

Promoting a Friendly but Fictional Image

Mobilizing Popular Culture in Recruitment Posters of the Japanese Self Defense Forces



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1 Introduction

1.1 Context

When various posters recruiting for the Japanese Self Defense Forces (hereafter, JSDF) featuring anime girls seemingly in their underwear appeared in 2019 in Shiga prefecture. Public reception was critical, with some spectators calling the image sexual harassment.¹ Officials from the local SDF recruitment office defended the choice by arguing that it would “appeal to younger audiences” and argued that its imagery was acceptable as the girls in question were simply wearing “very short pants.”² This instance of popular culture references within military recruitment strategies attempts to remedy the dwindling JSDF applicants, and its scathing reception comprises only one of many similar cases. In recent years, Japan finds itself in an increasingly unique and tricky position regarding the existence of the JSDF in both a domestic and international position. A fervent debate about the status of the JSDF has been brewing within the last decades concerning the role and usefulness of the forces.

The JSDF has particularly seen critique regarding its positionality within Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. This article renounces Japan’s right to wage war and maintain any sort of land, sea, and air forces. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s attempts to reinterpret parts of this article have resulted in developments such as the existence and deployment of the Izumo-class helicopter destroyer and have been subject to a good deal of scrutiny as a result.³ In addition, Shinzo Abe has expressed desire towards the “normalization” of Japan, with the JSDF as a full-fledged military force.⁴ The existence of the JSDF has been regarded with a variety of negative and positive perspectives regarding the various peacekeeping operations the forces have participated in internationally, together with their relief efforts in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. While the involvement and role of the JSDF might seem promising concerning various peacekeeping operations, they have continually

¹ Masumi Koizumi, “SDF draws fire for recruitment poster featuring female anime characters in skimpy costumes.” *The Japan Times*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/01/national/sdf-draws-fire-recruitment-poster-featuring-anime-style-female-characters-skimpy-costumes/>

² Ibid.

³ Denny Roy, “Stirring Samurai, Disapproving Dragon: Japan’s Growing Security Activity and Sino-Japan Relations,” *Asian Affairs, an American Review* 31, no. 2 (2004); Paul Martin, “The contradictions of pop nationalism in the manga Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought There!” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 11 no.2 (2020); Tomoyuki Sasaki, *Japan’s Postwar Military and Civil Society: Contesting a Better Life*. (SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan, 2015).

⁴ Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007).

struggled with recruitment numbers.⁵ Amid this contested position, the JSDF has tried to turn towards a new strategy to remedy their dwindling pool of applicants through the deployment of popular culture. Its impact, however, seems to be limited.⁶

1.2 Relevance

Trends in using popular culture within military recruitment and promotion campaigns emerged within various countries situated in the Global North and caught scholarly attention to grasp recruitment campaigns in the neoliberal age. The recruitment strategy of the JSDF that attempts to construct a new image through popular culture shows similarity with wider trends across the globe. The United States (US) for example initiated the “Army Strong” campaign that deploys popular culture references to improve the Army’s public image and to appeal to younger viewers.⁷ In addition, the United Kingdom has attempted to remedy low recruitment numbers by creating the “Snowflake Campaign.” The campaign focused on appealing to young men and women by referring to popular culture, social media, and brand identity that simultaneously offered them a chance to realize their potential and self-worth.⁸

In order to tackle this contemporary development, a cultural studies approach that analyzes the usage of popular culture is critical to shape a solid understanding for the meanings and beliefs that military advertisements negotiate. Exploring this topic illustrates the relatively little attention this area of study has received in comparison to the JSDF’s more militaristic contemporary developments. This cultural aspect is largely disregarded in favor of the broader nature of the JSDF and their history, role within Japan’s security strategy, and position within the international sphere.⁹ Popular culture has been addressed especially in relation to Japan’s soft power strategy and their popular ‘Cool Japan’ initiative but has been overlooked within the recruitment efforts of the JSDF.¹⁰ Existing literature has then failed to address the

⁵ Linda Sieg and Ami Miyazaki, “Ageing Japan - Military recruiters struggle as applicant pool dries up.” *Reuters*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-japan-ageing-military-recruits-idUKKCNILZICX>

⁶ Ibid; Jeffrey J. Hall, “Towards an unrestrained military: manga narratives of the self-defense forces.” in *The Representation of Japanese Politics in Manga: The Visual Literacy of Statecraft*. (Routledge, 2020), 121.

⁷ Outi Hakola, “How Pop Can Army Strong Be? Uses of Popular Culture in US Army Recruitment Campaigns.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 6 (2018): 1540.

⁸ Aamna Mohdin, “UK army recruitment ads target 'snowflake' millennials.” *The Guardian*, January 3, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jan/03/uk-army-recruitment-ads-target-snowflake-millennials>

⁹ Sasaki, *Japan's Postwar Military*; Yee-Kuang Heng, “Smart Power and Japan's Self-Defense Forces.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38 no. 3, (2015); Thomas French, *National Police Reserve: The Origin of Japan's Self Defense Forces*. (Leiden: Brill, 2014); David Hunter-Chester, *Creating Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force, 1945-2015: A Sword Well Made*. (New Studies in Modern Japan, 2016).

¹⁰ Taku Tamaki, "Repackaging National Identity: Cool Japan and the Resilience of Japanese Identity Narratives." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 1 (March 2019); Katja Valaskivi, "A Brand New Future? Cool Japan and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Nation." *Japan Forum* 25, no. 4 (2013); Nissim Kadosh

significant role popular culture has on military representation. It is detrimental to extend this research to contextualize and further contribute to the relevance of this debate. This thesis is therefore part of a growing volume of inquiries into popular culture use within this field of study.

Existing discourse has not adequately explained military recruitment trends outside Western countries and have not identified possible issues that arise when popular culture is implemented. By offering contextualization of JSDF strategies, this thesis contributes to both academic relevance of the project, and literature on popular culture as a form of political communication within international relations. As Weber has put forward: “All cultural sites are powerful arenas in which political struggles take place. Culture is not opposed to politics. Culture is political, and politics is cultural.”¹¹ Taking popular culture as a political site then allows for us to approach visual material through which political and societal life is represented.

Another point of relevance for this thesis consists of representation. The use of popular culture in international relations exposes a narrative that plays upon familiar modes of narration, such as images from games, television, and films.¹² As popular culture has gained a significant amount of traction across the world, similar strategies in military campaigns have occurred to appeal to a wider and younger audience, to represent a certain image and to increase employment numbers. Popular culture references within the material that recruitment offices create and circulate rely on the inherent ability to persuade and advertise. There exists a complex connection between popular culture and advertisement that are relevant to military recruitment material to attain concrete goals.¹³ Through this relation, we can analyze the reasons and manner through which the JSDF has transformed their image since the mid-1990s. It allows us to critically examine the way it strives towards positive appeal and attempts to legitimize and normalize its existence.

The representation of Japan and its military forces have shifted towards a direction that is reliant on popular culture.¹⁴ Because an analysis based on political and security policy approaches cannot account for the developments and changes in recruitment and representation alone, the influence that popular culture exercises upon opinions and views is central to this thesis. As Dittmer argues, while there has been a division made between high and low culture

Otmazgin, “Geopolitics and Soft Power: Japan's Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy in Asia.” *Asia-Pacific Review* 19, no. 1 (May 2012).

¹¹ Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 188.

¹² Hakola, “How Pop,” 1540.

¹³ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 119.

¹⁴ Hall, “Towards an unrestrained military,” 121.

within academic and public discourse, these are artificial; all contain political content and are intertwined with politics.¹⁵ As such, it is essential to investigate JSDF imagery as an example of intent to steer people's judgements about what is represented. This thesis therefore wishes to contribute to existing literature through the analysis of representation that positions popular culture as a site that negotiates images of the military within the political sphere.

Contemporary trends of popular culture use within military recruitment strategies are the cause of the research question that stands central in this thesis: How does the JSDF choose to employ popular culture in their recruitment efforts, and how is their image negotiated by their strategy? This question will be answered through a qualitative examination of visual material created by the JSDF through semiotic analysis. Along with primary sources that due to COVID-19 restrictions were gathered online, secondary sources will be used that analyze similar trends within the Global North, along with wider JSDF promotional material and a variety of issues identified in them by scholars. The sub question central in the first analysis asks if a continuation of the deployment of at times negatively received popular culture such as anime and manga might result in a negative association with the JSDF. The sub question in the second analysis questions how reality-mode posters serve to legitimize the JSDF through their representations. Ultimately, this thesis wishes to touch upon that the JSDF exposes itself to a host of issues ranging from outdated gender roles, fictionalization, and maintaining a unrealistic and benign image. Moreover, it argues that JSDF recruitment strategies follow larger trends of the application of popular culture internationally and are relevant to larger diplomatic strategies by the Japanese government. Particularly, a narrative that depicts the JSDF as keepers of peace that offers its participants an opportunity to explore and develop oneself without alluding to its offensive capabilities is put forward.

1.3 Chapter outline

The structure of this thesis will be as follows: First, a theoretical framework will provide an outline of a variety of concepts and background information needed on the field of study, together with more in-depth information on some of the theoretical approaches applied in this thesis. A methodology chapter follows that explains a research design of semiotic analysis that points towards implicit meaning, beliefs and implications. These then lay bare gestures, codes and signs that are meaningful within a social and cultural context. In addition, the methodology elaborates on the sources used in the analysis portion of this thesis that constitute of secondary

¹⁵ Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 628.

academic literature and primary visual material published by regional JSDF recruitment offices.

Chapter 4 consists of the first analysis and researches fantasy-themed various recruitment posters published by the JSDF. Chapter 5 further builds upon previous analysis but provides a visual analysis of a reality-based narrative within the chosen visual material. In the conclusion I establish that the current JSDF popular culture strategy that the JSDF could have negative consequences on a domestic and international scale for its image. It will also provide further research opportunities for the future.

2 Literature review

2.1 Popular culture

In this section the concept of popular culture and its connection to politics will be addressed first. As John Storey argues, popular culture is a complex site of conflicting and widespread understandings. In order to understand the concept, a definition must be established to work from. The most basic definition that might help us is that popular culture is “culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people.”¹⁶ Dominic Strinati elaborates upon the nature of popular culture and emphasizes that it is not homogenous, found within different groups across multiple historical periods, and as such does not have an exclusive definition.¹⁷ The conceptual attempts that try to define popular culture reveal a long-winded debate about the existence and division between high and low culture, with popular culture being placed as an inferior form due to its accessibility and general likeability among the general populace.¹⁸ Fiske adds to this by arguing that popular culture has the ability to reduce the difference between aesthetics and the everyday and appeal to commonalities in order to maximize its reach to a variety of groups.¹⁹ It is important however to consider that popular culture is a complex term that is constantly in flux and cannot be defined in a strict manner.²⁰ This thesis emphasizes that the deployment of popular culture is a powerful tool to mediate a positive image, exemplified by military recruitment rhetoric. A framework based on popular culture then allows us to understand the politics of the everyday and its broad applicability to a variety of actors.²¹ As such, we can consider popular culture as a communication tool that mediates representation and interaction.

2.2 Theoretical framework

This thesis will focus on two modes of narration and visual representation that occur within Japanese military recruitment campaigns that are based on Outi Hakola’s analysis of similar campaigns within the US. The theoretical framework of this thesis is based upon the relation between popular culture and advertising as argued by Jib Fowles and Judith Williamson. As Williamson points out, the images used within advertisements give them their significance, which in turn transfer their significance onto whatever they are promoting. Because JSDF

¹⁶ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. (Routledge, 2018), 5.

¹⁷ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. (Routledge, 2005), XIV.

¹⁸ Storey, *Cultural Theory*, 5-6.

¹⁹ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Routledge, 2005), 6.

²⁰ Storey, *Cultural Theory*, 14; Strinati, *An Introduction*, X.

²¹ Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 9.

promotional material functions as advertisements of this military body, the mediation of desirability and legitimization of specific narratives are similar to many advertising strategies. Similar to how advertising constructs desirable narratives and counteracts critical response through appeal, so do JSDF posters attempt to provide an attractive image. They also follow a similar advertising approach of what Fowles argues is translating the abstract into the observable. This theoretical framework allows to point out the ideological function in which the public is drawn into involvement with the ideas and meanings it communicates.

Lastly, I have adapted Hakola's framework by proposing two narrative modes to deconstruct common themes within JSDF recruitment rhetoric later in this thesis. As a result, I identify and differentiate a fantasy mode that makes use of fiction within popular culture, and a reality mode that focuses on practical opportunities such as personal development and career goals. Both narrative modes desire to appeal to the younger Japanese generation from different angles. These two modalities will allow us to understand different aspects of desirability within an overarching narrative. It also reveals that there is a duality at play within JSDF recruitment campaigns that emulates a wider trend within the Global North. This framework will then define the relationship between the utilization of popular culture and military recruitment trends within a contemporary and international setting.

2.3 The literature gap

To provide context to existing academic debates on Japanese military recruitment trends, we must first look towards a wider transformation of recruitment strategies within the Global North that includes popular culture. As literature that analyzes the role of popular culture within JSDF recruitment and promotion strategies is so limited, it will be useful to build upon the existing wider literature that discusses the JSDF to position Japan within this academic and international debate. As I have briefly mentioned before, while popular culture such as manga and anime are immensely popular domestically and abroad, critique also exists on the usage of scantily clad women, gratuitous violence, sexist narratives, the sexualization of children, and so forth.²² It is therefore important to consider who is meant to be the audience for the posters, but to also understand who the material ultimately reaches and what consequences the posters carry when they come into contact with a general public who might not have pre-existing knowledge of the borrowed media.

As we examine the trends of studies about the JSDF, their role within a domestic and

²² Matt Coughlan, "Senator calls for child abuse anime review." Canberra Times, February 26, 2020. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6650325/senator-calls-for-child-abuse-anime-review/>

international environment has been adequately researched. However, their position within a cultural dimension has been overlooked. The role of the JSDF and their contemporary activities have frequently appeared in newspapers, ranging from new developments to harsh critique on its current status and developments in and around Japan.²³ Academic literature surrounding the JSDF then focus largely around its hard power capabilities. Security policies, its complex place within Article 9, territorial disputes and the issue of remilitarization are oft-discussed subjects. Fortunately, a growing body of academic literature has been initiated to analyze why the JSDF has recently made efforts to deploy popular culture to increase recruitment numbers and promote a specific image of itself.²⁴ While discourse on this topic in the context of popular culture is generally new, it largely agrees that the JSDF strategy centers around one crucial aspect: representation. Additionally, it is implied that its military campaigns show overlap with Japan's wider diplomacy strategy.

For this thesis, two areas of academic discourse are important: constructed representations within popular culture, and narrative modes that exist within military advertising. Sabine Frühstück denotes that the use of popular culture creates a broader characterization of the JSDF as a group capable of activities other than fighting, such as rescuing, caring and building.²⁵ Desirable representations of such a nature are noticeable in the visual material this thesis will analyze. Other notable scholars, such as Takayoshi Yamamura and Paul Midford, argue against a common standpoint in popular media discourse that the collaboration of animation and military imagery are a revival of Japanese militarism or remilitarization.²⁶ Takayoshi Yamamura, who has similarly written about animation within the JSDF, emphasizes the "contentsization" and "fantasization" that have emerged from collaborations with anime producers and visual promotion of the military. He argues that "war is just a fantasy" as very little living Japanese have experienced the Second World War, and the younger generation sees war as a fictional and historical development.²⁷ Yamamura also identifies that the JSDF takes a passive role that grants permission or assistance in the creation

²³ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Toothless tiger: Japan Self-Defence Forces." *BBC News*, October 14, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34485966>; Sieg and Miyazaki, "Ageing Japan"; Masuda Tsuyoshi, "Japan approves new missile policy." *NHK World*, December 22, 2020. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1440/>.

²⁴ Hermawan D. Orlando, "Transformation of JSDF Image in Recent Japanese Animation." *Journal of Physics. Conference Series* 1175, no. 1 (2019); Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*; Martin, "The Contradictions."

²⁵ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 148.

²⁶ Paul Midford, *Rethinking Japanese Public Opinion and Security*. (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), 174; Takayoshi Yamamura, "Cooperation Between Anime Producers and the Japan Self-Defense Force: Creating Fantasy And/or Propaganda?" *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 12 no. 1, (2017): 4.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

of cultural works featuring their troops and vehicles and does not initiate movies or animation themselves.²⁸

Overall, academic literature that concerns itself with the image of the JSDF from a popular culture perspective is relatively new. This is surprising considering the concept is increasingly playing a bigger role as tools of political power within international relations. This area of study has unfortunately suffered under the presumption that it might not be as directly policy-relevant as economic or security-related matters.²⁹ As briefly mentioned before, representation in popular culture is an important aspect in how power, ideology and identity are produced, and can exact influence on the opinion of its consumers. It can help us understand the intricate dynamics behind the formation of ideas and beliefs.³⁰

The study of popular culture then lends itself very well to this rhetoric, as its close links to representation and advertising that are intent to persuade its consumers and influence or change their opinions of the JSDF.³¹ The JSDF at its core borrows from techniques that are inherent in both advertising and popular culture.³² Instead of focusing on a realistic military image, the JSDF has chosen to stay in line with initiatives that have characterized Japan's "pop-culture diplomacy" strategy with a focus on animations, manga, and novels of Japanese origin. However, Japan simultaneously attempts to provide images rooted in reality that portray the JSDF as a desirable and practical workplace. JSDF recruitment rhetoric is dualistic in the sense that it wishes to establish an identity through popular culture that seemingly correlates with governmental policies, but not particularly with the JSDF.

Academic research on JSDF recruitment campaigns that concern itself with popular culture usage are most often analyzed in relation to the anime "Gate."³³ This series, adapted from a light novel and subsequent manga series, details the life of a JSDF officer that is transported to a fictional world through a magical gate. The series follows the developments of the protagonist as he and the JSDF are thrust into a war that plays out simultaneously within Japan and outside of it in a fantasy world beyond the gate. Even though the premise is purely fictional, public perception has questioned the similarities between the story's security-related

²⁸ Ibid, 9-10.

²⁹ Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, "Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture—World Politics Continuum." *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155-56.

³⁰ Ibid, 156-57.

³¹ Strinati, *An Introduction*, 212-14.

³² Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 119.

³³ Yamamura, "Cooperation"; Orlando, "Transformation of JSDF Image"; Martin, "The Contradictions."

issues and those of the contemporary JSDF and the Japanese government.³⁴ Animation collaboration has not been without critique, having resulted in mainstream media and citizens' groups wondering if contemporary pop-culture strategies do not resemble those of prewar propaganda. In addition, the use of scantily clad anime figures that are often women in animation, manga, promotional posters and images attached to military vehicles have faced their fair share of criticism as such imagery is often disliked.³⁵

Deconstructing the trends within visual material of JSDF campaigns reveals a duality inherent in contemporary promotional material. I call for a thorough analysis of this selective narrative that attempts to promote a non-threatening and appealing fictional image but proposes itself as a practical and relevant choice for young Japanese people as well. By doing so, we might tackle the narrative of the JSDF and how it approaches its own representation in context to its domestic and international position. As such, the coming section discusses the methodology that contributes to analyzing the particularities of the image the JSDF strives to represent.

³⁴ Matthew Brummer, "Japan: The Manga Military: How Japan's "Creative Industrial Complex" is using manga to shape public perceptions." *The Diplomat*, January 19, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/japans-creative-industrial-complex/>

³⁵ Yamamura, "Cooperation," 4.

3 Methodology

The ensuing research makes use of a qualitative method of semiotic analysis. An approach that is able to closely examine messages communicated within visual material is especially detrimental to conveying certain beliefs and representations that result in meanings and associations transferred onto the consumer. Moreover, a semiotic methodology will link closely with approaches of persuasion and appeal to relevance that is present in JSDF recruitment posters. Important studies of semiology within this thesis are those by Ronald Barthes on the creation of myths that naturalize certain perceptions, and Judith Williamson, that analyzes signs, signifiers and signified that involve its audience in their ideological functions.³⁶ Popular culture then provides signification and values through implicit signs that ultimately guides opinions, representation, and perception. As Williamson further argues, critically analyzing advertisements in their material form contributes to providing an understanding that questions the artificial narrative ascribed to them by their creators.³⁷

Considering that popular culture has a complex relationship with advertisements, recruitment posters are well-suited to semiology as they are presented with both a visual and textual aspect. As images rarely appear without text of some form or other, we are provided with context that is subject to as much interpretation as the visual source.³⁸ The text alongside an image produces a particular perception that provides its reader with certain connotations. Barthes argues that these connotations convey different levels of significations.³⁹ The methodology will be further supported by Gillian Rose's book on Visual Methodologies where she stresses that semiology allows for a closer understanding of images in relation to their constructed meaning.⁴⁰

Instead of considering popular culture solely as an object to study, the research design of this thesis wishes to approach popular culture primarily as a way of communication instead. Semiotic analysis concerns itself with the examination of signs and symbols that express meaning within a particular cultural or social context.⁴¹ A distinction is to be made about the sign, signifier and the signified, with the sign constituting our poster, the signifier being a

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paladin, 1973); Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. (Marion Boyars Publishers, 1983).

³⁷ Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, 11.

³⁸ Storey, "Cultural Theory," 128.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 124.

⁴⁰ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. (Sage Publications, 2016), 106.

⁴¹ Daniel Breining and John W. Coletta, *Western Cultural Symbols in Latin American and Chicano Literature A Historical and Semiotic Analysis*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 7.

material objects, things or codes, and the signified the meaning that is communicated by the signifier. The use of symbols within signs contain either implicit or explicit meanings that are transmitted to its audience. Behind the use of specific characters lie decisions that hold certain prejudices and implications that lay bare meanings and ideas significant within a social and cultural context. Through the analysis of these aspects, it can be established what is connoted. By using of semiotic analysis, we are aware of advertisements using cues to communicate positive action and associations. These are not limited to tag lines, famous individuals or characters, colors and text that link to ideologies that structure contemporary society.⁴²

The goal of semiology in this thesis is fundamental to identify the ideas and meanings transferred within recruitment posters that carry political significance. Semiotic analysis allows us to analyze more than the object itself; the emotions and feelings that the image conveys extends beyond the physical modality of an object. Moreover, such a method takes account of the audience of an image that reveals a focus and desire on certain reception.⁴³ Advertisers primarily focus on an emotional response by wanting the consumer to feel as if their products and services are desirable and will enhance certain aspects of their life through non-verbal codes and textual utilization.

The primary sources used in this study consist of dozens of JSDF recruitment posters in Japanese. By selecting posters that depict characters from existing and popular Japanese animation and manga, a critical analysis that references to a variety of Japanese popular culture will be constructed. Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic that prevents travel to Japan, material was gathered through online sources such as news articles, websites, blog posts, social media and photographs. As such, not all recruitment posters that are published and distributed by the JSDF are discussed. Secondary material that constitutes of academic literature on broad use of popular culture within JSDF campaigns will provide a basis of the existing debate that this thesis will elaborate on. To provide further context on my primary sources, it must be noted that the JSDF's recruitment strategies are exacted on local and central-based levels.

Two analytical categories have been established in this thesis to provide a distinction of JSDF representation. Firstly, a fantasy mode is established that utilizes fictional characters and narratives that are based on existing Japanese popular media such as animation, manga, and light novels. Secondly, a narrative mode exists that is built on reality that focuses on real-life experience, personal development, and career goals for their applicants. Making a

⁴² Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 110.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 109.

distinction between these modes allows for the deconstruction of military recruitment campaign narratives in an analytical manner. An analysis based of recruitment trends across the entirety of the Global North would be too extensive for the scope of this thesis. As a result, the understudied nation-state of Japan was chosen as a case study to contribute to existing research. In addition, while Japan does adhere to a largely similar strategy as other states within the Global North, its execution is based upon Japanese popular culture in origin. This is in contrast with usage of popular culture that refer to Western action films or social media that are used in US or UK army campaigns. Within these two analytical modes, I established several smaller categories from dozens of recruitment posters to speed up and clarify the analysis process. The categories pay special attention to repeating themes and messages. As a result of these categories, the two main narrative modes were established. Within these modes, the posters produce very similar themes, aesthetics and messages. As such, it was necessary to group and categorize them as not to be overly descriptive and repetitive in the analysis. Moreover, due to spatial limitations of this thesis, it would not be practical to analyze the posters individually.

4 Fantasy-mode

This analysis chapter will begin by examining a variety of recruitment posters that are characterized as *fantasy-mode*. Fantasy themes are reoccurring within various mediums such as animation and manga that feature the JSDF, or are promoted and approved by them. Existing literature has stressed that this is largely due to the JSDF's aim to appeal to the younger generation in Japan.⁴⁴ Because Japan has a booming cultural industry, it is not surprising that the JSDF has decided to implement an identifiable and popular aspect of Japanese culture to represent its image. The association of the JSDF with contemporary popular culture might be perceived as fresh and exciting, but it also begs the question if it carries any negative connotation. After all, the themes, narratives and imagery within the represented animations and lie far apart from the actual activities of the JSDF. In addition, critique has been expressed by the Japanese public regarding various posters.

This analysis chapter consists of a semiotic analysis of several categories that I have established through the identification of the most common themes present in the posters. These categorizations consist of gendered bodies, positive emotionality, and borrowed art styles. However, the characters that are used in these posters do not represent actual JSDF staff members, nor specific activities. Instead, their imagery revolves around appealing compositions that attract passerby's and focus largely on vague narratives of recognition.

Using modalities of popular genres within advertisements goes further than simply using imagery that is recognizable however, as it also mediates emotion and ideologies related to such imagery.⁴⁵ Several JSDF offices and spokespersons have alluded to not having an in-depth motive behind specific utilization of the posters, and instead have communicated that they simply wanted the posters to be 'recognizable.'⁴⁶ It is unlikely that such a position can be taken and maintained in a neutral manner, as popular culture and advertisements by nature signify connotations and bring forth associated meanings and ideologies. We should ascertain the negative sides of the deployed themes in regard to the promotion of stereotypes, negative associations and problematic themes that the JSDF is ultimately responsible for communicating within their visual material.

⁴⁴ Hall, "Towards an unrestrained military," 126.

⁴⁵ Hakola, "How Pop," 1542.

⁴⁶ Kyoto Shimbun. "'Shitaghi de wa naku zubon' chira mie, jiei-kan boshū posutā ni hihan." March 28, 2019. <https://www.kyoto-np.co.jp/articles/-/4066>; Koizumi, "SDF draws fire."

4.1 The site of production

In order to provide context about the creation and the circulation of the posters, it is important to explain their site of production first. The posters are made and distributed through online and physical means by regional cooperation headquarters which are stationed in every prefecture in Japan. These institutions are referred to as *Jimoto*, that are part of several SDF joint institutions, and fall under the jurisdiction of the state minister of defense.⁴⁷ Also referred to as “Chihon” (地本), these institutions are primarily concerned with organizing recruitment activities and coordinating public relations. They are the general contact point of the SDF and a joint organization under the Ministry of Defense's Land, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces.⁴⁸ The regional cooperation headquarters contain many branch offices, regional offices, and recruitment information centers, which are subordinate organizations. The Self-Defense Forces Act (自衛隊法) stipulates that local governments should publicize the recruitment of the SDF, under which the posters analyzed in this thesis fall under.⁴⁹ This localized JSDF strategy to create and distribute posters is not to be confused with a more central-based recruitment strategy that applies to other promotional material such as videos, websites, pamphlets, and brochures that employs representations based on real life instead of fiction.

As such, not all representations of the JSDF in popular culture are purposefully created by *Jimoto* institutions. When it comes to the creation of anime and manga that feature the JSDF, it is noticeable to discern that these mediums are not purposefully created by the JSDF itself. Instead, animation studios approach the JSDF to ask for permission to use their likeness in fiction.⁵⁰ The JSDF has communicated that it wishes to keep a passive approach and not involve themselves in the actual process of the creation of these mediums. This allows them to keep a distance from their representations as they were not involved in the creative process. This argument has sparked discourse if the JSDF can position itself as a neutral party in such a manner and separate themselves from criticism arising from their depictions.

However, this distanced position primarily applies to animation and manga, but as local recruitment offices decide by themselves what kind of posters will be published and distributed,

⁴⁷ Japanese Ministry of Defense, “‘Chihon’ tte donna tokoro?” Accessed April 13, 2021.

<https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/jieikanbosyu/contact/chihon/about.html>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Yomiuri Shinbun, “Chūgakusei ni jieitai boshū bunsho Okayama nado 4-shi kōhō-shi keisai rōdō-kyoku `rūru ihan’ = Okayama,” *Yomiuri Shinbun Database*, December 14, 2002.

⁵⁰ Yamamura, “Cooperation.”

is not very applicable to recruitment posters.⁵¹ The main goal of these posters then seems to rely on recognition and positive perception from the audience that is familiar with Japanese popular culture. Without this knowledge, a more critical response could be warranted because of the seemingly unrelated signified and signifiers in the material. The JSDF has repeatedly communicated that its intentions lie solely with making the posters appealing and recognizable for the young public. However, it is unlikely that they are not aware of the connotations and associations that are communicated, nor does it seem likely that recognition is their sole motive.

4.2 Gendered bodies

This section analyses different sets of images on the basis of their most recurrent themes. The first common theme that is worth mentioning in fantasy-mode posters is the frequent use of female characters. These often originate from animation or manga series such as “Strike Witches” (figure 1) and “Gate” (figure 2). As briefly mentioned before, debate has been sparked about the various designs of characters and its usage in relation to the JSDF. According to widespread critique, the general public has largely been critical of similar imagery.⁵²



Figure 1. JSDF recruitment poster from the Shiga provincial cooperation office featuring characters from the anime “Strike Witches.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kyoto Shimbun, “‘Shitagī’”; Yomiuri Shinbun, “Jieitai posutā `sekuhara' boshū keiji `kyara shitagi mieru' tekkyo.” *Yomiuri Shinbun Database*, March 2, 2019.

In recent years, the usage of fictitious female characters within public relations activities have been featured often in visual material. The Kyoto Regional Cooperation Headquarters for example has been creating posters to solicit SDF personnel using female characters for several years, and has frequently made use of depictions on its website and social media.⁵³ Figures 1, 2, and 3 are examples of many such posters wherein the importance of bodies is characterized by young female characters. Local JSDF offices often make use of the exact same art style and imagery that are lent from original animation. These portrayals intend to spark a sense of familiarity for young people that spot the advertisement in public or online. The girls and women in question are mostly characterized by a ‘kawaii’ aesthetic. This term is commonly denoted as ‘cute’ in Japanese popular culture, but goes much further to symbolize a cheerful, but vulnerable and helpless disposition that is nearly childlike.⁵⁴ Because it is used in correlation with an art style that is prevalent in Japanese animation, it causes it to be rooted in a fictional and fantasy-like modality. The use of women for promotional purposes and their marginalization within JSDF ranks has resulted in many female members struggling with this narrative, however.⁵⁵



Figure 2. A JSDF recruitment poster made by the Tokyo regional cooperation headquarters depicting several characters from the Japanese animation “Gate.”

⁵³ Kyoto Shimbun, “Shitag.”

⁵⁴ Simon May, “Kawaii.” In *The Power of Cute*, (Princeton University Press, 2019), 61-64.

⁵⁵ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 86.

Apart from using characters that originate from existing animation series, several regional cooperation headquarters have created their own characters to symbolize the air, maritime and ground branches of the JSDF. Figure 3 is an example of a larger campaign of posters by Ibaraki prefecture and additional promotional material that uses anime art styles in order to appeal to a younger generation of potential recruits. The portrayal of bodies is then an important theme within the spatial and positional communication of fantasy-mode posters. Young, skinny, beautiful women who wear dresses starkly oppose our expectations and associations with military uniforms. The connotations that these female characters signify are an example of a stereotyped image of femininity that is associated with softness, brightness, and cuteness in line with a *kawaii* aesthetic. We could go even further and argue again in relation to this signified of the female signifiers that these characters invoke feelings of protectiveness. Body language in fantasy-mode posters additionally create a comfortable, and outgoing atmosphere. However, characters that are represented are often simply posing, and not actually undertaking anything, making them static, desirable bodies. Many characters maintain eye contact with the viewer, beckoning them to engage and acknowledge the human representations of the JSDF, but do so in an anodyne fashion.



Figure 3. Three female characters that portray the air, maritime and ground branches of the JSDF commissioned by the Ibaraki regional cooperation headquarters.

Female representations here are closely connected to the Japanese term of *moe*, that is seen as a response to *kawaii* characters in the form of a strong affection towards fictional characters in anime and manga.⁵⁶ The combination of female characters that invoke *moe* in relation to military content has been identified as ‘Moe Military’ in JSDF promotion and recruitment efforts in recent years.⁵⁷ Such imagery then connotes certain feminine stereotypes, wherein the women seem to function largely as a signifier of beauty and superficial visual pleasure primarily meant for a male audience. Softness, youth, approachability, but simultaneous desirability and sexuality are present as the signified in these images that explain the relationship between them and their signifiers. Inherently, *kawaii* and *moe* aesthetics signify a stereotype that is non-threatening, pure, and appealing. It simultaneously promotes a static representation of femininity and that is able to hold appeal and recognition for a wide audience with varying interests and ideologies, but contrasts with reality.

While it must be noted that multiple recruitment posters sport male characters, the spatial composition often revolves around female characters if multiple figures are present. Regardless of gender however, fantasy-mode posters follow a structure that places multiple characters in a central position taking up nearly entirely all of the available space as seen in figure 4 and 5. When we turn to male representations within fantasy-mode posters, another aesthetic and ideal is revealed. Although less popular, male characters that are featured within fantasy-mode posters signify masculine stereotypes of JSDF members in line with more traditional militarized masculine understandings. Ultimately, these gendered portrayals communicate a certain configuration of desirability that opens up the opportunity for identification and dissociation. Militarized masculinity is not only applicable to JSDF portrayals, but its ability to negotiate gendered ideals often relates to typical male Japanese occupations and the desire to escape this socially and culturally constructed milieu of ‘economic warriors.’ The JSDF offers itself as an institution that allows its members to be different from salarymen through professional and personal exploration of one’s skills and limitations.⁵⁸ While fantasy-mode recruitment posters do not explicitly enunciate these narratives, they do configure male representations that are distinguishable from ‘normal’ men.

⁵⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (October 2009).

⁵⁷ Yamamura, "Cooperation," 9.

⁵⁸ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 57.



Figure 4. Poster featuring the protagonist of the anime *The Irregular at Magic High School*.



Figure 5. Poster that portrays the protagonist of the manga *Tell me you want to live*.

The pictured men are physically capable, mostly defined by their physicality and their desire to protect. The connotations that these portrayals bring connect itself to more traditional stereotypical notions of masculinity. However, due to the usage of fictional characters that are frequently not depicted as people of Japanese descent, there is some semblance of fantasizing and idealization present. This is evident in the struggle of the JSDF to define masculinity in terms of historical military heroism because of its desires to be similar to other military institutions, and to not be a military at all.⁵⁹ Additionally, martial masculinity has been utilized in textual and visual material by the JSDF in the form of youthful and muscular bodies that are key to protecting the nation.⁶⁰ In combination with text that focuses on protection, one can interpret the male character as having the capacity to protect his female companions in addition to the general public and the nation. Ultimately however, the imperfect ‘normal’ man with his fears and complex reasonings that go beyond simply wanting to protect are not visualized.

⁵⁹ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 85.

⁶⁰ Mire Koikari, “Re-masculizing the nation: gender, disaster, and the politics of national resilience in post-3.11 Japan.” *Japan Forum*, 31 no. 2, (2019): 145.

Contextual knowledge of the animation series where the portrayed characters originate from ultimately contribute to the narrative of the JSDF as forces that similarly hold a position to perform extraordinary tasks that no other military force is able to carry out. Moreover, it can signify that someone who joins the JSDF can accomplish protecting Japan and perhaps even earth in a similar manner as the Strike Witches manage to do. Here, a dual narrative exists that juxtaposes the frequent usage of the *moe* and *kawaii* themes. There is an attempt to move away from a tougher image of typical military forces through fictional characters. However, it is most likely young men that will be most receptive towards these kinds of representations due to the Seinen and Shōnen genres that the characters frequently appear in.

4.3 Positive emotionality and fiction

Non-verbal signified and signifiers in fantasy-mode posters could be argued to be attractive young women, in addition to their body language, happy expressions, and clothing. These representations of manners reveal connotations of joyfulness, invitation, and innocence. When we relate the girls to the JSDF, it signifies the desire to protect the young girls that are decidedly non-threatening. Or alternatively, can be associated with what the viewer could constitute as people who are dear to them, or who they would like to protect according to their own interpretation. The messages perpetuated by the JSDF ultimately also invites critical perception regarding the sexualization of young girls that are presented in some posters, or at least an approval of such use within the animation genre they originate from.

Body language and art style again contribute significantly to the meaning-making process of the poster. These are characterized by joyful facial expressions, and a positive and youthful atmosphere that is cloaked in vibrant color. Joining the JSDF then causes happiness, invokes enthusiasm, and negotiates the connotations between hard and soft power. This general theme on the one hand associates the JSDF with an intensely cheerful and lighthearted vibe that contrasts its hard power capabilities. Narratives and atmospheres are created surrounding entertainment rooted in fantasy instead of communicating imagery that is true to life.

These depictions of emotionality bridge the connection to the JSDF's contemporary activities, with those of happiness, non-violence, and ebullience. It could be argued in how far these portrayals are useful and relevant in relation to the actual activities of the JSDF, as the characters in these posters rather function as symbolizations and human representatives of the forces instead of portraying reality. As such, the posters and the characters depicted within them function as signs that focuses on creating a likeness between signifier and signified within a fictional narrative. The posters produce signs that the JSDF provides access to happiness.

Furthermore, the focus on fictional narratives extends to the more evident fantastical themes that the posters borrow from the animation series such as clothing, weaponry, mythical beings and magic. It furthermore causes instant recognition for viewers who are familiar with the animation in question. The relationship between such themes and the creator of the advert can be connoted as if joining the JSDF allows you to step into a fantastical world. A disregard of real life extends towards the sole existence of positive emotions, and utilization of fictional characters simultaneously. Both signify a reality that does not exist in its entirety.

Due to its dependence on fictional elements, it is often hard to discern what the image would promote without its textual counterparts. Without language, it would seemingly be an advertisement for the animations they borrow from. While the slogans differentiate among the visual material, they ultimately convey a similar sort of message focused on the defensive capabilities of the JSDF, or the potential of becoming a person who is able to protect.

In relation to recruitment trends in the Global North that similarly deploy popular culture references, we see some similarities. These largely pertain to creating familiar images and modalities to present military forces as an exciting option. In addition, narrative modes of campaigns in the Global North such as the US Army's "Army Strong" commercials and the "Snowflake Campaign" in the United Kingdom, follow similar intentions as that of the JSDF. Namely, entertainment, recognition, positive association, relatability, and an absence of the violent reality of active-duty soldiers.⁶¹ However, we can see a differentiation in implementation. The JSDF uses solely art styles and mediums that have originated from Japan, that all use a near identical art style and aesthetic that emphasizes the cute, instead of the heroic and brave elements we find in Western-based recruitment campaigns. This narrative is complemented by the *moe* aesthetic that is perceived as unrelated to, and unpolluted by, reality.⁶²

4.4 Language and fiction

When we approach the textual aspect of the poster, it is obvious that the sizeable amount of text constitutes another important manner in how the medium communicates its messages, and what it regards as primarily important. As Barthes has argued, text within images or advertisements provides what he calls 'anchorage.' It allows for the reader to make a connection between the text and image, and specify its interpretation from a wide number of

⁶¹ Hakola, "How Pop," 1545.

⁶² Galbraith, "Moe."

possible interpretations.⁶³ If not for the text in these images, it would be difficult to discern its use and connection to the JSDF. Here then, language functions as a conveyer of decipherable meanings.⁶⁴ The size and boldness of the text connotes its importance. Without it, the audience would not know what it is looking at precisely and would not make the connection between the recognizable fictional characters and the JSDF. The service that is being advertised is only noticeable in the textual part of the advertisement. There is no visual evidence within the poster that makes clear the JSDF is the institution that is being referred to. This aspect is a noticeable feature deployed within the ad-world as well, where links between visual aspects are not necessarily linked, but rely on what specific elements mean to us personally, and then transfers such assumptions between the elements represented.⁶⁵

Text is often featured rather prominently, usually with the largest words forming some variation of “Jiei-kan boshū” which denotes that the JSDF is currently recruiting, with some form of slogan that often denotes a value or desire that the JSDF can fulfill. For example, the text in figure 1: “Mamoritaimono o, mamoreru hito ni,” signifies a slogan that conveys who the JSDF wishes to appeal to, and what one can achieve when signing up as a recruit. The slogan roughly translates to “For people that are able to protect what is dear to them.” Additionally, figure 3 is joined by another slogan “Taisetsu na hito mamoreru jibun” that roughly translates to “(become) someone that can protect people close to you.” Generally, these posters seem to associate protection with the ‘brand’ of the JSDF. As Williamson aptly argues, the function of language in this material is to form a place and positionality for the consumer of the ad.⁶⁶

4.5 Discussion of findings

As a result of looking at military recruitment strategies within Japan and briefly looking at the broader Global North, we identify that Japan follows a recurring central theme of popular culture but focuses on domestic popular culture media. We have seen that popular culture does not necessarily need to be correlated with the JSDF to be featured in a poster that is officially created by an SDF prefectural branch. Original creations that are independent from existing

⁶³ Roland Barthes, and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text*. (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 38-41.

⁶⁴ Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, 84.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

animation or manga mediums are deployed as well. However, it is obvious that recruitment offices attempt to maintain an overarching similar style that is borrowed from contemporary Japanese popular culture. Another noticeable trend is the frequent use of attractive men and women in the posters. Although not all male characters follow *kawaii* aesthetics, gendered representations that appeal to male strength and female amiability form a central appeal. On a connotation level, these gendered representations function as a common signified for desirability. Although the fictional characters are unrelated to the JSDF, through a reliance on pre-existing knowledge of its audience, the signifier is able to transfer this relation on the signified. These portrayals remain superficial however and focus on conveying recognizable, but unrelated elements connected the popular genre and the JSDF.

Relying on popular culture media that have sparked debate around the frequent sexualization of women and young girls the JSDF borrows from, connotes associations that the JSDF likely did not intend. Such associations extend to critical perspectives on the subject and ultimately might become attached to whatever is promoted; the JSDF. Moreover, the portrayed characters and their art styles denote more typical representations between men and women according to feminine and masculine stereotyping. It connotes that women or girls are non-threatening and need to be protected, while men are less frequently portrayed and follow more stereotypical stoic masculinity. Gendered representations that are not desirable for women – such as *kawaii* characters borrowed from animation genres such as Shōnen and Seinen that are often targeted towards men – are especially precarious for female applicants who are severely underrepresented in the JSDF.

Lastly, feelings that are communicated are almost solely reliant on positive emotions that imply joining the JSDF provides access to these. In fantasy-mode posters, there is no addressal of the responsibilities or activities that one would be tasked with when joining the JSDF, except infrequent visualization of military machinery. Instead, the posters remain floating in an unrealistic vacuum that is rooted in fantasy-based iconography and modalities that become disjointed from reality. They can be interpreted as attempts to be distanced from not only history, but politics as well due to its occurrence in a reality separate from ours.

5 Reality-mode

This chapter will delve into how recruitment posters created by the JSDF serve to legitimize its existence through more practical narratives than fantasy-mode posters. In addition to utilizing pop-culture references and imagery rooted in fictional media, the JSDF attempts to portray a more reality-based aspect within their wider recruitment campaign. This chapter will detail this second aspect of the dual narrative that the JSDF has employed within their recruitment campaign. Similar to fantasy-mode posters, the site of production of reality-mode posters lies at the regional cooperation headquarters level. As identified by the Japanese Ministry of Defense, these fall under the “Chihon poster” category, as the abovementioned fantasy-mode posters did also. A small amount of the designs of the posters are solicited from the general public, but are ultimately promoted and circulated by the *Jimoto*. The posters were made in the same time period as the fantasy-mode posters from the year 2010 onwards, and thus communicate a narrative that is relevant today.

Comparable to the first analysis, not every poster can be individually analyzed per element due to word constraints and to avoid repetitive findings such as common textual references to protection as depicted in figures 8 and 9, and practical opportunities the JSDF offers as referenced in figures 6 and 7. From several dozens of reality-mode posters, a selected process was initiated to decrease their numbers into more easily comprehensible numbers that could be analyzed in more detail. This was done by visually analyzing and utilizing semiology to construct categories based on the most common and overlapping elements. Categories that were established by investigating the most common themes are pacifist activities, positive attitudes, the intersection of reality and fiction, and practical opportunities. Following these categories, we can hasten the process of analysis and allow it to help us to identify common elements that will present a balanced conclusion of signifiers and signified that form representative narratives within the visual material.

5.1 Controversy and criticism

It is important to note that recruitment posters only feature a small role in JSDF recruitment strategies. There exists a wide range of promotional material such as brochures, magazines, pamphlets, videos, and festivals along with other activities the JSDF actively organizes. Reality-mode posters are an extension of fantasy-mode posters in the sense that they convey similar types of messages and signification. Reality-mode posters position themselves as communicators of the practical aspects of joining the JSDF. They align more with the narrative

of SDF officials that believe that young people consider them to be "a place to hone themselves before getting a full-fledged job."⁶⁷ Additionally, SDF application is seen as an alternative to save money due to low rent and food costs because one stays in a dormitory and due to adequate salaries. However, these applicants stay for short periods of time, and see the SDF as a steppingstone instead of a place for lifelong employment.⁶⁸

Moreover, regional cooperation headquarters that are in charge of recruiting SDF personnel provides personal information such as names and addresses of its citizens as requested by the government. These civilians receive promotional material and information in the hopes of increasing SDF personnel numbers. Responses to such activities are critical, as they are perceived in violation of the Personal Information Protection Ordinance. Many prefectures refuse to provide such information to the Japanese government.⁶⁹ Akihiko Furusato, Vice Chairman of the SDF Parents' Association, an organization formed by families of SDF members attributes the dwindling applicant pool to security legislation, and the fear that JSDF members will be dispatched to war zones such as Iraq, as opposed to national disaster relief. He questions if the prevention of situations where SDF forces are sent to battlefields are not the responsibility of politicians and diplomatic efforts, instead that of the JSDF.⁷⁰ Here we see a struggle between a narrative of normalizing Japanese military forces and the perception of danger and risks that the occupation involves. This context provides insight to the pressure that the JSDF faces regarding low recruitment rates. Attempts to increase applications are regarded as becoming increasingly desperate by some, as they go as far as inviting elementary and junior high school children to SDF stations, and printing recruitment slogans on toilet paper.⁷¹

5.2 Positivity and pacifism

Visual material as part of reality-mode is mainly characterized by familiar, but vague activities of the JSDF such as their national relief operations as well as references that portray them as a realistic and viable opportunity for young people professionally and personally. Here then, the overall message is still aimed at a younger generation but posed from another angle. Instead of revolving around the familiarity and recognizability that Japanese popular culture brings, it

⁶⁷ Shinichiro Kono. "Jieitai boshū VS. Abenomikusu, wakamono nyūtai ni eikyō wa? Ginō manabi taikan no rei mo/ Nīgata ken." *Asahi Shinbun*, April 21, 2015.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Yomiuri Shinbun. "Shūin'yosan'i 6-wari ijō ga shiryō teishutsu sezu shushō Jieitai boshū jichitai taiō de." *Yomiuri Shinbun*, February 13, 2019. <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASM2F3QZ9M2FUTFK00D.html>

⁷⁰ Asahi Shinbun, "Paruru dan mitsu, PR ni aidoru zokuzoku jieikan rikurūto dai sakusen." *Asahi Shinbun Database*, December 11, 2015.

⁷¹ Asahi Shinbun, "Paruru."

attempts to position the JSDF as a viable career opportunity and a space where one can develop oneself. The values of being able to protect and defend are visually represented in contrast to the posters in the first analysis. They are more clearly and directly related to JSDF imagery through bodies, uniforms, and the activities that they engage in. Moreover, we see the return of a focus on the defensive nature and image of the JSDF. An important element in these posters is the activity level and the portrayal of characters within their spatial dimension. In contrast to fantasy-mode posters, many reality-mode posters portray characters in-action, instead of posing or being simply present in a static position. This allows for a more organic notion to the posters due to the characters not following a restricted formula that is frequently repeated. The values of being able to protect and defend are visually and actively represented in contrast to fantasy-mode posters that merely alluded to the fact. Noticeable in such activities is their decidedly non-violent nature. There is a near uniform emphasis on acts of assistance and protection, and the positivity it brings, without any mention of hardship on the part of any actor. The signified and signifiers are then attached to our sign (i.e., the posters) and communicate that helping people is a natural association with the JSDF.

There is another sort of familiarity that the JSDF wishes to communicate in this material. Instead of focusing on the encounter the general public might have had with Japanese popular culture such as manga and animation series, it deploys the relief activities that the JSDF is known for in Japan. The JSDF's positive associations in Japan are largely tied to their search, rescue and relief operations after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.⁷² This is particularly interesting to note because public opinion of the JSDF before the 2011 earthquake was largely ambivalent.⁷³ The main goal behind the posters then maintains centered around recognition, but of a different kind that connotes very different representations and associations for its consumers. Instead of relating to popular culture references and relying on the influence that such a medium brings by itself, it speaks to the knowledge and reputation of past activities that have resulted in positive association with the JSDF.

Here, the cultural medium conveys beliefs and attitudes that position the JSDF as non-warriors that operate primarily on a domestic scale that inadequately conveys the extent of its forces. A benign narrative then subsequently downplays the influence and magnitude the JSDF compels as the fourth largest military force in the world.⁷⁴ A selective form of legitimacy is

⁷² Robert D. Eldridge, and Paul Midford, *The Japanese Ground Self-defense Force: Search for Legitimacy*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 332.

⁷³ Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and change in Japan*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2013).

⁷⁴ Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors*, 4.

then at play that only applies to its representation as a harmless force. These desire the creation of a convivial narrative that promotes the JSDF as a benign organization that is of benefit to the Japanese population, and its recruits. It is important to note that the posters do not touch upon the hardships of JSDF activities, negative experiences or training that applicants must go through. As such, it attempts to increase the legitimacy of the JSDF and distance itself from its military predecessor and possible controversy.

While the posters refer to more realistic aspects of the forces as noticeable in figure 6, these ultimately revolves based around a surface level, as it does not delve deeper in JSDF, nor details its participation in international training exercises to increase combat readiness and international cooperation between JSDF and U.S. forces. In addition, there is no mention of the positive effects that international peacekeeping missions such the JSDF's deployment to Cambodia have had on positive perception of the forced by the Japanese public.⁷⁵ Instead, it engages in glorification through primary representations of happiness in order to present positive experiences as the key features of the JSDF, and the self-fulfilment one gets from being able to protect the fellow man or the less fortunate in crisis situations.



Figure 6. Poster made by the Tokushima regional cooperation headquarters.

⁷⁵ Emma Dalton, "Normalizing the Japan Self-defense Forces via Marriage." *Journal of War and Culture Studies*. (March 2020): 5.

The choice to specifically portray acts of protection and ignore negative aspects of the JSDF ties into the frequent representations of manner that signify a positive mental and emotional state in JSDF recruitment material. These are extensions of fantasy-mode posters, only here they are extended to positive values and emotions to the application and training process, or the daily activities that JSDF personnel carries out. There is a lack of attention to the more difficult aspect of the career, and the physical and mental strain that it asks of its employees. A more intrinsic value and connection is put upon the JSDF as an opportunity to protect and defend through performative actions that the general public has already experienced. Human signs within these posters harness an emotionality that is largely centred on optimistic and pacifism can be traced to the desire to portray the JSDF as an entity not related to politics. As Paul Martin mentions, such representations allow for the creation of an “apolitical cultural space.”⁷⁶ Disconnecting the JSDF from its contested position within the international political sphere subverts association to critical discourse and Japan’s increasingly expanding military as a result of skirting around Article 9 of the constitution. It is clear that the JSDF is not interested in composing a truly realistic picture, but instead adheres to a strategy that is similar to advertising, where positive elements are magnified, and negative connotations are disregarded. Although the posters that have been analysed so far vary in their implementation, they maintain a very similar overarching level of values, manners, and messaging.

Through signifiers, the JSDF transfers signified such as pacifism, happiness and protection onto its own organization. The image gives additional power to the producer and as a result, projects associations of kindness, positivity and protectivity towards the JSDF. In this instance, it stresses human abilities that serve protection and defense. There is no mention of any offensive capabilities, as such a narrative would contrast the status and the boundaries of the constitution in which the JSDF operates in. This is especially noticeable in imagery such as figure 7, where no allusion is made to JSDF activities other than protection.

⁷⁶ Martin, “The Contradictions.”



Figure 7. Obihiro regional cooperation headquarters' recruitment poster.

5.3 Negotiating reality and fiction

The art style that is utilized in reality-mode posters overall remains rooted in fictional media. While these are seemingly less dramatized depictions of the *kawaii* aesthetic and are instead more similar to older manga-like art styles that are less flamboyant, there remains a fictional style present that communicates an overarchingly similar narrative. This is especially noticeable and puzzling when it is used in conjunction with familiar JSDF activities, instead of captured real-time footage of the JSDF. It is clear that the JSDF has chosen this style for a particular purpose. It could simply align with the desire to maintain a consistent aesthetic that appeals to younger audiences, but these unrealistic representations of very real career prospects convey feelings and experiences of human beings that do not actually exist. Instead, they are created by *Jimoto* under jurisdiction of the state minister of defense. The posters then attempt to mediate a space between reality and fiction. However, there continues to exist an overall specific stylistic model that in this instance is more accessible to a wider range of people. Additionally, there is a significant emphasis on a more equal appearance of male and female signifiers. Instead of focusing on a gaze that denotes masculine and feminine stereotypes, the posters attempt to portray a more diverse set of people. This is especially noticeable in how the

characters are represented by their bodies, race, gender, age and looks. Rather, this visual material is more about more realistic rather than fictional archetypes. While some prefectures use reoccurring characters, they do not represent personifications of specific branches of the JSDF and epitomes of femininity or masculinity.

The textual component of the posters above provides a more united whole as opposed to the contrasted and unnatural connections that were noticeable in the previous posters. Text use is much more diverse and correlates more clearly and easily with visual aspects. As such, it is more natural for the reader to connect the textual and visual elements of the posters. They approach the JSDF from an angle that promotes it as a possible workplace for young people who are graduating or have recently done so through sentences such as “I found it! Something that I want to do!” as found in figure 8. Other lines such as, “That sweat protects peace!” (figure 9) and “I want to protect smiling faces, I want to deliver (good) feelings” (figure 6) and other very simple but direct references in protection in figure 7 associates the JSDF with positive career prospects, the ability to provide protection, and as an opportunity to do what one is passionate about, instead of merely applying for a job due to necessity. It perpetuates the JSDF as a vehicle for self-betterment, personal ambition and protection. The signifiers in these posters connote the JSDF with human abilities, hard work and its capability to carry out missions of a defensive nature. Narratives that pay attention to the professional and personal opportunities that are available in a military work environment largely overlap with those within the Global North, where emphasis is put on the professional and personal viability of obtaining a military job. Although its art style might be fictional, the opportunities that the posters present are very real.

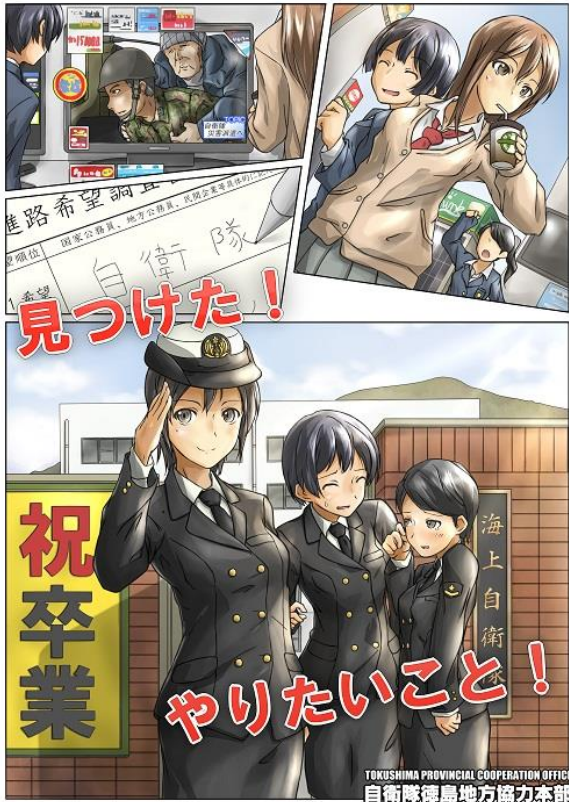


Figure 8. Recruitment poster by the Tokushima regional cooperation headquarters.



Figure 9. Recruitment poster created by the Kagawa regional cooperation headquarters.

It is noticeable that some prefectures show preferences for fantasy-mode posters, and others show a preference for reality-mode posters. It can be stated then that an amount of freedom and a certain fragmentation exists among several regional cooperation headquarters that ultimately do adhere to a largely similar message but do so through various modalities. It is important to note here that a disconnect exists regarding the intended audience. Fantasy-mode posters most likely appeal to a more specific and smaller audience although they intend to do so for a wide one, while reality-mode posters intend to appeal to a larger and more diverse audience. Fantasy-mode posters could be considered less effective because it depends on previous knowledge of Japanese animation and manga of its audience. Here, we see an overlap with advertisement strategies, as both make use of signs and associations that steer the responses of the general public. This is especially important regarding contemporary debates on the existence of the JSDF. A strong domestic support base could be gathered that could further improve its reputation and provide concrete benefits to remedy their faltering recruitment numbers.

While these posters then intend to draw upon young people to remedy for the

abovementioned reasons, they also wish to promote a positive and non-threatening image that further increases their domestic reputation and popularity. This is especially relevant because it allows the JSDF to remedy their relatively low reputation due to public perception as a continuation of the Imperial Japanese Army.⁷⁷ It also allows the posters to contribute to confidence building measures. By maintaining their effectiveness in the protection and defence of Japan and its citizens, it represents itself as an organization that is beneficial to society.

Ultimately, within the subset of *Jimoto* recruitment material in contrast to wider promotional material, there is an underrepresentation of reality-based imagery such as photographs and other portrayals of lifelike representations such as snapshots from video footage. The vast majority of JSDF recruitment posters disregard material that can be collected from visual technologies and instead opt for a fictional style reminiscent of manga-like drawings. It is curious to contrast this representation to other visual material that I have mentioned above such as brochures, pamphlets, and websites. There is plenty of material present that distinctly veers away from fictional portrayals, and instead uses photographic and realistic media. However, the JSDF has chosen to employ a fictional art style in recruitment posters that portrays a selected worldview.

5.4 JSDF strategies in relation to the Global North

As we have now established the most common themes and have highlighted primary trends and messages within reality-mode posters, it allows us to briefly place JSDF recruitment strategies into context with recruitment trends and their implementation across the Global North. Although Global North recruitment strategies in North America, Sweden and the UK vary in their messaging and implementation, an overlap is present regarding similar messages between popular culture references and reality-mode themes. It is meaningful to establish how Japan fits into broader recruitment trends and how its effectivity and implementation relates to similar existing recruitment strategies. Themes central in the US “Army Strong” campaign primarily revolve around action-based narratives that are reminiscent of present-day Hollywood action movies wherein heroism, bravery and violence are pulled to the forefront. Swedish military recruitment campaigns show resemblance with JSDF narratives as well, as they are similarly focused on attracting age groups from 18 to 25 years old, position the army as an opportunity for development, and portray it as a peacekeeping force. This last point especially shows an inclination to shy away from the offensive capabilities of military forces

⁷⁷ Eldridge and Midford, “The Japanese Ground Self-defense Force,” 3-4.

and instead draws attention to its pacifist nature.

The UK's army similarly shows related approaches by appealing to various adolescent interests such as social media use and gamer culture. Due to extensive research on the interests and behaviour of groups that are targeted by recruitment campaigns provide an adequate understanding of their audiences, and what might appeal to them.⁷⁸ It is unknown if Japan conducts similar research on the matter but considering the low impact the use of popular culture references upon their applicant pool, it seems unlikely that their ongoing strategy will be effective.⁷⁹ It is noticeable however that mainstream popular culture is increasingly becoming a fundamental part of military recruitment that ranges from its presence in films, television, music, games and more. Such efforts have been increasingly branching out and in the case of the US army – that has recently even established its own esports team due to their own struggles with low employment rates – has faced criticism for supposed morally questionable behaviour that seeks out increasingly younger youths on various online platforms.⁸⁰ In contrast to the JSDF's recruitment strategy, the abovementioned recruitment campaigns across the Global North notify potential recruits of the possible challenges they will face in some capacity.

Issues regarding physical and economic strife have also affected the JSDF, as low wages and relatively bad working conditions existed that the Ministry of Defense is currently trying to remedy from fiscal year 2020 onwards.⁸¹ While JSDF posters intend to function as a socializing agent they are hampered by their superficial nature and its dissatisfactory implementation that distinguishes itself in representation from its larger campaign. When put into context with Shinzo Abe's attempts to normalize the JSDF into a more conventional role, reality-mode posters function to legitimize this narrative. They firmly portray the JSDF as detrimental in the proceedings of protection while disregarding their war-making potentiality.

⁷⁸ Sanna Strand and Joakim Berndtsson. "Recruiting the 'enterprising soldier': military recruitment discourses in Sweden and the United Kingdom." *Critical Military Studies* 1, no. 3 (2015): 238.

⁷⁹ Linda Sieg and Ami Miyazaki, "Shrinking applicant pool: Japan's Self Defense Forces struggling to recruit amid population crisis." *The Japan Times*, September 18, 2018. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/09/26/national/shrinking-applicant-pool-japans-self-defense-forces-struggling-recruit-amid-population-crisis/>

⁸⁰ John McMahon, "The US military is using video games and esports to recruit – it's downright immoral." *The Independent*, November 23, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/army-military-video-game-fortnite-battlegrounds-call-duty-esports-defence-a8648656.html>

⁸¹ Japan Times. "Japan eyes hike in starting pay for SDF members as recruitment numbers falter." September 24, 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/09/24/national/japan-eyes-hike-starting-pay-sdf-members-recruitment-numbers-falter/>

5.5 Discussion of findings

Reality-mode posters contribute to the perpetuation of fundamental values such as pacifism and positivity attributed to the JSDF. Their representation as a protective body is made necessary and natural by its own institution. As such, joining the JSDF becomes a positive function in the lives of its participants and reflects a larger governmental narrative of normalization of the forces. Happiness and fulfilment become accessible feelings and thus signified, that are conveyed by the signifiers in the posters. These associations clash with high-intensity international missions and strict training regimens that are involved in military lifestyles. The JSDF is no typical military force however, as it is forced to rely on a defensive image for its continual existence in relation to Article 9. The signs as a whole then mediate between fiction and reality, the JSDF and the self, and appeals to the desire to develop oneself and do something that is attractive for one's own desires. The representations of more realistic figures that are searching for fulfilling jobs and lives function as a signifier for the viewer to compare and identify with. Reality mode posters and the characters present in them appeal to another sort of desirability than reality-mode posters; one with practical application for one's future, career, and experiences. The material communicates that applying for the JSDF means taking part in what the advertisement presents, in order to become like the sign. We as the audience are positioned as active receivers by the posters where we give meaning to them, and they give meanings back. Representations of the JSDF, although still rooted in fiction, produce feelings that are desirable for young people that are unsure how to build skills, experience, and how to start a meaningful life.

As a result of combining these real-life aspects with fictional representations, the JSDF attempts to mediate between superficial and pragmatic approaches. However, because these posters lend strategies from advertising, namely that it is an ambitious symbol domain that often highlights the individual, but constructs an image less than whole, JSDF workers become embodiments of non-violence, protective abilities and safety. Its signified transfers the assumption that the JSDF cannot be seen as offensive, difficult, or any other characteristic that impairs its carefully portrayed and naturalized benign image. Because of the vague allusions to JSDF tasks and responsibilities, a model self is offered to its spectator that contrasts its actuality. Reality-mode posters are also positioned outside of history, but simultaneously draws upon existing knowledge and memory of the activities of the military forces, nonetheless. Here, reality-mode posters function as a legitimization of the JSDF and

simultaneously positions the force as separate from the political dimension, something that is heavily contested in both public discourse and academic literature.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to answer how the JSDF has employed popular culture in their recruitment efforts, and how their image has been negotiated by this strategy. JSDF recruitment posters are part of a larger advertising strategy to curate the JSDF's image both domestically and internationally. They are but one instrument in a toolbox of measures that participates in constructing active procedures to positively impact recruitment and to connect hard and soft power. Accompanying this is an underlying narrative that is an extension of governmental narratives that wishes to normalize and legitimize the JSDF on a global scale. Despite the narrative that SDF officials have attempted to communicate, fictional representations are not merely utilized for appeal alone. The posters are vehicles that point towards deeper meanings and associations that harness popular culture to position the JSDF as a friendly and familiar force. As the methodology has highlighted, the signifiers and signified transfer specific attributes that fuse together the familiarity of popular culture with accessible representations of the military. The material also relies on existing bodies of knowledge on popular culture and the JSDF, that ultimately extends to both positive and negative associations. Fictional representations of the JSDF serve to provide an emblem of a group of people and become a focus for their identity. Abstract elements such as feelings are translated into embodiments represented by familiar fictional characters and JSDF personnel. It has become the function of the posters to provide us with objects and meanings that come to signify the JSDF as a desirable fragment of a whole.

I emphasize this fragmentation here because reality and fantasy-mode posters reflect two approaches that results in a narrative that selectively ignores aspects and activities of the JSDF that are politically significant. Connecting unrelated fictional characters with the very real and possibly dangerous activities of the JSDF produces a critical and frivolous perception of the forces for many Japanese spectators. The posters share motives of general advertising strategies that are rooted in fiction, and positive connotations in order to bring the consumer closer to the producer. This ultimately constructs an appealing, but unrealistic space. Within this space, the JSDF attempts to naturalize and legitimize a depoliticized façade as negotiated through entertainment to promote an anodyne image. This is underlined by lack of attention to the JSDF's international peacekeeping efforts. Through this narrative, ideologies about non-violence, nationality, and protection are furthermore tied to personal growth that promotes self-improvement and career prospects.

Various JSDF recruitment and promotion strategies position the institution in the

business of protection in order to soften its image. These themes, along with frequent depictions within fantasy-mode posters of characters in a *kawaii* aesthetic and manner familiar with animation and manga art styles, is part of this push to promote a softer and more approachable image of the forces that attempts to improve public perception and support. These strategies are then an extension of broader governmental initiatives such as pop-culture diplomacy and the Cool Japan initiative. Both modes in our signs and signifiers stay inherently rooted in fiction. The signified convey a sense of ahistoricity and apoliticality that circumvents real areas of life but remain inherently relevant to the JSDF as an institution and its cotemporary position today. As a result, fantasy-mode and reality-mode posters become dislodged not only from historical associations and war-fighting potential, but contemporary actions of the JSDF such as constructing roads and providing medical support. The posters then reflect in what manner popular culture representations steer associations through advertising and in the case of the JSDF, provides an apolitical space that steers away from controversy, a fear of military resurgence and perceptions of illegitimacy often discussed in international discourse.

In doing so, the JSDF emulates recruitment trends that are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Global North. However, the JSDF distinguishes itself by using media and art style specific to Japan, such as animation and manga. This strategy aligns with the country's larger soft power strategy where it wishes to position itself as an accessible, soft, and friendly place of culture. As well as being part of a larger ongoing trend in Global North recruitment strategies, this approach reflects a governmentally initiated narrative of the JSDF as a pacifist and non-threatening military force that does not violate Article 9. As there has been research done in context of military recruitment in the Global North, more non-Western perspectives are required in this area of study. Further research might provide more academic literature that contributes to how images are negotiated in the neoliberal age by military institutional bodies. In addition, it would be valuable to connect similarities on the role of military recruitment and popular culture references within contemporary military promotional strategies as an instrument of mobilization.

The entertaining nature of popular culture juxtaposed against very serious recruitment issues could ultimately contribute to hampering successful reception. It remains to be seen what role recruitment posters will play under the Suga administration, and if they will survive at all in its current state under the shifting direction of the JSDF. It seems likely however that on its current course, recruitment posters will not be able to change low recruitment numbers. The limitations of this study have largely revolved around a small existing body of literature

regarding JSDF recruitment posters, and the overwhelming focus on a small number of manga and anime references whenever there was interest in JSDF recruitment strategies. Due to word count, this thesis was not able to address the small number of recruitment posters made by Jimoto that featured real-life depictions. Moreover, as opposed to the localized recruitment posters, broader series of recruitment material that is more central-based such as video's, brochures, magazines, pamphlets and other adverts created and circulated by the JSDF was too broad to properly attend to in this research. As such, the recruitment posters that have been analyzed here speak to a smaller audience than the general strategy of the JSDF. It would furthermore be meaningful for future research to question insofar *Jimoto* – that are under the jurisdiction of the minister of defense and subsequently under that of the prime minister – have any freedom to create recruitment posters that are not extensions of governmental policies. Additionally, although this thesis specifically focused on recruitment strategies, it should be noted that promotional strategies among military bodies are a different aspect worth studying that further contribute to the mediation of military images as well.

Lastly, placing this research within a broader context is detrimental for the argument that popular culture cannot be separated from the political domain. Due to the already political and controversial position of the JSDF, a better image for the forces would positively contribute to broader issues that they have become entrenched in. However, a danger exists in purely portraying what the JSDF and its people mean as opposed to what they really are. It impairs us from gathering context and full understandings of the JSDF's existence, its purpose, and its activities. With tensions rising in Asia in contemporary issues such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute, and the attempts by Japan to establish a unified front against China with other nations through policies such as the Quad, initiatives that could rival the BRI, and growing ties with Southeast Asia, the JSDF will play an increasingly relevant role in contemporary international relations. Instead of posing a benign and apolitical image, the increasing importance and deployment of the forces in the future cannot be ignored. Lastly, this thesis has showed that the entwinement of popular culture with military recruitment strategies is a growing domain deployed for narratives that serve national interest. It is very likely that mediating positive images through popular culture is a strategy that will continue to grow further.

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