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'Can I Be Gay in the Army?': British Army recruitment advertising to LGBTQ youth in 2017–18 and belonging in the queer military home

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, the British Army opened its 'This is Belonging' recruitment campaign, aimed at groups of young people who were considered traditionally less likely to join the Army, with marketing at Pride in London aimed at LGBTQ youth. The campaign's next phase, in 2018, consisted of live-action and animated YouTube videos targeting specific groups including young women, religiously observant youth, emotionally sensitive young men, youth with average fitness levels, and, in the animations, LGBTQ youth again. While every other theme appeared in both sets of videos, the live-action set contained a video depicting homosocial male bonding instead of any LGBTQ theme. The Army's acknowledgement of LGBTQ identities during recruitment in 2017–18 suggested certain advances from the 2000s position where LGBTQ personnel were expected to keep their sexuality private. A close audiovisual analysis of the LGBTQ-themed video, 'Can I be Gay in the Army?', and its intertextual relationship with the other videos nevertheless reveals hesitancy over how to represent a legibly gay male soldier that hints at limits to the institution's inclusion of sexual difference. Drawing on both 'LGBT' and 'Queer' scholarship, the paper illustrates how concepts of domesticity and futurity can contribute to critical understandings of LGBTQ military inclusion.

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In July 2017, among the organizations handing out branded merchandise to the 26,000 participants of Pride in London was one which only 18 years before would still have expelled any gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender members it discovered: the British Army, which was launching a new campaign designed by the trendy advertising agency Karmarama by giving away more than a thousand sticks of what it called 'rainbow camo cream' (Diaz 2017). Only a minority of Pride-goers would have used or seen the sticks themselves, which were actually rainbow-coloured versions of the striped face-paint sticks which have been sold alongside sports tournaments for some years. The images and slogans of the Army's associated advertising campaign were however carried by several UK LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer) websites and potentially seen by thousands more target viewers, that is, LGBTQ Britons in their teens and twenties who might be persuaded to join the military.¹ In 2018, the giveaway turned out to be the first

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phase of a broader recruitment campaign, ‘This is Belonging’. Through a series of animated digital videos framed as soldiers recalling their initial misgivings about joining the Army, this campaign aimed to reassure imagined viewers including young LGBTQ people, young women, religiously observant youth and emotionally sensitive young men that their fears about military culture were outdated. The videos’ closing call to action invited them to imagine a future where they could experience a collective identity within the military on equal terms, that is, to ‘find where you belong’ (Army Jobs 2018a).

Understanding the campaign’s ‘LGBTQ’ dimension sits at the crux of debates about whether inclusion of personnel who transgress the traditional norm of the heterosexual cisgender male soldier shows that militaries can transcend those norms. These debates rest on opposed theoretical premises about sexual difference in international politics, distinguishable as, respectively, ‘LGBT’ and ‘Queer’ (Richter-Montpetit 2018, 222). In the first camp are scholars who deal with ‘LGBT politics’ (Kollman and Waites 2009, 3) from a broadly liberal perspective of rights, citizenship, and struggle within the mainstream public sphere (e.g. Bosia 2014; Ayoub and Paternotte 2014). Applied to the military, this invites critique of how military cultures have used hypermasculinity, misogyny and homophobia in producing their desired masculine military subjectivities (Belkin 2012), but also invites faith that militaries can be reformed to champion inclusion, reflect the full diversity of their states’ populations, and improve their effectiveness and readiness as they do so (Belkin et al. 2012). Normatively, this camp values a universalist order of human rights, and trusts that once this order has been realized, states and militaries can be ‘forces for good’ (Duncanson 2013).

‘Queer’ perspectives, meanwhile, draw on queer and often anti-colonial theory to reject the stable identity categories envisaged in ‘LGBT’ studies, insist on radical political critique, and refuse the co-option of certain forms of sexual and gender diversity into the projects of the contemporary liberal state (Richter-Montpetit 2018, 223). Applied to the military, Queer critiques are inseparable from the circumstances of the Global War on Terror, when according to critics such as Jasbir Puar (2007) Western states and militaries simultaneously promoted their own LGBTQ-friendliness and depicted Muslims as inherently homophobic both at home and abroad. Such ‘pinkwashing’ strategies (Puar 2013, 337) aimed to win Western public consent for military campaigns in Muslim countries and the Israeli military’s occupation of Palestine. They simultaneously sought to detach more depoliticized and commodifiable forms of queer sociality, expression and desire from more radical, threatening, unassimilable forms (Wilkinson 2017, 238). Viewed through the lens of Rahul Rao’s work on ‘queer questions’, ‘LGBT’ perspectives on recruitment campaigns targeting LGBTQ youth would pose the queer question normatively: how do militaries treat or promise to treat their queers? ‘Queer’ perspectives would use queer theory to ask, much more critically, ‘Who shapes imaginations of futurity’ in these appeals, ‘how and why?’ (Rao 2014, 200, 211).

The professions of inclusivity that UK military recruitment campaigns have expressed since the 1990s towards women, racialized minorities, and now also sexual minorities could therefore be understood either through an optimistic ‘LGBT’ reading or a more suspicious ‘Queer’ reading. Women’s integration into the British Army proper began in 1992 with an expansion in 1998 (Woodward and Winter 2007, 33), though their ground close combat exclusion persisted until 2016 (King 2017, 307). Army recruitment advertising aimed at women has typically aimed to persuade them that qualities essentialised as

'feminine', such as empathy and negotiation, are valuable and necessary in a military responding to contemporary security needs (Woodward and Winter 2007, 88). Its messages to young Britons of colour have not allayed concerns about racism, nor unease about the War on Terror, which continued to make military careers unattractive to many Black and Asian youths; recruiters were aware that much of the Army's visible diversity since 1998 has come instead from Commonwealth recruits (Ware 2010, 324–6). The UK lifted its ban on 'homosexuals' in the military in 2000 after a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling, though the armed services continued to treat sexuality as an individual, private matter, and until 2006–8 reacted with caution to the idea of troops marching in uniform at Pride (Bulmer 2013, 141–3).²

Throughout this period, Victoria Basham (2009) suggests, the military believed it could both harness and control diversity to improve military effectiveness while preserving heteronormative, white and masculine norms. It was at this time that Sarah Bulmer (2013) conducted her research into the UK military's incorporation of 'gay and lesbian' identities. When interviewing military personnel in 2010 she encountered frequent contradictions, such as commanders wanting to voice commitments to equality but still being alarmed that troops at Pride would be seen alongside, or even be, men looking stereotypically 'gay' (Bulmer 2013, 143–4). Bulmer (2013, 139) explained this through Cynthia Enloe's idea of 'patriarchal confusion' in the military (Enloe 2007, 80), that is, the fact that 'forces [both] sustaining and opposing patriarchy' appear to exist at once. Bulmer (2013, 148) discerns 'patriarchal confusion' through employing a 'performative' understanding of identity drawn from Judith Butler, where identities must be understood with reference to the 'matrix of intelligibility' within which they are reproduced. That matrix's norms, she argued, remained patriarchal and heteronormative even as the services started to co-operate with Pride. In the 2010s, the UK military has made demonstrative public gestures of support for LGBTQ, and even trans, equality that have given today's LGBTQ troops 'unprecedented acceptance and freedom' but not necessarily transformed military gender relations (Bulmer 2017, 171–2). One could thus question, following Ahmed (2012, 116), whether these represent commitments to diversity which are supposed to have 'performative' functions in guaranteeing they will be met but are actually 'non-performative' as they *allow* the commitment to stay unmet behind a diverse public façade.

To ask what the 'This is Belonging' videos might reveal about LGBTQ inclusion in the contemporary UK military puts this study in methodological relation to the growing literature on armed forces' images and videos on social media. This phenomenon, first observed by Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein (2015) in their study of Israeli forces' 'digital militarism', is now commonplace to military digital diplomacy. Understanding the gender politics that militaries communicate through these images, this literature argues, requires attention to their 'visuality' (Crilly 2016, 52). David Shim and Frank Stengel (2017), for instance, argue that German forces' photographs of operations in Afghanistan, posted to Facebook, drew on established constructions of masculinity and femininity to seem appealing. Katharine Wright (2019) similarly finds a 'masculinist protection logic' at work in the digital diplomacy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Natalie Jester (2021) focuses more specifically on recruitment in comparing how US and UK recruitment campaigns since 2002 have promoted visions of military belonging which go beyond traditionally hegemonic military masculinities

focused on combat and strength. Until now the greatest attention to LGBTQ inclusivity in military recruitment materials has been on Sweden, as part of the ongoing work of Sanna Strand. Strand's research, which began by contrasting Swedish and UK recruitment in 2013–14 (Strand and Berndtsson 2015), deals directly with LGBTQ inclusivity as a national value that the Swedish military ostensibly exists to defend (Strand and Kehl 2019). With Maria Stern, Strand has gone on to show how recent Swedish military marketing reassures prospective female recruits that menstruation will not impair their military belonging in the field (Stern and Strand 2022).

Methodologically, studies of military social media images in general analyse entire corpuses or sub-corpuses of images posted to forces' social media accounts (e.g. Shim and Stengel 2017). Smaller-*n* studies of specific recruitment campaigns that consist of a few key items can apply more in-depth analysis to each one (e.g. Strand and Kehl 2019; Stern and Strand 2022). With ten videos from each country in her dataset, Jester (2021), for instance, could conduct a discourse-theoretical analysis exploring what presuppositions were made in each video, how each video attached ideas to subjects and objects, and which subjects were granted agency or leadership. The ten 'This is Belonging' videos consist of five live-action and five animated clips posted to the official 'Army Jobs' YouTube channel in January 2018, lasting around 30 s each: most animations' themes had a live-action counterpart, but the LGBTQ-related animation, 'Can I be gay in the Army?' (Army Jobs 2018a), had no directly matching live-action video.

To analyse the images that militaries and other actors in international politics create, Meredith Loken (2021, 377) proposes two types of strategy: content coding and descriptive comparison, and iconology and interpretation. Although a corpus of 10 videos does not lend itself to large-scale trend analysis, some descriptive comparison is necessary to understand how (un)characteristic the 'Gay?' video might be of others in the campaign – therefore how the campaign handled being 'gay' compared to other under-represented experiences in the military. The study's predominant approach, however, is interpretive. Following Lene Hansen (2011) in acknowledging that images function intertextually, it considers 'image(s) themselves' as well as images' 'immediate intertext', the 'dominant policy discourses' where they circulate, and 'linguistic texts' that attribute meaning to images.

This paper also, however, makes two further methodological moves. One is to recognize that *audiovisual* images require analysis of how the images move, and how sound and images are synchronized to invite meaning-making together (Malmvig 2020, 650). Another is to pay specific attention to how bodies are represented, separately and together. This recognizes that 'the micro-politics of bodies, affect and movement' influence how politics, security and the military are thought about at the macro-level (Åhäll 2019, 151). It also applies the 'queer intellectual curiosity' of Cynthia Weber (2016, 19), which questions how 'distillations of shared meanings in forms or images [...] attach to and detach from material bodies' as they are mobilized in international politics into figurations of normality and/or perversion.

Accordingly, the paper first considers dominant UK policy discourses around LGBTQ recruitment in the videos' short-term historico-political context, 2017–18. It then explains the immediate intertexts of the 'This is Belonging' campaign and the other videos launched alongside the 'Gay?' video in 2018. While all the videos employed soothing visual devices to reassure target viewers that they could belong in the Army,

the ‘Gay?’ video’s visual narrative was more metaphorical, though harnessed the important linguistic text of the closet door to promise LGBTQ viewers psychic security through military friendship and domesticity. As such, it appealed to a sense of futurity as avowedly LGBTQ soldiers that Army recruitment had traditionally not offered LGBTQ youth. By circumscribing its notion of sexual difference to one that would not bring same-gender desire directly into the ranks, however, it resisted imagining an actually queer military home.

Dominant policy discourses and immediate intertexts of ‘this is belonging’ in 2017–18

Dominant policy discourses around UK military recruitment in 2017–18 included the discourse that the Army was confronting a severe enough ‘recruitment crisis’ that it needed to widen its appeal to non-traditional recruits (Jester 2021, 58), and the discourse that the services were exercising progressive leadership in acting on their public sector equalities obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The 2015 Strategic Defence Review had set a target of increasing female recruitment to 15% of total military strength and ‘black and minority ethnic’ recruitment to 10%, though did not mention LGBTQ recruits (Louise and Sangster 2019, 11). The UK government was, however, articulating a discourse of the UK as a European and world leader on LGBTQ rights, to be reflected in its July 2018 ‘LGBT Action Plan’ (Lawrence and Taylor 2020, 599–600). These discourses appear to have suggested to the Army that it was desirable and necessary for its next recruitment campaign to include outreach to LGBTQ youth as well as other groups who might not believe they could belong in the Army. Once ‘This is Belonging’ fully launched in 2018, counter-discourses would come from critics who warned that ‘political correctness’ would weaken the Army, and, using different premises, the campaign group ForcesWatch. This organization was founded in 2010 to investigate militarization, military ethics and human rights concerns in the UK, and its priorities include campaigning against the UK’s recruitment of 16- and 17-year-olds, one of its chief reasons for criticizing ‘This is Belonging’ (Crilley 2019; Louise and Sangster 2019).

On top of the internationalization of LGBTQ rights as a security issue that had been gaining pace since the mid-2010s, in 2017 reactions to the new Trump administration in the USA would also influence representatives of officially LGBTQ-inclusive militaries to reassert their inclusivity. As one of his administration’s numerous rollbacks of minority rights, Trump had announced on 26 July 2017 that he would reinstate the ban on trans personnel serving in the US military which Barack Obama had lifted in 2016. Responses on social media from institutional and personal NATO allies’ accounts included the Canadian Armed Forces, which tweeted a photograph of Navy musicians marching in a Pride parade with rainbow flags on their instrument and a recruitment message to Canadians ‘of all sexual orientations and gender identities’ (Herreria Russo 2017), and pro-trans tweets by two senior Royal Navy officers (BBC News 2017). The commander of UK maritime forces Rear Admiral Alex Burton, for instance, tweeted ‘As a Royal Navy LGBT champion and senior warfighter I am so glad we are not going this way’. Burton’s tweet articulated the discourse that militaries are most effective when the full range of their nations’ social identities are represented in the ranks: it was as a ‘senior warfighter’, not just as a diversity champion, that he welcomed trans service. British military

performances of LGBTQ inclusion, contrasted to Trump's trans military ban, thus cast what Paul Higate and Nivi Manchanda (2018) see as a 'shockingly enlightened, even humane' image, overlaying the reality of UK special forces' 'permanent war' in North Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

These performances started in 2017 with the 'Pride Camo' promotion, supported by pre-Pride press releases to LGBTQ online media including *Gay Times* and *Pink News*. Sixty-one serving LGBTQ soldiers were to march at Pride, and Karmarama's executive creative director told *Gay Times* that the rainbow 'camouflage' sticks were intended to celebrate LGBTQ service personnel, implying that LGBTQ recruits would no longer have to be private about their identities in order to be as comfortable as cisgender straight recruits:

The modern Army is proud of its LGBT+ soldiers and we support that. Camo cream is all about hiding and blending in, but this is a time for standing out and standing proud. (Llewellyn 2017)

The featured image accompanying the link on social media showed a streak of 'rainbow camo' along a stubbled white cheek. Unlike conventional Pride flags, the streak's lowest stripe was light blue rather than violet, which might suggest its creator did not know the rainbow flag well, or that its manufacturer had no violet paint.

Rainbow flags were flown to coincide with Pride on more than 300 British Army bases around the world (Duffy 2017a), and in September 2017, the Army also contributed to a new awareness campaign by the LGBTQ charity Stonewall. One participating sergeant's remarks to *Pink News* epitomized the discourse that LGBTQ inclusiveness equalled greater military effectiveness, potentially signalling more comfort with sexuality-related difference than in Bulmer's interviewees' time:

Traditionally the Army was straight and male – it looked pretty homogenous from the outside.

But letting people express their individuality – whether that's being trans, black, Asian – allows people to be as productive as possible. (Duffy 2017b)

'This is Belonging', when it fully launched following these publicity moves, marked a new approach to both diversity and emotionality in British Army recruitment (Jester 2021). Unlike previous campaigns that had signalled diversity at a surface level by including more women and troops of colour in their images of military teams, 'This is Belonging', in contrast, contained more tailored messages to under-represented groups, including young women, young Muslims, youths who saw themselves as less physically fit or more emotionally sensitive, and the LGBTQ youth appealed to at Pride 2017.

Images and discourses of military LGBTQ-friendliness in 2017 were thus part of the 'Gay?' video's 'immediate intertext' (Hansen 2011, 51), while the fact that 'This is Belonging' had launched at Pride could also have helped frame the rest of the campaign as signalling a new comfort for diversity in the Army. The set of five animations that included the 'Gay?' video were all themed around questions that the film-makers imagined might be giving young people second thoughts about taking up the Army's opportunities for adventure, steady employment and professional development. 'Will I Be Listened To in the Army?', for instance, featured a young woman worried that men would talk over her as they had in her civilian job. 'Can I Practise

My Faith in the Army?’ featured a young Muslim man who had found out the Army supported his daily prayers better than civilian employers had. ‘What If I Get Emotional in the Army?’ saw a young man overcoming the preconception of the military as emotionally repressive, and ‘Do I Have To Be a Superhero To Join the Army?’ reassured viewers that they did not need to be super-fit to join. ‘Can I Be Gay in the Army?’ aimed to pre-empt young LGBTQ people’s anticipated concerns that the Army would be an institutionally homophobic environment where they would not fit in.

When the animations launched, the news cycle around them quickly became a debate about whether their targeted appeals showed the Army had succumbed to ‘political correctness’ or ‘gone soft’. The hawkish-retired colonel Richard Kemp, for instance, told BBC Breakfast that ‘[t]he army, like the rest of government, is being forced down a route of political correctness’ and that ‘the main group of people who are going to be interested in joining [...] are going to be attracted by images of combat’, implying that the Army and its recruitment material required remasculinization in order to fill its recruitment gap (Weaver 2018). Commenting on the controversy, Jenny Mathers (2018) argues that the strength of reaction against the campaign could be attributed to the fact that ‘it calls into question very basic ideas about what it means to be a “real man”’. Claire Duncanson (2013) argues these ideas had actually already been changing in the military, where new military masculinities had emerged around peacekeeping duties in the 1990s and then around counter-insurgency during the War on Terror. One might therefore expect these new military masculinities to include comfort with the idea of the LGBTQ soldier and specifically the gay male soldier, but a close audiovisual analysis of the ‘Gay?’ video reveals a more complex logic.

The ‘Gay?’ video’s audiovisual aesthetics

As YouTube videos, which would also appear as promoted posts on other social media networks, all five animations entered a digital space that originated as a grassroots video-sharing site and has continued to be defined by ‘cultural logics of community, openness and authenticity’ (Burgess and Green 2018, vii) even as states, militaries, arms manufacturers and other powerful international actors have used it for advertising, propaganda and digital diplomacy (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019; Jackson 2019). Each animation’s aesthetic techniques followed the same affective script. At the beginning, the featured voice started describing something that had once worried them about joining the Army, over intimidating dissonant music and looming obstacles confronting the animated figure of the recruit. The music and colour scheme became more friendly, usually including a change of background, as the voice described how Army friendship and teamwork had helped them settle in. The ‘Gay?’ video followed this pattern, with a young man’s voice saying:

Growing up, I really had my heart set on joining the Army. My brother was in Afghanistan. Hearing his experiences, that’s when I knew I wanted to join as a medic. I was really worried about whether I’d be accepted, but within days I was more than confident about being who I was. I’m not afraid to talk about having a boyfriend. I thought I’d have to hide it, but once

you've done it you think, 'Ooh, why did I make it such a big thing for so long?' (Army Jobs 2018a)

Its protagonist is a white man first seen in civilian clothes, walking with a similar figure who might be his brother. As the only LGBTQ figure in the entire recruitment campaign, his whiteness is salient: as with the white women soldiers whose images embodied reassurance that military life could accommodate the 'leaky' corporeality of cisgender women in a 2018 Swedish recruitment campaign (Stern and Strand 2022, 6), the campaign's representations could evidently only cope with one axis of diversity at a time.

This figure's transformation into a soldier and teammate is mediated through the visual device of a door, which provides his transition into happy military life. The young man sees his elongated shadow as a soldier lit up in an open door. The door is then seen on a hillside, far away. A uniformed man walks back through the door and then, as the voice describes wanting to be a medick, silhouettes of a quiet patrol and a calm resuscitation scene appear on screen. (This scene's mood is, of course, the opposite of conditions in which a combat medic would work.) The video's emotional turning-point is the line 'more than confident about being who I was': here, another uniformed hand clasps the character's own. In the next scene, the hand is shown as that of a squadmate's, pulling him through the door. He lands on a hillside with a helicopter in the background. As the voice talks about being able to speak about having a boyfriend, we see two men walking supportively, one with his hand on the other's shoulder. The image pulls out to show it has been taking place in the head of one soldier in a four-man squad, who might be waiting for a helicopter to arrive.

These five animations' soothing sensory trajectory was sharply criticized in ForcesWatch's 2019 report on 'This is Belonging'. This argued that they plotted recruits' promised experience as:

a linear journey from uncertainty or even negativity in the civilian world to one of security and positivity in the Army. They journey from enclosed spaces with dark and foreboding imagery and music, to vistas of light filled horizons and uplifting music. (Louise and Sangster 2019, 43)

This paper's analysis supports the ForcesWatch reading but also notes aesthetic differences between the 'Gay?' video and other animations which it did not discuss. Firstly, only the 'Gay?' video used black-and-white animation rather than colour. Secondly, its animation represented a 'gay' experience metaphorically, whereas the faith-themed, women-themed and fitness-themed animations illustrated the protagonists' pre-military lives literally. Thirdly, the 'Gay?' video had a less detailed script than other animations. Both the speech and imagery of the faith-themed, gender-themed and fitness-themed videos had narrated their protagonists' perceived obstacles concretely: the man in 'Can I Practise My Faith in the Army?' is seen being told by a civilian employer's looming head that they cannot accommodate his daily prayer needs, while on Army exercises he is shown being able to unroll a prayer mat (Army Jobs 2018b). The woman in 'Will I Be Listened To in the Army?' is surrounded by much larger male figures in suits and ties until she falls into the Army's reassuring hand and learns to strike powerful poses as a newly commissioned officer commanding men (Army Jobs 2018f). The 'Gay?' video, conversely, gave notably less information about what the protagonist

had been worried about or what experiences before recruitment had led him to expect that he would not fit in.

Present but unnamed in this video is the metaphor of the closet door. A door mediates both the protagonist's fear of homophobia and his successful entry into military brotherhood. Most UK LGBTQ youth encountering the video would already know the phrase 'coming out of the closet' as a metaphor for proudly revealing one's sexual and/or gender identity, making it a key 'linguistic text' (Hansen 2011, 51) for such viewers' interpretations. The 'closet', as named by North American gay liberation activists after the 1969 Stonewall rising and theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 68), represents the stifling social and legal pressure to hide one's sexuality and pretend to conform to heterosexual norms. Treating the door as a closet in this way suggests a reading where the viewer is invited to suppose that fear of having to 'stay in the closet' about his sexuality, when straight male recruits would be able to talk freely about theirs, is what the protagonist had to overcome to become the soldier he longed to be.

The structures known as the closet have, for Sedgwick (1990, 72), shaped modern 'gay' identities and cultural production, but also produced a 'crisis of definition' where it becomes essential to define people and intimate acts as either homosexual or homosocial. If an act can be judged homosocial *not* homosexual, its participants are freed from the stigma of homosexuality, making urgent the 'will to knowledge' (Weber 2016) that strives to determine whether referents are stably normal or perverse, straight or gay. What invests the closet with meaning, according to Michael Warner (2000, 1), is thus an 'ethics of sexual shame'. From this perspective, the 'Gay?' video could be said to employ a heteronormative epistemology that assumes it was natural for the youth to be ashamed of his non-normative desire. Viewing it intertextually with the other four animations, however, suggests the video is attempting to imply that homophobic stigma is a feature of civilian life, just as aggressive Islamophobia or domineering male bosses were features of civilian life that other animations' characters could leave behind.

Whether the 'Gay?' video successfully persuades viewers that the Army is less homophobic than civilian life is, of course, up to each viewer. Viewing it and the other videos intertextually, one might suggest, weakens this message: it exhibits a remarkable lack of specificity about its topic, homosexuality and homophobia, compared to the other animations. Its closest match in allusiveness is 'What if I Get Emotional in the Army?' (Army Jobs 2018e) which takes a young Black man on a journey from fears of emotional isolation to a reality of emotional wellbeing. This difficulty in visualizing how homosexuality could be embodied is even more apparent when the animations are interpreted alongside the five live-action 'This is Belonging' videos, posted on the Army Jobs YouTube channel the same day. Following a more conventional script for Army recruitment videos, these videos showed scenes of what the advertisers wished to suggest were typical military activities. Each ended in a close-up on the central figure plus an on-screen slogan ('Having My Voice Heard', 'Facing My Kryptonite', 'Keeping My Faith', 'Expressing My Emotions' and 'Still Playing the Joker'), then finally the words 'This is Belonging'. Jester (2021) argues these represented a novel emphasis in UK military recruitment advertising on teamwork and emotional strength.

Notably, four of them echoed themes from the animations: being listened to, triumphing in fitness challenges, finding time for worship, and expressing emotional vulnerability. Yet instead of the fifth video depicting a situation aimed at LGBTQ

soldiers, it showed a racially diverse group of male infantrymen playing pranks on each other inside an armoured vehicle, with the slogan ‘Still Playing the Joker’ (Army Jobs 2018d). This depicted homosociality but had nothing apparently to do with embodied experiences of being gay. An optimistic ‘LGBT’ way to read it as supporting the ‘Gay?’ video’s narrative might be to imagine that gay soldiers can feel so comfortable with their squadmates that they do not have to hold back from joining in male bonding rituals, which in everyday military life are often homoerotic (see Basham 2013). But this would require quite a leap to read any ‘gay’ identity into the video, in contrast to, say, how concretely the animated and live-action faith-themed videos could represent Islamic prayer. A critical Queer reading might suspect that, faced with Sedgwick’s ‘crisis of definition’, the film-makers chose a theme of homosociality *rather than* homosexuality when it actually had to be embodied by human actors. At the point of translating animation to live action, then, LGBTQ viewers stopped being directly invited to imagine the psychic security of belonging in the military home, despite this message being central to the campaign.

A queer military home?: ‘domesticating’ the military in UK recruitment

Each video in ‘This is Belonging’, including the ‘Gay?’ video, offered its target audience the message that, even though they perceived aspects of military culture would make them feel excluded, their perceptions were mistaken and they did actually belong. They moreover suggested that military comradeship was more emotionally rewarding than any form of belonging in civilian life. As the critical British veteran Joe Glenton (2021, 39) observes, the military has long marketed itself as a ‘family’ where recruits can find belonging, meaning, advancement and adventure, and the notion of a regimental family even persists into post-service life. Yet, Glenton (2021, 39) adds, ‘if the army is a family, it is a dysfunctional one, at least by any civilian measure’; one anti-war veteran turned social worker Glenton interviewed even argued that the ‘controlling, coercive and threatening’ atmosphere of military induction even matched Crown Prosecution Service definitions of domestic abuse.

The family imagined by ‘This is Belonging’ was still, in many ways, masculine and homosocial. Despite the campaign’s nod to gender equality in the two videos featuring women, eight of the ten videos represented military camaraderie, bearing out the ForcesWatch report’s argument that Army recruitment advertising’s approach to diversity has been ‘tokenistic [...] with a focus on male bonding’ (Louise and Sangster 2019, 4–5). The invitation to join the family was, moreover, being issued to very young men. Perhaps the most contentious aspect of UK military recruitment is its minimum enlistment age of sixteen, which has been criticized by the NGO Child Soldiers International and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UK Children’s Commissioners 2016). Governmental efforts to instil a so-called ‘military ethos’ through schools have particularly targeted working-class boys. Basham (2016, 260–1, emphasis original) argues this has had ‘class-making’ effects of ‘reinforcing the military as a site of opportunity – in some cases the *only* site’ when government austerity measures have eroded civilian jobs for working-class youth. The ‘This is Belonging’ campaign’s invitation to join a family of ‘camaraderie and community’ is seen by Rhys Crilly (2019, 133) as ‘specifically aimed at recruiting young people’ down to age sixteen. Indeed, it promises

not just family but also a home, since the reproduction of military life depends on specifically military forms of domestic routine (Atherton 2009, 827).

The idea of the military as home in daily life can be seen as cushioned by what Matthew Rech (2020) terms the wider ‘domestication’ of militarism in UK military recruitment materials which present life in the military as familiar, normal and attractive. Through recruitment stalls, airshows and charity merchandise, Rech (2020, 1077) argues, militarism is ‘domesticated’ through objects that members of the public take home (Rech 2020, 1077) – such as a rainbow camo stick from Pride 2017. These objects implicitly promise their handlers and owners, especially those who might be interested in military careers, that obtaining the economic and emotional benefits of belonging to a national military is attractive and worth the risk, hardship and sacrifice. As such, they are material versions of the textual promises that Strand and Berndtsson (2015, 238) discern in UK, and indeed Swedish, recruitment discourses: supposedly, training will increase recruits’ physical *and* mental capacities, improving ‘the well-being and efficiency of both body and soul’. The psychic, emotional fulfilment that recruits will supposedly gain through undergoing the social and bodily transformations of military training is to be delivered in a specifically military home.

While certain military recruitment campaigns also make more material socio-economic promises of skills development and career advancement – such as the Royal Navy’s ‘Made in the Royal Navy’ and Royal Air Force’s ‘No Ordinary Job’ campaigns, which coincided with ‘This is Belonging’ in 2018 – all the examples discussed in this paper mobilize what Amanda Chisholm and Hanna Ketola (2020, 271) term the psychic notion of ‘militarism as a path to a secure future, to a “good life”’. So ‘affectively felt’ is this logic that it has power over individuals’ hopes even when the promise’s ‘fragility and impossibility’ are clear (Chisholm and Ketola 2020, 271). They explain this paradox as a manifestation of what the queer theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) called the ‘cruel optimism’ of social relations in precarious conditions. As Sara Ahmed (2006, 90) observes, the source of such psychic security is supposed to be the home, at least in the ideals of heteronormative society; in social reality, the home is frequently no such thing. To promise psychic security, the military must therefore offer a sense of home. This is both symbolic, so that recruits become ‘at home’ in the military community, and material, since troops live, train and serve in more intimate proximity to each other than they are likely to have shared with anyone besides immediate family members in civilian life (Atherton 2014, 146).

A queer and feminist understanding of the military home must, therefore, ask which bodies are able to be present in the home under which conditions, and also which bodies desire to or are able to form a home together. Normatively, a recruit who stays in the military will eventually marry and transition from barracks life to married housing, so the latter question also turns on which bodies can form a home together *and become a military couple*, the familial unit that the military relies on for sustaining married troops’ emotional wellbeing, effectiveness and morale (Gray 2016, 153). A military accustomed to controlling the lives of ‘military wives’ (Hyde 2017, 195) has had to contend in the twenty-first century with also having to rely on same-gender partners and spouses, including an unknown number of men. While within institutional patriarchal norms this disruption to the military household’s gender order would be a challenge, for recruits who desire partners of the same gender it is a prerequisite in

order for them to be able to imagine futures for themselves within the symbolic military home.

Queer futurities and the ‘Gay?’ video’s affective promises

In inviting their psychically insecure viewers to imagine futures for themselves in the Army through identification with a protagonist who shares the characteristic they fear will exclude them from full military belonging, the ‘This is Belonging’ animations appeal to a sense that critical Queer scholars have termed futurity. In doing so, they reflect the wider affective politics of recruitment advertising in volunteer militaries, which operates through (audio)visual representations inviting their chosen audiences to imagine the activities, sensations and bodily transformations they will experience if they answer the call to join the military (see Brown 2012; Crane-Seeber 2016). Their structure as first-person testimony of civilian-to-military transition is currently a common device in UK military recruitment, also employed by ‘Made in the Royal Navy’ campaign and by other Army Jobs video series based on specific trades or towns: in all these campaigns, a viewer who identifies with the central character and their civilian situation appears invited to imagine experiencing the affects of a similar transformation in the near future. ForcesWatch observes critically that UK recruitment advertising’s use of first-person narrators describing their journey towards fulfilment in military life ‘emulates the narrative and visual styles often used in films and other entertainment forms to create affinity and desire in the audience’ (Louise and Sangster 2019, 15). In the ‘This is Belonging’ animations, unusually for the military, that affinity and desire is created by using the target viewer’s marginalized characteristic as an affective hinge.

The animations’ affective force thus emerges from how they interact with the viewer and from the prior situated, embodied experiences any viewer brings to watching the video. To a heterosexual British viewer who identifies with the idea of their country as an LGBTQ-friendly nation, the ‘Gay?’ video’s implication that the Army is diverse might evoke a flash of pride. Its script and emotional trajectory also suggest, however, that its creators had accepted that the prior embodied knowledge of many potential LGBTQ recruits would make them anticipate that joining the Army would *not* be a comfortable future. Indeed, it suggests they had anticipated that to young gay men, other LGBTQ youth, and other audiences targeted during ‘This is Belonging’, imagining one’s future self in the military is bound up with alarm and doubt beyond what is experienced by recruits who appear to live up to a heteronormative, white, masculine ideal. The video’s acknowledgement of this everyday queer insecurity becomes a promise that the institution understands what it means not to be heterosexual in everyday life.

Extremely rarely in UK military recruitment, the ‘Gay?’ video thus offers a (certain kind of) gay military future – one into which a male viewer can project himself *because*, rather than regardless of the fact that, he is gay or desires men. Its appeal to lesbian and bisexual women viewers might be more indirect, since the specificities of negotiating the Army’s gendered bodily regimes as a woman while also desiring women are not illustrated; it would thus be for each viewer of another gender to parse how far its appeal also addressed them. (In British English it is ambiguous whether ‘gay’ refers to all homosexuals or just homosexual men.) Futurity, Anthony Matarazzo and Erin Baines (2021, 8) argue, is an important component in how individuals construct military masculinities

and subjectivities, since the role of soldier, like the role of father, is a 'performative, future-oriented' category requiring specific repeated acts that constitute those social identities over time. When acting on each social identity causes conflicting demands, Matarazzo and Baines argue, the conflict often weakens troops' attachments to military identities as time goes on. Even in romantic partnerships which do not or cannot lead to parenthood, the same can be said: unless compelled, a soldier who is unable to imagine a future containing an intimate life for themselves within the military is unlikely to stay a soldier for long.

From 'Queer' perspectives, of course, the very idea of future and futurity is a contested concept. For white queer theorists such as Lee Edelman (2004), futurity often represents less a promise, more an object of mistrust. Warning Queer scholars to be suspicious when institutions make appeals to the future, Edelman (2004, 2) suggested that the deviance of queerness stood structurally opposed to what he called 'reproductive futurism', or the heteronormative exhortations that it is normal to strive for a better world in the interests of 'the Child'. Queer scholars of colour including José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 95), however, criticized Edelman for creating and reproducing a 'monolithic figure of the child that is [...] always already white'. Rather than conceding that appeals to the future were only ever the domain of 'normative white reproductive futurity', Muñoz argued, queer politics should be working 'to glimpse another time and place: a "not-yet" where queer youths of colour actually get to grow up' (Muñoz 2009, 96). By calling into being *these* futures, Muñoz thought, queer politics could transcend presentist and assimilationist concerns, including the struggles for equal marriage and the right to serve in the military (Muñoz 2009, 22).

The militarized sense of future evoked in the 'Gay?' video is much more circumscribed than the queer futurities in these debates. For Jack Halberstam (2005, 2), for instance, queer temporalities are those which exist in *opposition* to the 'paradigmatic markers of life experience' based on biological reproduction and heteronormative marriage. The 'Gay?' video's promised future is closer to how futurity operates in what Halberstam terms a heteronormative 'time of inheritance': this 'connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability' (Halberstam 2005, 5). Indeed, not only does nationalism function this way, but so does the Army's notion of the regimental family. Traditionally this regimental family has been built up of men who form relationships with women and become, or have potential to become, biological fathers. Significantly perhaps, the 'Gay?' video's script creates a concept of belonging that permits military traditions of homosocial masculine friendship to coexist with queer masculine desire, but only in the 'safer' figure of a desiring subject who already has an established boyfriend. This is a gay subject who, as long as he is monogamous, is less likely to bring his desire threateningly *into* the ranks, from whence it might 'leak' (Stern and Strand 2022, 8) to threaten military order.

Outside the scope of the 'Gay?' video, then, are men who take multiple male sexual partners, who engage in casual sex with men, who experience and express desire for men they serve beside, or even who serve in combat roles while identifying as gay. Outside the scope of the entire campaign, and therefore implicitly to be disavowed, is the possibility that intimate and homoerotic acts of male bonding might blur the military's carefully constructed homosocial/homosexual divide. The twenty-first century's novel subject of the 'normal homosexual', who can belong to the military without destabilizing military

masculinities or the nation's patriarchal gender order, is, as Weber (2016, 132) suggests, still haunted by the 'perverse homosexual' after all. The video and its intertexts reveal how military recruitment operates through affective promises of futurity and psychic security precisely because the military's heteronormativity as a social institution leaves those promises unresolvable. In so doing, it shows how these appeals operate elsewhere in military recruitment, where the fact that they invoke forms of domestic future that most heterosexual and cisgender people take for granted leaves invisible what they promise about the military home.

Conclusion

How LGBTQ soldiers should be visually represented, if at all, has caused anxiety and confusion in the UK military since before open LGBTQ service began. At the end of the 2000s, when the military treated sexual diversity as a private matter, officers interviewed by Bulmer (2013, 144) would worry that LGBTQ troops would express their sexual identities in ways that conflicted with the uniformity of military identity – like the commander concerned that uniformed men marching at Pride would resemble 'the line up of the Village People', or an officer warning sailors not to wear glittery make-up or earrings to the parade. In the 2010s, the military took qualified steps to acknowledge LGBTQ soldiers as another minority community within its ranks. Yet the 'This is Belonging' videos still expressed hesitancy over how to visualize and embody sexual difference to such an extent that the protagonist's anxieties in the 'Gay?' animation could only be represented through metaphor and graphics hinting at mental isolation, and the live-action videos avoided creating any LGBTQ-themed scenario altogether.

It is not hard to imagine how a live-action LGBTQ-themed 'This is Belonging' video could have been conceived. A video with LGBTQ inclusion as its key message might have shown a same-gender couple and their Army friends celebrating a wedding, or their friends supporting them as they marched at Pride. A video depicting LGBTQ inclusion incidentally might simply have shown a character who was unambiguously in a same-gender relationship. In the live-action 'Expressing My Emotions' (Army Jobs 2018c), which seems to normalize emotionality within an everyday military domestic ritual, the male protagonist receives a letter from home during a rainforest operation, sighs at a teabag his lover has sent him, and a younger male soldier brings him boiling water to make a cup of tea. His letter is unsigned, so theoretically his partner could be male; but, as with 'Still Playing the Joker', it would take what Sedgwick's queer theory terms a consciously 'reparative' reading (Sedgwick 2003, 123) to imagine this. But what if his letter had been signed by a man? A queer intellectual consciousness can easily imagine it – but the campaign's audiovisual texts could not.

This example from UK military recruitment in 2017–18 suggests that a 'patriarchal confusion' (Bulmer 2013) around the coexistence of homosexual identities and military identity is still at work there. Yet some of its context had changed. By 2017–18 the Army had realized that LGBTQ youth were an untapped recruitment pool and had decided to target such pools in advertising to address the recruitment crisis. It had also ended combat operations in Afghanistan and was pivoting to react to the evolving threats detailed in the 2015 Strategic Defence Review. The space for troops' sexual identity to be public rather than private was slightly greater than in 2010, though still conditional. It

was not, for instance, as wide as the space signalled by the Swedish military's LGBTQ-themed publicity campaign of 2016–17, which positioned Swedish forces as existing to defend Swedes' 'right to live how you like – the way you like and with whoever you like' – in the words of the caption to an image of rainbow-laced military boots shared on the Swedish forces' social media channel before Stockholm Pride in 2017 (Strand and Kehl 2019, 303). It was still part of a transnational turn towards performing LGBTQ-friendliness and openness to more 'sensitive' masculinities in which the UK, Swedish, Australian and Canadian militaries all engaged during the late 2010s, contrasting with and sometimes reacting to the simultaneous anti-LGBTQ backlash in the USA.

Interpreting the 'Gay?' video within the intertexts of the 'This is Belonging' campaign and dominant policy discourses surrounding recruitment and LGBTQ-friendliness in 2017–18 might leave a sense of 'messiness' towards both 'LGBT' and 'Queer' perspectives on LGBTQ inclusion in the military. On one hand, the animations' openness towards emotion and vulnerability, and their acknowledgement that LGBTQ youth have reasons to perceive that military culture might not allow them to belong, might be evidence of the kind of 'progressive change' towards 'relations of equality, respect, and empathy' that Duncanson (2015, 244) hopes will emerge from current military masculinities. On the other, sexualized harassment and hypermasculine behaviour were still identified as significant problems for the military in the 2019 Wigston Review and the House of Commons Defence Committee's 2021 report on women in the Forces (Ministry of Defence 2019; House of Commons Defence Committee 2021). This might suggest that, regardless of commanders' aspirations, many recruits would find the emotional promises of 'This is Belonging' were not being met. One might then conclude, with anti-assimilationist Queer scholars, that the campaign instrumentalised LGBTQ-friendliness to help solve a recruitment crisis or even to perform a rhetorical 'pinkwashing' move.

The 'messiness' of interpreting the video is that both positions can be true at the same time. Feminist scholars conducting ethnographic and interview-based research within and around militaries often use this term to denote the difficulties of critiquing militarism and its institutions while not dismissing the everyday and often positive experiences of service personnel and others 'touched by military power' (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 65, 69). While it may primarily be close interpersonal encounter that makes us conscious of the 'messiness' of military research (Baker et al. 2016, 151), the contradictions of interpreting the 'Gay?' video suggest that messiness also manifests in applying visual and audiovisual methodologies to military artefacts. Since queerness encompasses the 'never-quite-achieved or coherent' (Weber 2016, 14) as well as the self-evidently transgressive, the plural, irresolvable logics of interpretive messiness could themselves be seen as queer (Kehl 2020, 28).

The 'Gay' video, viewed with awareness of Queer scholarship on domesticity and futurity, can neither be fixed as entirely welcoming nor as entirely dismissive of LGBTQ troops. It does, however, add even fresher nuance to critical military studies research on how the UK military has incorporated the identities of LGBTQ troops since their open military service began. In 2015, Duncanson (2015, 240) was able to observe that contemporary Western militaries' performances of LGBTQ-friendliness were arguably presenting 'another case of old hierarchies being replaced by new ones: respectable, discreet queers and problematic, offensive "out" queers'. At least in the logic of 'This is

Belonging', the hierarchies have sharpened further still. No longer are all the 'out' queers necessarily problematic; some can be respectable and even institutionally advantageous, that is, they can belong. The queers who continue to be problematic and unrepresentable are those who cannot or will not fit into heteronormative forms of domesticity and futurity, whose imagined futures exceed the soldierly life course imagined for them, and who unsettle the reproduction of regiment, military and nation over time. While 'This is Belonging' is evidence that the British Army now offers some queers a home in the military, that is not the same as a queer military home.

Notes

1. Contemporary UK media and institutions typically use 'LGBTQ' or 'LGBT+' as a collective term for people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. This paper uses 'LGBTQ' when discussing how institutions address this community, 'LGBT' to describe the scholarly approach often contrasted with 'Queer', and 'homosexual' when referring specifically to same-gender attraction. Ambiguities of 'gay' in UK English are discussed below.
2. The Royal Navy first marched in uniform at Pride in 2006, and the Army and Royal Air Force in 2008.

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