PMSCs such as CACI and DynCorp promise these individuals a viable and superior alternative. When working for such companies, ex-militaries acquire a business identity and become productive civilians, while at the same time being able to retain the identity of their past as honourable soldiers.

These findings are important in several respects. To begin with, they lend force to the critical security studies literature, according to which PMSCs are neither apolitical nor mere service providers, but are instead actively involved in the ongoing political struggles over the definition of masculinities (Joachim and Schneiker 2012, 2015, 2019). Furthermore, our analysis reveals that social media holds infinitely more possibilities for such companies to (re-)construct identities. Compared to traditional channels of communication, social media allows for identities to be, on the one hand, constituted in more vivid and colourful ways, while, on the other hand, also being linked in new and unfamiliar – or even more ambivalent – manners (Waters and Jones 2011).

In the case of the PMSCs in our study, the coupling of traditional military and business masculinities gives rise to a new 'corporate soldier' identity, which ex-militaries acquire upon their entry into the private security sector. This compound identity, however, is not just consequential for job-seeking veterans. It also is a source of power for PMSCs and an opportunity to reconstruct and upgrade their own corporate identity. By hiring former generals, navy seals or soldiers, PMSCs can, on the one hand, acquire a hegemonic, military masculinity and establish themselves as more legitimate and compatible security actors when seeking contracts with governments and their armed forces. On the other hand, when joining military masculinity with its business variant, these companies can also generate themselves as superior to the armed forces. With the 'corporate soldiers', PMSCs are able to claim to restore veterans to civilians and take care of their economic well-being at the same time as they ensure and provide protection for citizens in general, both from internal and external threats.

Regarding the literature on social media and the construction of identities, the analysis of PMSCs adds to the existing research. Rather than either affirming or transcending gender constructions, these new forms of communication appear to allow for many more possibilities to represent the self and the other. Users may, as is the case for PMSCs, mix and match masculinities or femininities as they see fit, depending on the purpose and the addressees. Moreover, with the rise of social media, the construction of gendered meanings is no longer as tightly linked to official or traditional institutions. Instead, due to the possibilities created by virtual online spaces, private actors are increasingly implicated, thus becoming able to (re-)define what gendered identities connote and, in turn, privilege some and marginalise others.

These insights warrant further scholarly attention and research. As there is still rather little knowledge about how security actors – as opposed to armed forces – (re-)constitute military masculinities or even deploy femininities, future studies may investigate which other variants are brought into circulation by these actors, how they are strategically used, and how states and other actors respond to them. Furthermore, as social media is as yet a rather underexplored empirical domain as far as the identity construction of security actors is concerned, it is important not only to map the kinds of gendered identities that are deployed by these actors, but also to determine whether they promote consistent or rather different and contradictory constructions across different platforms. Finally, much emphasis has thus far been placed on supplying and creating gendered identities. By comparison, there is close to no knowledge as to how addressees receive and respond to these identity conceptions. On the basis of social media data, however, it is in part possible to start accounting for these lacunae. Given the ability of users to comment on as well as state their own opinions, we can examine whether certain gender conceptions find more or less acceptance as well as trace whether they are gaining traction. In conclusion, much remains to be done with respect to researching the construction of political identities since with the arrival of social media a new variable has come into play.

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