

**Strategic Implementation of the AIDA Model into Military Marketing Strategies:
An Army National Guard Study**

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined how military marketing messages capture attention, generate interest and desire, and motivate action among the military's target market in the digital age. The research problem addressed in this study was that military marketing efforts often struggle to resonate with their target market, individuals aged 17 to 34, limiting engagement and reducing behavioral response among potential recruits. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how Army National Guard marketing messages influence audience progression through the AIDA model. The study was guided by this framework, which conceptualizes marketing effectiveness as a sequential process moving audiences from awareness to behavioral intent. A qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis was employed to examine participant perceptions of military marketing advertisements. The study included 20 participants aged 18 to 34 with no prior military service. Participants viewed 20 digital advertisements and responded to structured open-ended survey questions. Data were analyzed using directed qualitative content analysis aligned with the four stages of the model and interpreted in terms of cognitive, affective, and conative response patterns, which informed recommendations for improving the effectiveness of military marketing messaging. The findings indicated that advertisements were effective at capturing cognitive attention but less successful at sustaining affective engagement or producing conative behavioral intent. The study concludes that military marketing campaigns may benefit from more emotionally resonant and personally relevant messaging to strengthen audience progression toward action. Future research may examine repeated exposure to messages and additional communication formats to further evaluate marketing effectiveness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Military marketing campaigns are more complex now than ever, a reality underscored by Ashish Vazirani, then-Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for the Department of Defense (DoD) (Vergun, 2023). “We’re constantly refining to adapt to the ever-changing digital landscape across different media and social media platforms” (Vergun, 2023, para. 13). Vazirani stated that today’s youth do not know much about military service (Vergun, 2023). The Army stated that one of its general recruiting challenges is a significant lack of awareness among the American youth regarding military service (Parrino, 2024). There is a knowledge gap between the military and America’s youth, who lack knowledge regarding military life and its benefits (Spoehr, 2023). Fifty percent of the American youth claim to know relatively little about military service (Borg, 2022).

The Army’s Director of Marketing Strategy, Colonel John Horning, stated that after the Army poured money into fresh marketing campaigns, it saw significant increases in *potential* applicants (Novelly et al., 2023). However, they still missed their recruiting goal by 25% in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 (Spoehr, 2023). The Navy missed its recruiting goal by 35%, faring the worst of all military branches (Cohen, 2024). Collectively, all military branches missed their FY23 recruiting goal by tens of thousands. With only 23% of its youth eligible for military service without a waiver and only 9% interested in possible military service over the next few years, the United States (U.S.) military is facing its worst recruiting crisis ever (Parrino, 2024).

The military’s target market consists of individuals aged 17-34 (Department of the Army, 2016, paras. 2–3, a.). Within this demographic, Generation Z (Gen Z) – those aged approximately 17 to 28 – represents the largest segment. As the first generation of true “digital natives,” Gen Z has grown up immersed in technology and is highly attuned to digital content,

platforms, and trends (Brown et al., 2019). This generational characteristic presents a strategic opportunity for the DoD.

2010 brought the U.S. to the birth of its fourth industrial revolution, or Industry 4.0 (Becker et al., 2020). Industry 4.0 is the progressive and extensive application of digital technologies, affecting and changing how consumers work and live (Safrankova et al., 2020). This evolution of digital technologies offers new values to the DoD and its Gen Z consumers.

Industry 4.0 is based on digitalizing business activities and processes, gathering and analyzing data, and transforming organizations into smart and sustainable ones (Safrankova et al., 2020). It brings digital engagement to the forefront of the marketing landscape. It advances the computing power, intelligent control, and connectivity of innovative product developments and other radical changes within marketing science (Becker et al., 2020).

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is the oldest surviving work on military strategy that is embedded in a foundation of political and economic strategy (Hlavatý & Ližbetin, 2021). However, the landscape of economic strategy has undergone drastic changes since Sun Tzu's time, with new entrants emerging. Today's newest entrant in economic theory is the attention economy.

The Attention Economy theory holds that, in today's digital age, a business's value is determined by its ability to capture and hold consumers' attention (Dai & Wang, 2023). Marketers use this theory to create compelling, attention-grabbing marketing campaigns that capture their target market's attention (Velocenet.com, 2023).

The economy is determined by what is scarce (Dai & Wang, 2023). In a situation of information overload, people's limited attention resources are scarce. Attracting attention tends to create commercial value, and people's attention becomes a finite economic resource.

Information is everywhere, and human time and attention are valuable commodities - perhaps even more valuable than money itself. People must choose how to spend their time and what to “pay attention” to (Henderson, 1999).

In the post-industrial economy, social media platforms commodify and monetize how people pay attention to, receive attention from, and seek other people’s attention (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). This new economy transforms attention into a currency cultivated throughout our culture. User engagement, click-through rates (views or clicks on a video), and affective relations (e.g., likes, retweets, or comments) can now be quantified and measured in this new currency (Zulli, 2018). People on social media and other internet platforms now pay “attention” (as currency) to the extraction of enormous value (Celis Bueno, 2017).

Rose (2015) stated, “We are in an all-out war for attention between the forces of insanity and the forces of things that actually matter to society” in his article *The Attention Economy 3.0* (Rose, 2015, p. 7). Tzu’s *The Art of War* is a strategic methodology for defending one’s survival, leading to the analysis of the distribution of forces (Hlavatý & Ližbetin, 2021). Rose’s statement was not a metaphor but a literal reference. He stated that living in an attention economy leaves us with a deficit of attention. He continued to say that society is saturated with abundant “useless” and even “predatory” information. Organizations that market to a specific segmentation are at war with practically everyone else to win their attention.

Attention is one of the most valuable resources in modern-day capitalism (Zulli, 2018). In the attention economy, forces are determined by people living in a “mental world” instead of a “material world” (Sinha, 2022). This is referred to as the state of “mental capitalism.” In Industry 4.0, complex algorithms developed by the internet capture human attention by creating patterns from consumption habits, lifestyles, preferences, and other consumer-specific data,

transforming this information into active elements of the “valorization cycle of capital” (Celis Bueno, 2017). Celis Bueno described this “cycle” as a process conceptualized by scholars as “cognitive capitalism.” Attention is intimately tied to agency, autonomy, and self-determination (Bruineberg, 2023). Henderson (1999) exclaimed that organizations must find innovative ways to capture the audience's attention.

Ormen and Gregersen (2023) explained the transition from an attention economy to an engagement economy, where a new focus must be placed on commercial transactions between all platform sides (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023). They stated that the most valuable audience commodity has never been mere attention, but rather the connection with the producers and brands.

Marketing has always leaned on the contact economy to weigh its return on investment (Tassi, 2018). Consumers' contact with content has long been the basis for monetizing the media economy. Philippe Tassi (2018) explained that our focus must no longer be on the likelihood of contact between content and consumers, but rather on persuading consumers to allocate attention to the organization's desired stimuli, consciously or unconsciously. Tassi explained that although contact remains necessary, it is no longer sufficient. Organizations must not only establish contact between consumers and stimuli, but also attract their attention (attention economy) and hold their interest long enough to motivate them to execute the call to action (engagement economy).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that the military struggles to connect with its target market and retain audiences amid the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). Katherine Kuzminski, Director of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS),

stated that most military branches seem to “wrestle with their messaging” (Novelly et al., 2023, para. 36). Military marketing messages must appeal to young people's interests (Spoehr, 2023). Vazirani of the DoD stated, “We must reach today’s youth *where they are* with a message that resonates with them and motivates them to act” (Vergun, 2023, para. 12).

Dwivedi et al. (2021) advised that future research is required to investigate how advertising affects the overall buying decision by influencing consumer behavior, increasing brand awareness, influencing the willingness of users to click, and increasing attention (Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, battling for consumer attention represents the fundamental "attention economy" challenge: the cost of attention-grabbing, sustaining, and immersing in digital media (Karki, 2024). This battle for attention has made it difficult for the DoD to create marketing content that resonates with its target markets. To address the current recruiting crisis, the military must understand the effects of digital media on consumer behavior while developing more strategic messaging approaches for the digital content environment. Military recruitment in the digital era is crucial, and the DoD faces substantial barriers when attempting to engage potential recruits, who are forced to sift through an abundance of digital content daily. This problem must be addressed because it poses a vital threat to U.S. national security and the DoD’s recruiting force (McMahon & Bernard, 2019), which can lead to an understrength military force with less combat capability (Spoehr, 2022) and a weakened readiness and ability to fulfill its ever-expanding missions (McMahon & Bernard, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to use qualitative content analysis (QCA) to explore how military marketing messages capture *attention*, generate *interest* and *desire*, and drive *action* among their target market in the digital age by using the AIDA model

(Hassan et al., 2015, p. 8) as a framework. This study directly addresses the DoD's problem of creating marketing messaging that struggles to connect with its target audience within the attention economy. Using a QCA approach, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of young adults interacting with military marketing messages to understand how these messages influence awareness, engagement, and decision-making within the military marketing funnel. Data was collected through open- and closed-ended survey questions with participants recruited via purposive sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), ensuring a diverse representation of individuals who have encountered digital military marketing campaigns. The target population comprised young adults aged 18–34, with a sample size of 20 participants (non-prior service) to achieve thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). The study was conducted in geographically diverse regions within the U.S. to ensure a broad perspective. The primary constructs examined were audience engagement, message effectiveness, and decision-making behavior within the AIDA framework. Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Adu & Larsen, 2021), using coding and thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights. Findings from this study provide practical recommendations for military marketing professionals to refine messaging strategies and improve recruitment outcomes in the digital era.

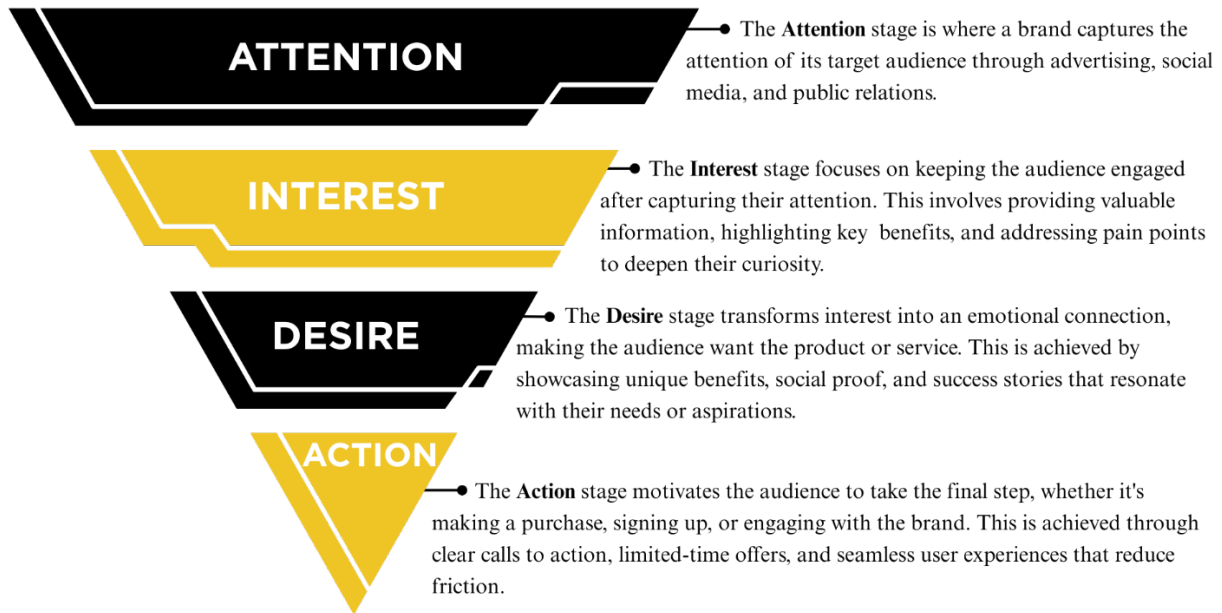
Conceptual Framework

St. Elmo Lewis' AIDA model (Hassan et al., 2015) served as the conceptual framework for this research, providing insight into the most effective methods for the military to create marketing messaging that resonates with its target market. In 1898, Elias St. Elmo Lewis proposed the AIDA communication model, which focuses on consumers' mental processes in purchasing a product or service (Fong et al., 2017). AIDA is an acronym that stands for *attention, interest, desire, and action*. It is a commonly adopted practice in formulating

marketing strategies. In essence, a firm must capture the consumer's attention, pique their interest, spark a desire, and ultimately persuade the consumer to take action, i.e., make a purchase.

The AIDA model (figure 1) is a funnel that focuses on consumers and explains the theoretical reasoning behind how they travel through the communication channels (Ghirvu, 2013). St. Elmo Lewis recognized that consumers must progress through several stages of the acquisition process. His primary vision was that they needed to receive different messages about a product [or service] at various times, moving them down a linear path through the funnel, starting from their awareness of the product [or service] to a general interest in it, to creating a desire for it, which transcends into committing to an action (Vollrath & Villegas, 2022).

St. Elmo Lewis also attached psychological components to his AIDA model (Hassan et al., 2015). He stated that marketing communication appeals to consumers' *cognitive* or intellectual, mental, or rational states (attention); *affective* or emotional and feeling states (interest and desire); and *conative* or behavioral and motivational states (action) throughout the AIDA model.

Figure 1*AIDA Model*

Note: Figure created by the researcher based on the AIDA model framework (Hassan et al., 2015).

Although the model was introduced by St. Elmo Lewis in 1898 and has undergone different revisions, its basic principles remain intact today (Hassan et al., 2015). Lavidge and Steiner (1961) expanded the AIDA model by introducing the *Hierarchy of Effects* model (Wisker et al., 2019). This second model aimed to deepen the understanding of the marketing communication process and its impact on consumer behavior (Ghirvu, 2013). It follows consumers through a psychological journey to develop brand loyalty. The Hierarchy of Effects model comprises six steps, whereas the AIDA model comprises four (Wisker et al., 2019). These six steps are *awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and purchase*. This model possesses the same three psychological components (cognitive, affective, and conative) as the AIDA model. Marketers must identify at which stage of the funnel consumers are driven to

commit to an action. Marketers can adjust advertising spending (ad spend) at specific funnel stages.

Whether with the AIDA model, Hierarchy of Effects model, or any other complementary versions, marketers' primary goal is to understand the cognitive, affective, and conative phases that consumers progress through and their effects on consumer behavior (Wisker et al., 2019). Marketers use the AIDA model to persuade consumers to purchase their product or service, or become aware of it (Polk, 2018). Whether as a guide for persuasive communications or a method for achieving promotional goals, the AIDA model shows that consumers respond to messages in a cognitive, affective, and conative sequence. If successful, marketers can create messaging that resonates more with their target market, leading to a commitment to a product or service.

In this qualitative study, the AIDA model served as the guiding framework for analyzing how the Army National Guard (ARNG), a DoD military organization, uses marketing messages across the stages of *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. Through QCA, the researcher examined the extent to which messages employ cognitive, affective, and conative elements to capture attention, hold interest, create desire, and stimulate action among the target audience. Using the AIDA model in this way provided a structured lens for coding and interpreting the data, ensuring that the analysis not only identified whether messages resonate but also explained *how* and *why* they succeed or fail at each stage of the communication process.

Research Methodology and Design

This study deployed qualitative research using a qualitative descriptive design with QCA as the analytic approach. Given the military's struggles with creating marketing messages that effectively captures *attention*, generates *interest* and *desire*, and drives *action* among their target market in this digital age, this approach provided rich, in-depth insights into how the perceptions

of young adults who have interacted with ARNG marketing messages perceived these messages and their ability or inability to influence awareness, engagement, and decision-making within the military marketing funnel, aligning with the AIDA framework. This insight is essential for understanding the nuances of audience engagement and tailoring future marketing strategies.

Data was collected through surveys that include both open- and closed-ended questions. While closed-ended items provided basic contextual information, open-ended responses served as the primary source of qualitative data. These narrative responses enabled participants to express, in their own words, how they interpreted and reacted to ARNG marketing messages.

Analysis followed the principles of QCA: initial coding of participant responses, categorization, and theme development. These themes were aligned with the four stages of the AIDA framework (attention, interest, desire, and action) to explore how participants progress through the marketing funnel when exposed to military messaging. This design ensured that findings remain grounded in participant voices while offering practical insights into how audience engagement unfolds in the digital age.

Research Questions

The rapid expansion of the digital age has made it increasingly difficult for the military to connect with its target market and maintain engagement. The DoD struggles to craft marketing messages that resonate with young people who are inundated with digital content and constantly filter through overwhelming information. This challenge is part of the broader "attention economy," where capturing and sustaining audience attention is increasingly costly and competitive. Addressing this issue is critical, as ineffective military marketing can threaten national security by leading to an understrength force with diminished combat readiness and operational capabilities.

RQ1

How do military marketing messages capture the *attention* of the military's target market in the digital age, and what factors influence their initial engagement?

RQ2

What elements of military marketing messages generate *interest* and *desire* among the military's target market, and how do they help decrease the knowledge gap between the military and its target audience?

RQ3

How do digital media platforms influence the transition from *interest* and *desire* to *action* in the military marketing funnel, and what messaging strategies most effectively encourage their target market to engage with call-to-action prompts (e.g., clicking a hyperlink to the website or calling the "800" number)?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a pressing challenge within the ARNG Marketing Operations: developing campaigns and strategies that effectively resonate with the target market of 17- to 34-year-olds in Industry 4.0. The rise of digital technologies, hyper-personalized content, and information overload has drastically shifted how audiences consume and engage with marketing messages. As such, traditional military marketing methods are no longer sufficient to capture the attention and interest of today's *digital native* consumers. This research contributes to strategic military marketing by exploring how modernized and data-driven content marketing strategies can generate attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA), while also narrowing the knowledge gap between the military and its prospective target audience.

The outcomes of this study may have important implications for both military marketing leaders and practitioners. By identifying and validating approaches that allow ARNG marketing teams to craft compelling digital campaigns that break through the digital noise, this research supports the development of more precise and impactful messaging strategies. These findings can help practitioners optimize campaign effectiveness and enable leaders to make data-informed decisions that align recruitment messaging with contemporary consumer expectations. Additionally, this study enriches the academic literature by blending marketing science with public-sector and military applications, an underexplored area.

Successfully addressing the problem, fulfilling the study's purpose, and answering the research questions yield numerous benefits. These include enhanced campaign return on investment (ROI), improved public perception of the ARNG, increased enlistment engagement, and greater alignment between organizational communication and consumer needs. In contrast to the adverse outcomes associated with outdated marketing efforts, the positive impact of this study lies in its potential to modernize ARNG marketing operations and set a benchmark for future military marketing practices in the digital era.

Definitions of Key Terms

AIDA

A model created by Elias St. Elmo Lewis in 1898, which focuses on consumers' mental transactions to purchase a product or service (Fong et al., 2017). The AIDA model, which stands for attention, interest, desire, and action, is designed to assist in formulating marketing strategies that gain the consumer's attention, attract their interest, create a desire, and finally, compel the consumer to take action, i.e., make a purchase.

Attention Economy

Information is everywhere, and human time and attention are valuable commodities - perhaps even more valuable than money itself (Henderson, 1999). People must choose how to spend their time and what to “pay attention” to. In today’s digital age, the value of a business is based on its ability to capture and hold the attention of its consumers. Marketers use this theory to create compelling and attention-grabbing marketing campaigns to capture the attention of their target market (VelocenetWORK.com, 2023).

Engagement Economy

The transition from an attention economy to an engagement economy is a new focus on commercial transactions between all platform sides (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023). Organizations must establish contact between the consumers and the stimuli, attract their attention (attention economy), *and* manage to hold their interest long enough to make them want to execute the call-to-action (engagement economy) (Tassi, 2018).

Generation Z (Gen Z)

Made up of 17- to 28-year-olds, Gen Z makes up most of the DoD’s target market (Department of the Army, 2016) and are known as the first group of “digital natives” (Brown et al., 2019).

Hierarchy of Effects

An expanded concept of the AIDA model created by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) which sought to further the understanding of the marketing communication process and its effects on consumer behavior (Ghirvu, 2013; Wisker et al., 2019).

Industry 4.0

A moniker representing the fourth industrial revolution, Industry 4.0 is the progressive and extensive application of digital technologies, affecting and changing how consumers work and live (Safrankova et al., 2020). It is based on digitalizing business activities and processes, gathering and analyzing data, and transforming organizations into smart and sustainable ones.

Summary

The problem addressed in this study is that the U.S. military struggles to connect with its target market and sustain engagement due to the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). Despite investments in modernized campaigns, the DoD faces declining awareness and interest among youth, compounded by the challenges of the attention and engagement economies, where organizations must compete to capture and hold consumer attention. This issue is critical, as ineffective messaging directly impacts national security through reduced recruitment and readiness.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to use QCA to explore how ARNG marketing messages capture attention, generate interest and desire, and drive action among the 18-34-year-old target market, applying the AIDA model as the guiding framework. Through open- and closed-ended survey questions, this study examined the perceptions of young adults who have engaged with ARNG marketing messages to assess how these messages influence awareness, engagement, and decision-making in the digital era.

A qualitative design was appropriate because it allowed for rich insights into participants' perspectives and experiences while remaining grounded in the data. QCA ensures a structured, theory-driven analysis, enabling a deeper understanding of how the AIDA framework manifests in real-world digital military marketing. This chapter provided an overview of the study's

background, problem, purpose, and significance, establishing the foundation for exploring how military marketing aligns with the AIDA model. The next chapter builds on this framework by reviewing existing literature related to military marketing, digital engagement, and theoretical perspectives that inform this study's conceptual foundation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem driving this research inquiry is that the military struggles to connect with its target market and sustain audience engagement due to the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to use the AIDA model as a framework to explore how military marketing messages capture *attention*, generate *interest* and *desire*, and drive *action* among their target market in the digital age. This chapter reviews the literature relevant to the AIDA model, its application in contemporary marketing, and its specific implications for military marketing. The review is organized as follows: first, to examine the theoretical foundations of the AIDA model; second, to explore its evolution and comparisons to related frameworks; third, to analyze the digital marketing landscape; and finally, to address its applicability to the unique challenges of military marketing.

Documentation

A thorough, methodical approach was employed to gather scholarly, peer-reviewed literature, ensuring that only pertinent, high-quality sources were included in this review. The primary databases used to obtain these sources were EBSCOhost (via National University's online library), Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar.

The primary search terms included “*AIDA*,” “*AIDA model*,” “*hierarchy of effects*,” “*customer purchase journey*,” “*marketing economics*,” “*attention economy*,” “*engagement economy*,” “*platform revolution*,” “*fourth industrial revolution*,” “*industry 4.0*,” “*4IR*,” “*marketing*,” “*military marketing*,” “*marketing strategies*,” “*marketing theory*,” “*rational marketing theory*,” “*irrational marketing theory*,” “*rational choice theory*,” “*alternates to AIDA*,” “*AIDAS*,” and “*AIDAR*.” Various combinations were used to explore further literature,

e.g., “*AIDA + marketing strategies*,” “*military marketing + AIDA*,” and “*hierarchy of effects + marketing*.”

The research of peer-reviewed scholarly articles spanned five years. However, to conduct a deeper literature review of seminal works, some dating back 100 years, on the origins of AIDA and its incorporation into marketing thought.

Framework

As the 20th century came to a close, a new type of economy was introduced to society (Henderson, 1999). Hazel Henderson (1999) discussed the use of the attention economy to harness communication technologies to expand and change economic behavior. She championed that we must find innovative ways to capture the audience's attention. Moreover, what might have been a bridge too far at the time, she even mentioned using cyberspace to garner more vigorous attention. It was evident that attention was becoming increasingly scarce in our society, and new methods were needed to capture consumers' attention.

Consumers respond to marketing messages in a cognitive, affective, and conative sequence (Polk, 2018). The AIDA model harnesses this process in a framework that drives consumers through four cognitive phases: *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action* (Hassan et al., 2015). The AIDA model is a commonly adopted practice in formulating marketing strategies in business and focuses on the mental transactions that consumers progress through to purchase a product or service (Fong et al., 2017). Marketing organizations aim to grab the consumer's attention, create interest in the product [or service], generate desire, and finally prompt the consumer to take action, i.e., make a purchase.

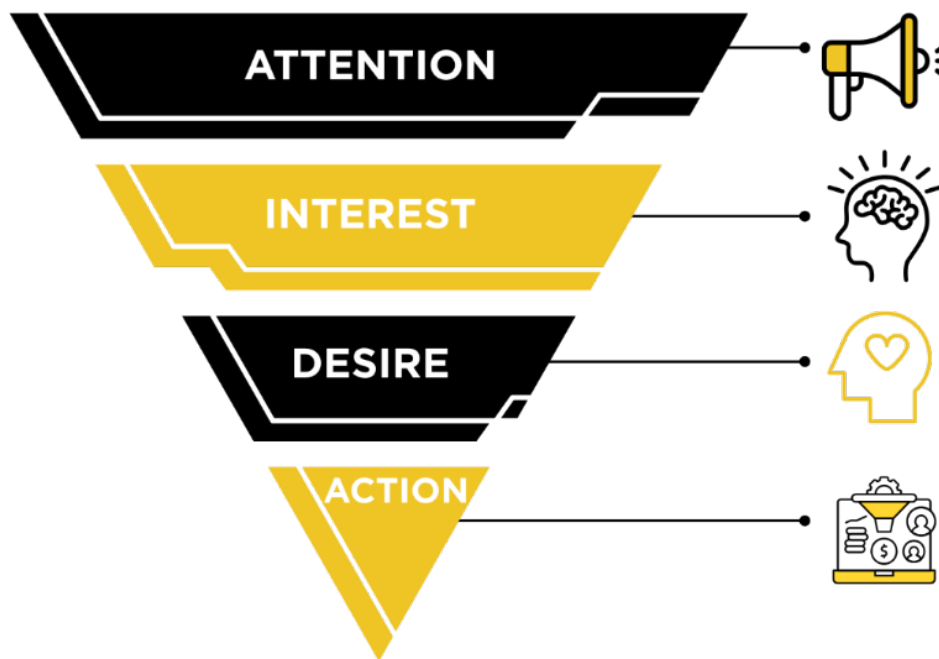
The AIDA model is represented as a funnel that focuses on consumers and explains the theoretical reasoning behind their progression through communication channels (Ghirvu, 2013).

St. Elmo Lewis recognized that consumers must progress through several stages of the acquisition process. His primary vision was that they needed to receive different messages about a product [or service] at various times, moving them down a linear path through the funnel, starting from their awareness of the product or service to a general interest in it, to creating a desire for it, which transcends into committing to an action (Vollrath & Villegas, 2022).

Marketers use the AIDA model to persuade consumers to either purchase their product or service or become aware of it (Polk, 2018). Whether as a guide for persuasive communications or a method for achieving promotional goals, the AIDA model shows that consumers respond to messages in a cognitive, affective, and conative sequence. If successful, marketers can create messaging that resonates more effectively with their target market, leading to a stronger commitment to the product or service.

Figure 2

AIDA Marketing Funnel



Note: Figure created by the researcher based on the AIDA model framework (Hassan et al., 2015).

Effective Frequency Theory

As stated earlier, St. Elmo Lewis theorized that consumers need to receive different messages about a product [or service] multiple times (Vollrath & Villegas, 2022). This repetitive exposure helps them move through the marketing funnel. Multiple exposures to marketing messages increase consumer awareness of and facilitate consumer information processing (Schmidt & Eisend, 2015).

Tellis (1997) referred to the search for the precise number of exposures that maximizes consumer response to an ad as the “holy grail of effective frequency” (Tellis, 1997, p. 75). Tellis stated that there is no magic number for effective frequency (e.g., 7, 9, 11), but the advertising context determines whether one, two, or many exposures are necessary for optimal sales. He further breaks down the context of advertising into three factors: *brand familiarity*, or the extent to which the target audience is familiar with the brand; *message complexity*, or the level of difficulty, richness, or ambiguity of a message; and *message novelty*, or the degree of newness, originality, or unexpectedness of a message.

Detailed Stages of the AIDA Model

As explained earlier, the AIDA model assists marketers in understanding how their target audiences change over time (Song et al., 2021). It is used to better understand the consumer decision-making process, from their psychological behavior to the effects of marketing communications on their final action (such as purchase or consumption), resulting from the media. Consumers’ emotional reactions to marketing stimuli directly affect subsequent behavior, and the AIDA model helps track and predict this behavior.

Attention:

The *attention* stage is the recognition phase, where a consumer first becomes aware of the product or service (Song et al., 2021). This stage exploits the visual and kinetic appeal of a stimulus to capture the attention of its viewers (Hung et al., 2025). This initial step triggers emotional processing by establishing a platform for emotional and cognitive engagement. This emotional connection helps amplify awareness and capture consumers' attention. Although commonly known for being an involuntary component, consumers generally make conscious decisions regarding which stimuli to give preference to – selective attention – after registering, storing, and processing all perceptual information (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021).

Interest:

The *interest* stage converts consumers' initial curiosity into a deeper inclination towards the stimuli (Hung et al., 2025). Here, consumers gain a deeper understanding of the product or service (Kim, 2024). This stage refers to a consumer's feeling about a particular product or service (Song et al., 2021). The *interest* stage comprises cognitive and affective elements (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). Consumers' sensory perceptions begin to operate at attitudinal and opinion-forming levels. Positive emotions motivate approach, exploration, and creative encounter (Kim, 2024). Emotional engagement and increased consciousness are intended to spark further interest, transitioning consumers into the subsequent *desire* stage (Hung et al., 2025). This stage does not have as immediate an impact as the *attention* stage – it entails a longer interaction to ensure acceptable message communication (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021).

Desire:

The *desire* stage is a sustained emotional state that is triggered by the subsequent *interest* stage (Song et al., 2021). However, interest alone does not directly influence desire but affects

the *desire* stage through attitude. *Desire* is a strong mediator in the effect of attitude on intention, directly influencing behavioral intention. The *desire* stage is the actual aspiration for the product or service (Ghirvu, 2013), also known as the “end state” (Song et al., 2021). It is a state of mind where consumers have a personal motivation to perform an action or achieve a goal (Kim, 2024). In this stage, consumers are in an emotional state in which they believe the promotional message is true, aspire to, and even dream about the product or service, feeling inclined to transition to the next stage – *action* (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021).

Action:

Every marketing campaign pursues some goal (e.g., sell a product) (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). The *action* stage is aimed at translating increased awareness and desire into a tangible, sustainable behavior (Hung et al., 2025). Developing at the behavioral level (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021), this psychological stage motivates consumers to ultimately take an *action* (i.e., making a purchase) (Song et al., 2021). This stage finalizes the conative process with actual acquisition, or the concrete action of buying a product or service.

Navigating from the *attention* to the *action* stage demands a higher psychological or economic commitment (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). As consumers progress through the AIDA model, the effort required to reach the next stage increases. Therefore, the effort and difficulty required for organizations to transition consumers from one stage to the next increases.

Theoretical Foundations of Marketing Communications

The AIDA model uses marketing communications to focus on consumer transactions and purchases (Hassan et al., 2015). In the digital world, marketing communications emphasize three essential steps: creating awareness of a product or service, building relationships, and delivering mutual value to customers. St. Elmo Lewis stated that marketing communication appeals to

consumers' cognitive – or intellectual, mental, or rational states (attention), affective - or emotional and feeling states (interest and desire), and conative - or behavioral and motivational states (action) throughout the AIDA model. Several theoretical foundations of marketing communication that lay the groundwork for consumers' cognitive, affective, and conative states are *marketing theory*, *rational and irrational marketing theory*, and *rational choice theory*.

Marketing Theory

Since ancient Greece, philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Homer have contributed their thinking to the roots of marketing thought (Tamilia, 2009). They, along with many others, gave rise to a more modern view of the roles of buying and selling, the meaning of money, and the role of merchants in promoting society's well-being. The history of marketing thought concerns the production, diffusion, and affirmation of marketing ideas and concepts (Tadajewski & Jones, 2014).

Phillip Kotler is known as the father of Marketing Theory (Tadajewski & Jones, 2014). Marketing theory describes the behavior of human consumers and predicts the optimal stages for brands to market themselves to consumers (Burdfield-Steel & Burdfield, 2023). Marketing theory emphasizes differentiation from competition, even extreme differentiation, which ensures a favorable positioning in the minds of consumers (Duralia, 2022).

Rational Vs. Irrational Marketing Theory

Rational marketing theory assumes that all human decisions are rational, informed, and motivated by accurately assessing the utility of “goods and services” utility (Fastenau, 2019). Under this set of assumptions, all actors in the marketplace attempt to maximize their utility or profit. However, throughout marketing history, the understanding of consumer behavior has shifted from a rational marketing theory to an irrational one. Understanding seemingly irrational

behavior is fundamental to business research (Dilger et al., 2019). Consumers' cognitive response factors include emotion, intuition, color, norms, and other external factors outside the rational theory framework. This introduces the concept of "irrational consumerism."

Irrational consumerism can be broken down into three cornerstones: *emotions*, or the cognitive appraisal received by the consumer; *place*, or the situational factors relating to the context; and *time*, or the intertemporal choices selected by the consumer, and the foundational concept of this research, related to marketing and attention, or the scarcity of it.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory refers to guidelines that help understand economic and social behavior (Krstić, 2014). It concerns rational human behavior and is characterized by the principle of rationality, which is subject to constraints. (If children prefer to watch TV instead of studying, they act subjectively and rationally.)

The Importance of AIDA in Contemporary Marketing

Marketing Economics

At some point in the late 20th century, marketing evolved beyond "advertising" principles and protocols, branching into various disciplines, including economics. Horsky and Sen (1980) discussed how economic theory theoretically underpinned many marketing principles. They pointed out that, although marketers and economists often share the same interests, their methodologies, content, and literature focus differ extensively. A lot has changed and evolved over the last 40 years; however, seminal work from Horsky and Sen laid down a strong foundation of marketing economics.

Platform Revolution

Industry 4.0 has introduced, among many others, the platform revolution (Sharam, 2019). Sharam (2019) described the platform revolution as a digital technology platform of “new economics” matching markets turbo-charged by technology. The surge in digital platforms in the 21st century has disrupted how organizations spend their marketing dollars (Jayson et al., 2018). Historically, platforms enabled organizations and their customers to create value through interactions (Costa, 2016). Their overarching purpose was to facilitate matches among users, enabling the exchange of goods, services, or social currency. However, in Industry 4.0, as platforms have gravitated more towards digital technologies, they have created even further value by “de-linking” access from ownership and giving rise to what has been titled the “sharing economy” (Costa, 2016).

Marketing has always leaned on the contact economy to weigh its return on investment. Consumers' contact with content has long been the basis for monetizing the media economy (Tassi, 2018). Philippe Tassi (2018) explained that our focus must no longer be on the likelihood of contact between content and consumers, but rather on persuading consumers to allocate attention to the organization's desired stimuli, consciously or unconsciously. Tassi explained that although contact remains necessary, it is no longer sufficient. Organizations must not only establish contact between consumers and the stimuli but also attract their attention and hold their interest enough to motivate them to execute the call to action.

Digital platforms create models based on consumers' actions (Bruineberg, 2023). Where consumers click, what keeps them engaged, and what triggers them are all logged by these models, which are used to present consumers with content and structure that optimize the platform's engagement goals. Complex algorithms developed by the internet are used to garner

human attention by creating patterns from consumption habits, lifestyles, preferences, and other consumer-specific data, transforming this information into active elements of the “valorization cycle of capital” (Celis Bueno, 2017). Celis Bueno described this “cycle” as a process conceptualized by scholars as “cognitive capitalism.” This business model, in which human attention is a scarce resource over which digital platforms compete for survival, introduces us to the attention economy.

Attention Economy

Attention is a limited cognitive resource that a consumer may devote, to different degrees, to an object (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). The first objective of every marketing campaign is to attract the consumer’s attention. However, the U.S. is currently in an attention economy, which is the cost of attention-grabbing, sustaining, and immersing in digital media (Karki, 2024). This lack of attention is due to the large amounts of information available to consumers in their everyday environments (Bruineberg, 2023). Consumers can be exposed to 1,000 to 5,000 promotional messages from commercial communications daily (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). Attention is one of the most valuable resources in modern-day capitalism (Zulli, 2018). Actual, perceived, and potential attention drives enterprise and is a minimal resource. The economy is determined by what is scarce (Dai & Wang, 2023). In a situation of information overload, people’s limited attention resources are scarce; attention attracts commercial value, and attention becomes a finite economic resource.

The Attention Economy theory posits that, in today’s digital age, a business's value is based on its ability to capture and retain consumers' attention. Marketers use this theory to create compelling and attention-grabbing marketing campaigns to capture the attention of their target market (Velocenetwork.com, 2023).

As we have embraced Industry 4.0, our society is well into the new era of the “information age” (Henderson, 1999). Information is everywhere, and human time and attention are valuable commodities, perhaps even more valuable than money itself. People must choose how to spend their time and what to “pay attention” to.

In the post-industrial economy, social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, commodify and monetize how people pay attention to, receive attention from, and seek other people’s attention (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). This new economy transforms attention into a currency cultivated throughout our culture. User engagement, click-through rates (views or clicks on a video), and affective relations (e.g., likes, retweets, or comments) can now be quantified and measured as a new currency (Zulli, 2018). As the adage goes, time is literally money now. People on social media and other internet platforms now pay “attention” (as currency) to the extraction of enormous value (Celis Bueno, 2017).

Attention Economy Impact

Fiscal year (FY) 2022 was the worst year for military recruiting (Spoehr, 2022). There is just an overload of information that the military’s target market is struggling to filter through. As stated earlier, in situations of information overload, people’s limited attention resources are scarce, and attracting attention tends to create commercial value, making people’s attention a finite economic resource (Dai & Wang, 2023).

Our society is well into the “information age,” where information is everywhere, and human time and attention are commodities (Henderson, 1999). In the attention economy, various forms of entertainment, social media, news, and advertising constantly fight for people’s attention. Military recruitment must compete with these distractions to capture the attention of potential recruits, particularly young people, who are the primary target demographic. This has

vastly impacted the ARNG's recruiting efforts. The ARNG places a significant portion of its marketing efforts into social media advertising. However, with their target market inundated by information overload, they must decide what to "pay attention" to and which information they extract provides the most value to them (Celis Bueno, 2017). ARNG marketing departments must use click-through rates, user engagement, and effective relationships to generate digital currency (Zulli, 2018) and calculate an effective return on investment.

Engagement Economy

Avid fishermen can tell you that catching a fish is not the most challenging part, but reeling it in successfully is where the actual skills lie. Business firms can dedicate a plethora of finances and resources to grabbing their target market's attention (or catching the fish); however, if the organizations cannot keep their attention and engage consumers, all the effort would have been for nothing.

Ormen and Gregersen (2023) explained the transition from the attention economy to the engagement economy, where a new focus must be placed on commercial transactions between all platform sides (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023). They continued to explain that the most valuable audience commodity has never been mere attention but rather the connection with the producers and brands. When driven by emotionally charged incentives, focused attention is closely linked to intensified emotional engagement (Hung et al., 2025).

Engagement Economy Impact

The marketing funnel is essential for every successful marketer and marketing department. Different marketers and search engine results might yield slightly different variations of the marketing funnel (depending on their mission and company goal), but its purpose and function remain constant.

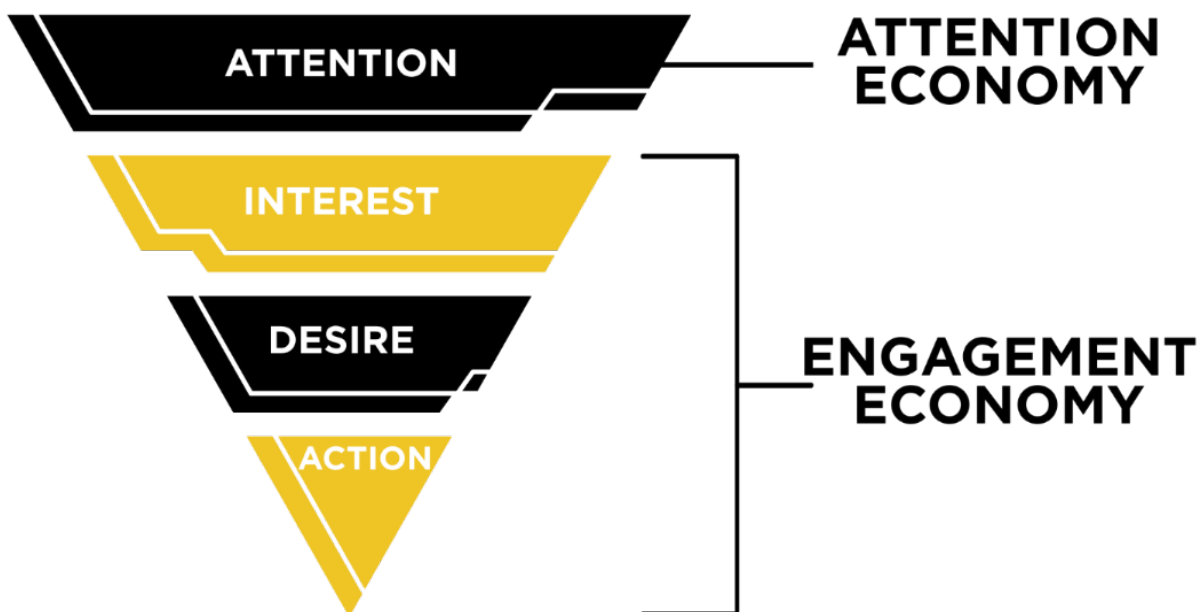
This is best explained with the AIDA marketing model. *Attention* is at the top of the marketing funnel, dedicated to increasing brand awareness. Next is *interest*, followed by *desire*, sharing the middle of the funnel. These two segments aim to guide consumers to a higher level of consideration. Ultimately, action anchors the bottom of the marketing funnel, aiming to convert prospects into customers.

Marketers strive to create campaigns that walk their target market through a journey from the top of the marketing funnel to the bottom. Once attention is obtained by their marketing efforts (top of the funnel), the attention economy transitions into the engagement economy, placing a new focus on transactions between all platform sides (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023). Military marketing efforts have shifted from one-way communication to actively building relationships with the target audience. Engagement is about reaching prospects and establishing meaningful connections to keep them “engaged” through their marketing funnel journey. This involves engagement and interaction to foster trust and understanding. This can be achieved by leveraging social media and other online communities to engage with prospective candidates, enabling direct interaction, sharing of experiences, and addressing individual inquiries to move prospects further down the marketing funnel.

The engagement economy essentially splits the AIDA marketing funnel into two sections: the top-of-the-funnel (awareness) section is solely correlated with the attention economy, while the middle- and bottom-of-the-funnel sections (interest, desire, and action) are correlated with the engagement economy.

Figure 3

AIDA Marketing Theory Divided by Attention & Engagement Economy



Note: Figure created by the researcher based on the AIDA model framework (Hassan et al., 2015), the attention economy (Karki, 2024), and the engagement economy (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023).

Comparison with Related AIDA Models

Consumer behavior research draws up established decision-making models, typically identifying needs, searching for pre-purchase information, evaluating alternatives, making a purchase, consuming, evaluating post-consumption, and disposing of the product. Examples of these decision-making models include the *Hierarchy of Effects* model, the *Consumer Decision-Making* model, and the *Customer Journey* model.

AIDAS Model

In 1910, Sheldon posited that his theorized *AIDAS* model better represented the customer journey (Iwamoto, 2023). The *AIDAS* model comprises the same psychological features as its

foundational predecessor, the AIDA Model. Like AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action), the AIDAS model adds a *satisfaction* segment (Takaya & Yamashita, 2020). In the satisfaction stage, consumers are not only satisfied with the product or service but are also more likely to purchase it once or multiple times.

AIDAR Model

Fortenberry Jr. & McGoldrick (2020) also championed for an expansion of the AIDA model with their theorized *AIDAR* model, adding an “R” for “retention” (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2020). They criticized the traditional AIDA model for omitting the post-purchase and reinforcement roles of marketing and advertising. Although they acknowledged the aforementioned AIDAS model in the previous paragraph, they stated that simply adding “satisfaction” to define the post-purchase potential of advertising too narrowly. *Satisfaction* is also derived more from a personal selling context than from marketing (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2020; Iwamoto, 2023). The addition of retention reflects more of a contemporary emphasis on post-purchase retention, reinforcement, and relationship building (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2020).

Hierarchy of Effects Model

Lavidge and Steiner (1961) expanded on the AIDA model with their Hierarchy of Effects model (Wisker et al., 2019), which explains that interactions between companies and consumers progress through sequential stages. This model consists of six steps: awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and purchase (Wisker et al., 2019). The Hierarchy of Effects model uses cognitive, affective, and conative processes in decision-making (Ghirvu, 2013). The *cognitive* stage involves awareness and knowledge of a product or service, the *affective* stage

encompasses liking and preference for it, and the *conative* stage entails conviction and purchase of it (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021).

The Hierarchy of Effects model establishes the effect of marketing communication on consumer behavior outcomes (Song et al., 2021). This model follows consumers through a psychological journey, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the marketing communication process and its impact on consumer behavior. The model's six steps present a chain of causal effects along various stages and facilitate the characterization of consumer behavior at specific moments (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). It provides a systematic approach, with each stage clearly identifiable, enabling separate analysis.

The Hierarchy of Effects model has the same cognitive, affective, and conative components as the AIDA model; however, it adds affect to explain the response to advertising (Ghirvu, 2013). In other words, they involve learning and understanding the features, the use, and the benefits of a product or service being advertised (Ghirvu, 2013). Ultimately, this model states that the different interactions between company and consumer outline a journey through different stages that get progressively closer to the end goal – *action* (i.e., purchasing a product or service) (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021).

Consumer Decision-Making Process Model

The *Consumer Decision-Making Process* is a decision-making model that involves cognitive, emotional, and conational components (Kim, 2024). It comprises five sections: *problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation* (Desku & Sadrija, 2023). Kotler and Keller (2021) emphasized that the consumers' purchase process begins before the purchase is made (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Furthermore, not all consumers go through all the stages of the *Consumer Decision-Making Process* due to the nature of the buyer, the product, and the purchase situation.

In the problem recognition phase, certain stimuli prompt consumers to seek information about a certain product or service (Vieira et al., 2023). Consumers research and gather information about the product or service in the information search phase. Throughout the *evaluation of alternatives* phase, consumers research all possible alternatives for the product or service and consider factors such as price, quality, features, and benefits. Once a *purchase* is made, consumers consider the factors that influenced their decision-making process during the *purchase evaluation* phase. This final stage is further divided into two categories: *environmental influences* and *individual differences*.

Environmental Influences consist of external factors that surround the consumer (Vieira et al., 2023). These factors include culture, social class, peers, family, and other specific situations. These external factors shape consumers' preferences, perceptions, and behaviors. *Individual Differences* consist of internal factors that vary from buyer to buyer. These factors include the resources available to the consumer, their motivations, level of involvement, and knowledge about the product or service, as well as their attitudes, personality traits, values, and lifestyle.

Customer Journey Theory

The *Customer Journey Theory* is a dynamic process comprising three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Hardcastle et al., 2025). Like the previously mentioned decision-making models, the customer journey model emphasizes the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions shaping a product or service. However, Hardcastle et al. (2025)

emphasized that this integrated perspective reconceptualizes the consumer decision-making process from a linear, legacy progression to a complex, multidimensional journey.

As we discussed the Platform Revolution earlier, technology has enabled consumers with instantaneous information access, thus reshaping customer journey navigation (Hardcastle et al., 2025). Customer experiences are multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social, and physical responses to stimuli. The customer journey model is a robust framework that enables marketing departments to analyze consumers' experiences and create tailored marketing strategies. Algorithms and personalized advertising are the consequences of the platform revolution, having reshaped customer journeys. This technological evolution drives a shift from linear models to nonlinear, multidimensional models. Characterized by a series of iterative loops, detours, and simultaneous interactions across digital platforms, integrated artificial intelligence (AI) data-driven technologies have made customer journeys nonlinear, multifaceted, and dynamic.

Applicability of the AIDA Model in Military Marketing Strategies

The battle for attention has made it challenging for the DoD to effectively resonate with its target market using traditional, *cookie-cutter* campaigns. The DoD has been unsuccessful in placing the “right technology, people, and processes needed to better understand consumer needs and provide more authentic and relevant customer experiences” (Whitler, 2022, para. 1) within its marketing landscape to adapt to the new, constantly changing consumer landscape that demands more personalized targeting. This is partly because the DoD conducts what Paskalis (2022) refers to as “assembly line marketing” practices that “crank out” large numbers of cookie-cutter campaigns built from generic template molds (Whitler, 2022).

Although Spoehr (2023) exclaimed that there is a knowledge gap between the military and the American youth (Spoehr, 2023), it is currently unknown where and why this gap exists. What *is* known is that the continuation of the DoD's failure to connect with its target market and achieve its recruiting goals will lead to insufficient recruitment of future personnel and retention of those already in service (McMahon & Bernard, 2019). The U.S. military has been an all-volunteer force for over 50 years (Vergun, 2023). The inability to replenish the military force year after year might threaten the status quo of the U.S.'s all-volunteer force, which has been in place since 1973.

The AIDA model outlines the response process a receiver of a message goes through before taking actual action. It is paramount for the military marketing landscape to understand the cognitive, affective, and conative phases that their target market goes through to commit to “purchasing” a service, i.e., enlisting in the military. The AIDA theory can focus on and harness these mental transactions to better reach and resonate with the target market.

Summary

This research aims to explore AIDA Marketing Theory (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) as a framework for understanding how marketing messages resonate with consumers in *Industry 4.0*, with specific application to military marketing challenges. The literature review traces the model's theoretical foundations, its detailed stages, its relationship to broader marketing communications theory, its relevance in the attention and engagement economies, comparisons to related consumer behavior frameworks, and its applicability to DoD marketing.

The AIDA model, originating from St. Elmo Lewis, describes the consumer journey from awareness to action through cognitive, affective, and conative stages. It provides marketers with a funnel framework to attract *attention*, cultivate *interest*, generate *desire*, and ultimately drive

action (behavior). Literature underscores how emotional and rational processes interplay across these phases, reinforcing AIDA's value as both a persuasive communications guide and a decision-making model. Within this structure, *attention* begins with stimuli that trigger recognition and emotional processing; *interest* builds curiosity and engagement, blending cognitive and affective elements; *desire* connects attitudes to behavioral intentions, creating personal motivation; and *action* represents the culmination of these processes in a final conversion requiring commitment.

The theoretical foundations of marketing communication further enrich AIDA's relevance. Classical marketing theory, advanced by scholars such as Philip Kotler, emphasizes consumer behavior and competitive differentiation. Rational marketing theory assumes utility-driven, logical decision-making, while irrational marketing theory acknowledges the critical roles of emotion, intuition, and external influences. Rational choice theory adds nuance by framing consumer behavior as both subjective and constrained, yet rational within its context. Together, these perspectives situate AIDA within broader academic traditions of marketing thought.

The review of AIDA in contemporary marketing highlights how digital transformation has reshaped marketing through economic, technological, and consumer behavioral changes. Marketing economics bridges the methods and concerns of economists and marketers, while the platform revolution describes how digital platforms monetize consumer interactions and preferences. The attention economy redefines attention as a scarce and monetizable resource, highlighting the challenge of capturing and sustaining focus in an era of information overload. The engagement economy extends this concept, emphasizing the importance of building

relationships, fostering emotional connections, and sustaining consumer engagement through interactive, trust-based exchanges.

AIDA is also examined alongside other consumer behavior frameworks. The *AIDAS* model introduces satisfaction as a post-purchase stage, while the *AIDAR* model adds retention, highlighting the importance of long-term relationships. The *Hierarchy of Effects* model proposes a six-stage process, ranging from awareness to purchase, with an emphasis on psychological progression. The *Consumer Decision-Making Process* expands on this with five stages from problem recognition to post-purchase evaluation, accounting for both environmental influences and individual differences. *Customer Journey Theory* builds on these models but emphasizes a nonlinear, multidimensional path shaped by technology and AI. In contrast, *Effective Frequency Theory* stresses the importance of repeated exposure and contextual factors such as message complexity and brand familiarity.

Finally, the chapter applies these insights to military marketing. The DoD faces significant challenges in capturing the attention of its target market, particularly younger audiences immersed in the digital age. Traditional “assembly line” campaigns often fail to resonate, as they lack personalization and authenticity. In the attention economy, the military competes with an oversaturation of digital stimuli; in contrast, the engagement economy prioritizes cultivating relationships and sustaining meaningful interactions. Recruiting shortfalls underscore the need for adapting strategies, as failure to connect with youth audiences poses a threat to the sustainability of the all-volunteer force. Applying AIDA to military marketing provides a structured framework for understanding how potential recruits move cognitively and emotionally from awareness to enlistment, offering clearer direction for creating effective, targeted, and resonant campaigns.

Overall, this chapter establishes AIDA as both a historically grounded and contemporarily relevant framework. By situating the model within broader marketing theories, digital economic shifts, and competing consumer behavior frameworks, it demonstrates how AIDA can illuminate gaps in DoD marketing and suggest pathways for improving engagement with the military's target market.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study is that the military struggles to connect with its target audience and maintain engagement due to the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). Katherine Kuzminski of the Center for a New American Security stated that most military branches seem to “wrestle with their messaging” (Novelly et al., 2023, para. 36). Military marketing messages must appeal to the interests of young people (Spoehr, 2023). Vazirani of the DoD stated, “We must reach today’s youth where they are with a message that resonates with them and motivates them to act” (Vergun, 2023, para. 12). The purpose of this qualitative study was to employ directed QCA to explore how military marketing messages capture attention, generate interest and desire, and drive action among their target market in the digital age, using the AIDA model as a framework (Hassan et al., 2015, p. 8).

This chapter outlines the research methodology and design used to address the problem and achieve the study’s purpose. It begins by describing the research design and rationale, followed by an explanation of the population and sample, and the instrumentation used. The chapter then details the study procedures, data collection, and data analysis processes. Additional sections address the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, as well as the measures taken to ensure the ethical integrity and trustworthiness of the research. Collectively, these components provide a comprehensive overview of how the research was structured and implemented to explore the effectiveness of ARNG marketing messages through the lens of the AIDA model.

Research Methodology and Design

This study employed qualitative research, using QCA as the research design. The use of content analysis dates back to the 18th century in Scandinavia (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content

analysis involves counting and comparing keywords, or “content,” followed by interpreting the underlying context. Content analysis is a flexible method for analyzing text data, which may be verbal, print, or electronic, and which may have been obtained through open-ended survey questions, interviews, or narrative responses (Kondracki et al., 2002). It seeks to interpret and make sense of mediated communication among individuals, including texts, symbols, messages, information, mass media content, and technology-supported social interactions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

QCA focuses on the characteristics of language as communication, with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is a research method for the subjective interpretation of text data content through a systematic coding and theme identification process. The goal of QCA is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). There are three different types of QCA: conventional, directed, and summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Researchers employ all three approaches to interpret text data within a predominantly naturalistic paradigm.

Conventional content analysis is typically employed in studies with a design aimed at describing a phenomenon. Here, researchers allow categories and their names to flow naturally from the data, rather than using preconceived categories (Kondracki et al., 2002). However, failing to identify key categories can result in a partial understanding of the context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Directed content analysis is guided by a more structured process than a conventional approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). With existing theory or prior research about a phenomenon, researchers identify key concepts or variables as initial coding categories. A directed approach aims to confirm or expand upon an existing theoretical framework or concept. It can offer

insights or predictions regarding key variables and their interrelationships, helping to establish the initial coding framework or connections among codes, a process known as deductive category application. The results of a directed content analysis provide both supporting and contradictory evidence related to a given theory. The theory or existing research framework serves as the foundation for interpreting the findings. Any newly identified categories may challenge the existing understanding of the phenomenon or contribute to refining, expanding, and deepening the original theory.

Summative content analysis begins by identifying and counting specific words or content within the text to gain insight into their contextual meaning and usage (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This is conducted not to infer meaning, but rather, to explore usage. A focus on counting the frequency of specific words would initially define this as a quantitative framework. However, it is the interpretation of the content (latent content analysis) that distinguishes this from a quantitative *analysis*. In a summative approach to QCA, a focus is placed on exploring the underlying meanings of words or content.

For this study, the researcher employed a directed QCA approach. This method was most appropriate because the study was guided by an existing theoretical framework (the AIDA model), which outlines four stages of persuasive marketing communication: *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. Using a directed approach allowed the researcher to begin with these predetermined categories as an initial coding scheme while remaining open to new themes or subcategories that may have emerged from the data. This approach provided a structured yet flexible process for analyzing how military marketing messages align with or deviate from the AIDA framework. The use of directed QCA helped validate and potentially refine the

applicability of AIDA theory in a military marketing context, offering both confirmatory and exploratory insights into message effectiveness and audience engagement.

A quantitative design was not appropriate for this study because the goal was not to measure variables or test hypotheses using numerical data, but rather to explore participants' perceptions and experiences related to how military marketing messages capture attention, generate interest and desire, and drive action. Quantitative methods are best suited for studies that examine relationships between variables or test predefined theories through statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In contrast, this research sought to provide rich, descriptive insights into how and why target audiences respond to marketing messages, aligning more closely with a qualitative descriptive approach. Creswell (2018) explained that qualitative inquiry enables researchers to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, making it the most appropriate approach for this study's focus on perceptions and message interpretation.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study consisted of individuals aged 18 to 34, as this demographic aligns with the DoD's primary recruitment audience (Department of the Army, 2016). From this population, a purposive sample of 20 non-prior-service individuals (those who have never served in the military) was selected. Purposive samples are selected based on a predetermined criterion related to the search (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). Although there is no definitive answer to what sample size is required to achieve complete saturation, data experts suggest that for content analysis, 12-20 participants should be obtained (Ahmed, 2024). Given the goal of qualitative research to ensure that data collection yields rich and meaningful insights, the researcher selected a sample of 20 participants.

Figure 4*Age/Gender Sample Matrix*

25-34	5	5
18-24	5	5
	Males	Females

Note: Figure created by researcher to visually depict the sample breakdown of gender and ages.

To ensure balanced representation by gender and age group, the sample [aimed to] include 10 males and 10 females, with 10 participants aged 18-24 and 10 participants aged 25-34. In essence, five females aged 18-24, five males aged 18-24, five females aged 25-34, and five males aged 25-34 (see figure 4) [Chapter 4 later explains that although the study initially aimed for equal gender distribution, participant recruitment and survey completion rates resulted in a higher proportion of female respondents (13 females and 7 males)]. This population represents the audience for whom the ARNG marketing messages are designed and whose perceptions are critical to understanding the effectiveness of these messages within the AIDA model framework. Participants were recruited via social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook), ensuring voluntary participation and adherence to ethical research guidelines.

The identified problem is that the military struggles to connect with its target audience and maintain its attention due to the rapid growth of the digital age. The purpose of this

qualitative study was to employ QCA to explore how ARNG's marketing messages capture attention, generate interest and desire, and drive action among their target market in the digital age, using the AIDA model framework as a guiding lens. Therefore, non-prior service individuals aged 18–34 represent the most relevant population, as they constitute the primary recruitment demographic for the ARNG and the broader DoD. Their perceptions and responses to marketing messages are critical to understanding how effectively digital communication strategies engage this group. Furthermore, this population is directly positioned to answer the research questions, which seek to explore (1) how military marketing captures attention and initial engagement, (2) what elements generate interest and desire while bridging the knowledge gap between the military and its audience, and (3) how digital media influences the transition from interest and desire to action. Studying this demographic provided the most meaningful insights into the effectiveness of ARNG marketing strategies within the AIDA framework, as it allowed the research to evaluate real-time engagement patterns and behavioral responses from the very audience the organization seeks to influence.

The inclusion criteria for the study participants were that they must:

- be between the ages of 18 and 34 years of age.
- have NEVER served in the military (to maintain focus on civilian audience perceptions of marketing messages).
- have access to digital media platforms (e.g., social media, online advertisements, etc.).
- voluntarily consent to participate and provide open-ended feedback on selected ARNG advertisements.

This study was conducted in a virtual setting, allowing participants to complete the survey from their homes, workplaces, or any other location of their choice. This flexible approach enabled participants to engage with ARNG marketing materials in familiar and natural environments that mirror how they typically encounter digital content. Because ARNG advertisements are primarily distributed through online platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as other social media channels, a virtual research environment accurately reflected the real-world context in which the target audience interacts with these messages.

The virtual setting is appropriate given the study's problem and purpose, which focused on understanding how ARNG marketing messages connect with the 18–34-year-old target market in the digital age. Conducting the research online allowed for a geographically diverse sample and offered participants the convenience of participating without restrictions of time or place. This design ensured authentic responses by allowing participants to evaluate digital advertisements in a naturalistic media context, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings within the AIDA framework, which encompasses attention, interest, desire, and action.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument for this study was a researcher-developed qualitative survey administered through SurveyMonkey®. This online data collection platform allowed participants to securely and conveniently complete the survey from any location. The survey included a combination of digital ARNG marketing materials, consisting of photography, marketing creatives, and video advertisements, embedded directly within the survey. Participants viewed these materials and responded to a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended items gathered basic demographic information and measured initial reactions to each advertisement. At the same time, the open-ended questions invited participants to describe

in detail how each advertisement captured their attention, sustained interest, created desire, and motivated action in accordance with the AIDA model framework.

The use of SurveyMonkey® ensured data integrity and accessibility while maintaining participant anonymity. Because the instrument is researcher-designed, questions were developed to elicit rich, descriptive feedback consistent with QCA. Upon completion of all surveys, the data was imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program used to organize, code, and identify patterns or themes. NVivo's capabilities in text analysis and thematic mapping supported the reliability and transparency of the directed QCA process by enabling systematic coding aligned with the theoretical constructs of the AIDA model. This approach ensured methodological rigor and enhanced the validity of the findings by revealing deeper meanings and relationships within participants' responses.

Study Procedures

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of human subjects and adherence to ethical research standards (see Appendix B). Once IRB approval was granted, the researcher began recruiting participants through social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook). The recruitment message included a brief description of the study, eligibility criteria, and a link to the online survey. When participants accessed the survey link, they first viewed an electronic informed consent form that explained the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were required to electronically acknowledge their consent before proceeding to the survey.

Data was collected through a SurveyMonkey® questionnaire designed and administered by the researcher. The survey included both open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended

questions collected basic demographic information, such as age and gender, and minimal AIDA-related questions about selected ARNG marketing content. The open-ended questions elicited detailed responses about participants' perceptions of ARNG marketing advertisements.

Participants reviewed a selection of digital marketing creatives and video advertisements embedded within the survey. Each participant evaluated the ads and provided narrative feedback describing how the messages captured attention, maintained interest, aroused desire, and motivated action, using the AIDA model. Participants were able to complete the survey at their convenience from home, workplace, or any other preferred location. The entire process was expected to take approximately 30 minutes.

Upon completion of the surveys, all responses were exported from SurveyMonkey® into NVivo qualitative analysis software for data organization, coding, and analysis. A directed QCA approach was applied, beginning with predetermined codes based on the four stages of the AIDA model: *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. Additional subthemes that emerged during analysis were identified inductively to enrich understanding. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher maintained an audit trail to document decisions made during data collection and analysis, ensured reflexivity by bracketing personal biases, and used participant voice through direct quotations to support transparency and credibility. All data was securely stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. Files will be retained for 3 years after the study's completion before being permanently deleted.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research methods, including content analysis, interviews, and focus groups, predominate in information behavior research (Chu & Ke, 2017). The data collected from the open-ended survey responses were analyzed using a directed QCA approach, supported by

NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Directed QCA was suitable for this study because the AIDA model, an existing theoretical framework, guided it and provided predetermined coding categories: *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. These categories directly aligned with the research questions and the study's purpose of exploring how ARNG marketing messages engage the 18–34-year-old target market throughout each stage of the communication and persuasion process.

Once the survey data were exported from SurveyMonkey® into NVivo, the researcher began the data preparation process by reviewing each participant's responses for completeness and clarity. The data was then organized and segmented into meaningful text units related to the AIDA constructs. During the initial coding phase, the researcher applied a deductive coding structure based on the four predefined AIDA categories. Deductive coding begins with a predetermined organizational framework that guides the coding process (Bradley et al., 2007). The researcher first developed an initial set of codes based on established concepts or theoretical constructs before conducting a detailed, line-by-line review of the data. These preliminary codes enabled the integration of ideas and patterns well documented in the existing literature or theory. This "start list" enabled new inquiries to benefit from and build upon previous insights.

Within each main category, subthemes were inductively identified to capture nuances and emerging patterns not directly anticipated by the theoretical framework. For example, participant comments about visual appeal may align with the concept of "attention," while emotional or value-based reactions may represent emergent subthemes within the concept of "desire." The iterative coding process continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new categories or significant themes emerged from the data. NVivo was used to facilitate this process by enabling

systematic organization, frequency visualization, and cross-referencing of codes, ensuring accuracy and consistency in theme development.

The findings were presented in a narrative format, supported by participant quotations that illustrate key patterns and relationships. Each research question was addressed through its corresponding AIDA category to ensure alignment between the analysis and the study objectives. This process allowed the data to directly answer the research questions: (1) How military marketing messages capture the *attention* of the military's target market in the digital age, and what factors influence their initial engagement, (2) what elements of military marketing messages generate *interest* and *desire* among the military's target market, and how they help decrease the knowledge gap between the military and its target audience, and (3) how digital media platforms influence the transition from *interest* and *desire* to *action* in the military marketing funnel, and what messaging strategies most effectively encourage their target market to engage with call-to-action prompts.

The role of the researcher in ensuring the ethical integrity and trustworthiness of the data analysis process is central. Transferability was achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the participants and context (Richards & Hemphill, 2018), enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings. Confirmability was maintained by bracketing personal biases and engaging in reflective journaling throughout the analysis, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the data rather than the researcher's assumptions. To enhance credibility, the researcher used direct participant quotations and detailed audit trails to demonstrate transparency in the interpretation of results. Dependability was supported through consistent documentation of coding decisions and procedures, ensuring the study can be replicated under similar conditions. Together, these strategies ensured that the data analysis

process maintained ethical rigor, analytic transparency, and alignment with the study's purpose and research questions.

Assumptions

Every research study operates under certain assumptions that are accepted as true to ensure the study is valid and meaningful. In qualitative research, assumptions are the foundational beliefs or conditions that the researcher presumes to be accurate, even though they cannot be empirically verified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Recognizing these assumptions promotes transparency and strengthens the credibility of the research process. For this study, several assumptions were necessary for the successful execution of the research design, data collection, and analysis. These include expectations about participant honesty and understanding, the appropriateness of the AIDA model as the guiding framework, the authenticity of ARNG marketing materials, the reliability of SurveyMonkey® and NVivo software, and the researcher's ability to maintain objectivity throughout the study.

Limitations

All research studies have inherent limitations, conditions, or constraints that may affect the interpretation, credibility, or generalizability of findings. In qualitative inquiry, limitations are understood as “weaknesses within a research design that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research” (Ross & Zaidi, 2019, p. 261). Acknowledging them promotes transparency and helps readers understand the context in which the results should be interpreted.

This qualitative descriptive study, which employed a directed QCA approach, was subject to several limitations relevant to trustworthiness. First, the sample size and representativeness may limit transferability, as the study included only 20 participants (13 males and 7 females across two age groups), limiting the extent to which the findings can be

generalized to the broader ARNG target population. Second, because the study relied on self-reported responses, there was potential for response bias (e.g., social desirability and differences in interpreting questions) that could affect the authenticity of participants' reflections. Third, participants completed surveys independently at their own locations (e.g., home, work), introducing environmental variance (e.g., distractions, different display screens, timing) that may have altered how the advertisements are viewed or understood. Fourth, researcher subjectivity in coding and theme selection posed a limitation: personal perspectives or prior experience with military marketing may have influenced how data was interpreted. Fifth, the scope of materials was constrained: focusing exclusively on ARNG digital advertisements limits the applicability of results to other branches, non-digital media, or marketing strategies beyond the selected ads.

To mitigate these limitations and bolster trustworthiness, several strategies were implemented. To enhance credibility, participants were encouraged to provide rich, detailed responses, and findings were illustrated using direct quotations that anchor interpretations in the participants' voices (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Dependability was supported through a detailed audit trail that documented coding decisions, ensured consistent code application in NVivo, and facilitated periodic reflexive reviews of coding consistency. The researcher engaged in reflexivity and journaling to acknowledge and bracket biases during analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed, contextual descriptions of participant demographics, settings, and advertisement materials, allowing readers to assess their relevance to other contexts. Confirmability was reinforced by explicitly linking analytic claims to participant data and by being transparent about interpretive decisions. While these steps could not eliminate all limitations, they reduced undue influence and enhanced the study's integrity.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries or scope that the researcher intentionally imposes on a study to make it manageable and focused (Coker, 2022). Unlike limitations (which are constraints beyond the researcher's control), delimitations reflect the choices made about what to include or exclude from the inquiry. Coker (2022) describes delimitations as researcher-defined boundaries that help clarify the internal and external scope of the study, ensuring the research remains aligned with its focus and research questions.

For this dissertation, the following delimitations were applied, each with an underlying rationale:

Rather than examining marketing materials across all U.S. military branches, this study restricted its scope to advertisements from the ARNG. This delimitation ensured the depth of analysis and relevance to professional interests and domains, while avoiding dilution across too many organizational contexts. It aligned with the problem statement and purpose, which emphasize how ARNG messaging engages its target market under the digital regime.

Non-digital, print, or broadcast media were excluded. The RQs specifically target how military marketing works *in the digital age*, and how digital platforms mediate *attention, interest, desire, and action*. Excluding non-digital formats helped maintain consistency in the study and avoided confounding variables introduced by different media types.

This delimitation constrained the sample demographic to the population most relevant to ARNG recruitment efforts. It also allowed for exploring possible age or gender differences, while keeping the sample manageable for qualitative depth and richness. It is justified by the purpose of examining how its core target market perceives ARNG messaging.

Excluding more interactive methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups) streamlined data collection and ensured consistency across all participants. This decision maintained comparability across responses and kept the methodology aligned with the directed QCA approach.

The study did not include longitudinal follow-up or repeated measures. This delimitation means that the researcher analyzed participants' perceptions at a single point in time, rather than examining how perceptions change over time. The decision kept the study feasible within the timeframe and resource constraints.

Each of these delimitations was purposefully tied to the AIDA framework, research questions, problem statement, and purpose statement. By delimiting the analysis to ARNG and digital ads, the researcher ensured it remained tightly aligned with how the ARNG seeks to engage the 18–34 demographic through digital communications. The methodological delimitations (survey rather than interviews, cross-sectional rather than longitudinal) maintain internal consistency and feasibility, which are critical in a qualitative descriptive, directed QCA design. While these boundaries limited the study's applicability beyond ARNG digital messaging and broader populations, they sharpened the study's focus, facilitated deeper insight, and made practical execution more realistic.

Ethical Assurances

This study adhered to the IRB's ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality (Knotek et al., 2022). This study received approval from the National University's IRB before data collection (see Appendix B). Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time. Responses were anonymized, and all data was securely stored on an encrypted and password-protected computer

accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained for three years following completion of the study, after which, all digital documents will be permanently deleted using secure file-erasure methods. The study aligned with the principles of the Belmont Report, specifically respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

As the principal investigator, the researcher's role in this study was to design, implement, and analyze the research in a manner that upheld ethical integrity, methodological rigor, and participant confidentiality. The researcher was responsible for developing the survey instrument, recruiting participants, ensuring informed consent, securely managing the data, conducting the analysis, and presenting the findings.

The researcher brought both personal and professional experiences to this study, which may have both strengthened and introduced potential biases. As a marketing professional with over 15 years of experience, including extensive work in military marketing and communications, the researcher has first-hand knowledge of the challenges associated with military recruitment messaging and audience engagement. The researcher's professional expertise equips him with a deep understanding of the marketing environment, its theoretical foundations, and the practical applications of the AIDA model. However, this background may also have predisposed him to interpret participant responses through the lens of his prior experiences, potentially influencing how themes were identified or framed.

Additionally, the researcher's service as a veteran and involvement with military organizations could have unintentionally led him to favor more favorable or sympathetic interpretations of military marketing strategies. Recognizing this dual role as both a scholar and practitioner was essential for maintaining credibility and ensuring that findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's own assumptions.

To minimize bias, several strategies were employed. First, the researcher designed the survey questions to be neutral and open-ended, avoiding language that could lead respondents to give desired responses. Second, he maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to document his thoughts, assumptions, and decisions, helping him remain self-aware of potential biases. Third, he employed systematic and transparent thematic coding procedures, relying on established qualitative analysis methods to ensure consistency and reliability. Peer debriefing with colleagues and committee members was also used to validate interpretations and challenge assumptions. Finally, participant responses were presented using direct quotations, ensuring that their voices, rather than the researcher's interpretations alone, drove the findings.

By acknowledging the researcher's background and employing these strategies, the researcher aimed to balance his professional expertise with the objectivity required to produce valid, reliable, and trustworthy research outcomes.

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the methodological blueprint guiding this qualitative descriptive study. The chapter justified the use of directed QCA, anchored in the AIDA framework, as the organizing lens for analysis. It specified the population and purposive sample (20 non-prior-service participants aged 18–34). It described the virtual research setting in which participants would complete an online survey in naturalistic settings (at home, at work, or at a location of their choice). The instrumentation and materials include a researcher-developed SurveyMonkey® survey featuring ARNG digital advertisements (photos, creatives, and videos) and a mix of closed-ended items (demographics, initial reactions) and open-ended prompts that elicit AIDA-aligned perceptions. Study procedures outlined included IRB approval, electronic consent, recruitment, survey administration, and secure data handling. The data analysis plan

describes importing responses into NVivo, applying deductive codes derived from AIDA, allowing inductive subthemes to emerge iteratively until saturation is reached, and reporting findings with illustrative quotations.

The chapter also addressed trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability) through an audit trail, reflexive journaling, consistent coding in NVivo, thick description, and use of participant voice. It articulated core assumptions (e.g., participant honesty, appropriateness of AIDA, authenticity of materials), acknowledged limitations (e.g., small purposive sample, self-report and environmental variance, researcher subjectivity, ARNG-only scope), and justified delimitations (ARNG digital ads; surveys rather than interviews; cross-sectional design; 18–34 demographic). Finally, ethical assurances were provided to confirm IRB approval, informed consent, confidentiality, secure storage, and data retention protocols.

Together, these elements establish a coherent, rigorous design that aligns the research problem and purpose with the procedures and analyses needed to answer the study's RQs. Chapter 4 now presents the results, organizing the findings by the AIDA constructs and addressing each RQ - how ARNG messages capture attention, build interest and desire, and ultimately prompt action - supported by representative participant quotations and theme summaries.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem to be addressed in this qualitative descriptive study is that the military struggles to connect with its target market and maintain audiences due to the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). The purpose of this study is to use qualitative content analysis (QCA) to explore how military marketing messages capture *attention*, generate *interest* and *desire*, and drive *action* among their target market in the digital age by using the AIDA model (Hassan et al., 2015, p. 8) as a framework.

This chapter presents the findings derived from the survey data collected from participants aged 18 to 34, the military's primary recruitment audience. The results are organized by research question and structured according to the AIDA model's cognitive, affective, and conative stages. Qualitative findings are presented alongside descriptive numeric summaries from structured survey items to provide contextual clarity regarding patterns and distributions of participants' responses to military marketing messages across multiple digital advertisements. The chapter focuses on objectively reporting patterns, distributions, and participant responses relevant to attention, interest and desire, action, and changes in baseline knowledge, without interpretation or speculation.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the data in this qualitative descriptive study was established through the systematic application of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. These criteria were used to ensure that the findings accurately reflect participant responses, are methodologically sound, and can be evaluated and replicated by future researchers. The study analyzed participant responses to military marketing stimuli using a

directed QCA approach grounded in the AIDA framework. Results are organized by research question and reported objectively and without interpretation.

Credibility

Credibility was established through methodological rigor and transparency in data collection and analysis. Although the study initially aimed for equal gender distribution, participant recruitment and survey completion rates resulted in a higher proportion of female respondents (13 females and 7 males). All completed responses were retained to preserve data integrity and avoid introducing selection bias through post hoc exclusion. Data were collected using a standardized survey instrument (SurveyMonkey.com®), ensuring consistent exposure to stimuli and uniform questioning across all participants. Responses were analyzed using a structured coding process aligned with predefined AIDA constructs, reducing subjectivity in categorization and enhancing the accuracy of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by providing a clear description of the study context, participant characteristics, and research procedures. Participants were drawn from the defined target market age range of 18 to 34, consistent with the military's primary recruitment demographic. While the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, the detailed documentation of the sample, stimuli, and analytic framework allows readers to assess the applicability of the results to similar military or government marketing contexts, particularly those focused on digital advertising and audience engagement among young adults.

Dependability

Dependability was ensured through a transparent and replicable research design. The study employed a qualitative descriptive methodology with directed QCA, using the AIDA

model as the guiding framework. Data collection procedures, participant recruitment criteria, survey instruments, and coding protocols were thoroughly documented. This systematic approach enables future researchers to replicate the study using the same methodology, instruments, and analytical structure, thereby supporting consistency and reliability of the research process over time.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established by minimizing researcher bias and ensuring that findings were derived directly from participant responses. The use of predefined AIDA categories reduced interpretive drift and limited subjective influence during analysis. All coding decisions were grounded in the data and supported by verbatim participant responses. No modifications were made to the data set based on participant demographics or response patterns. Additionally, analytic decisions were documented throughout the process, creating an audit trail that allows external reviewers to trace findings back to the original data and verify that conclusions were data-driven rather than influenced by the researcher.

Results

Overview of the Study

This study used a sample size of 20 participants who were exposed to a set of 20 ARNG marketing advertisements designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the messages. Participants viewed multiple advertisements representing different creative approaches and messaging styles commonly used in ARNG marketing. A qualitative descriptive design was employed using structured survey items and open-ended responses to capture both measurable changes in participant perceptions and deeper insights into audience reactions. Descriptive numeric summaries from closed-ended items were used to provide contextual clarity and support

structured comparison of responses, while open-ended responses were analyzed using directed QCA to capture deeper insights into audience perceptions. Data collection included pre- and post-assessments to examine changes in awareness, attitudes, and intent, without inferential statistical testing, before and after exposure to the advertisements, enabling a structured comparison of responses across the two measurement points. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the following table to provide contextual background for the dataset, while ensuring that no personally identifiable information is disclosed.

Participant Demographics

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n=20)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	13	65
	Male	7	35
Age Group	18-24	10	50
	25-34	10	50
Military Status	Non-Prior Service	20	100

Note: All participants identified as non-prior-service individuals between the ages of 18 and 34.

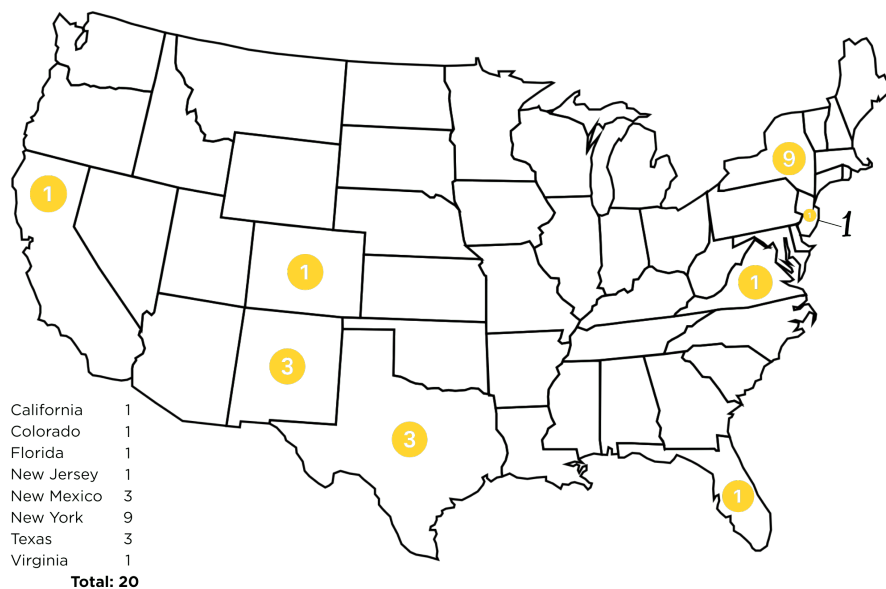
Current State Residing in:

Participants were recruited from various parts of the U.S., and the following figure illustrates their geographic distribution. This demographic information is provided to contextualize the sample by highlighting the regional diversity of participant locations. The

figure is presented descriptively to demonstrate the breadth of geographic representation within the study while ensuring that no personally identifying information is disclosed.

Figure 5

Geographic Locations of Study Participants (n=20)



Frequency of Daily Social Media Access

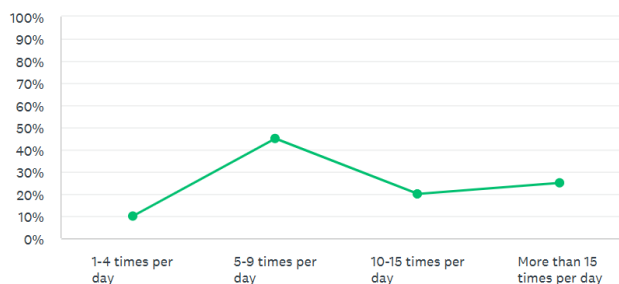
The following figure presents an overview of participants' self-reported frequency of daily social media access. This demographic information was collected to contextualize the sample's digital media habits and provide background on participants' typical engagement with social media platforms. The data are reported descriptively to illustrate the distribution of responses across access frequency categories, without interpretation or analysis.

Figure 6

Frequency of Daily Social Media Access Among Participants (n = 20)

How many times do you typically access or check social media in a single day?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ 1-4 times per day	10.00%	2
▼ 5-9 times per day	45.00%	9
▼ 10-15 times per day	20.00%	4
▼ More than 15 times per day	25.00%	5
TOTAL		20

Note. Image copied from survey results from SurveyMonkey.com®.

AIDA-Based Categorization of Participant Responses

Table 2 presents the categorization of participant responses aligned with the AIDA framework, specifically focusing on creating awareness of the ARNG, generating interest and desire in the ARNG, and motivating action to learn more about the ARNG (e.g., visiting a website or contacting a recruiter). The table summarizes the frequency and percentage of responses within each category as identified through directed QCA. The data are reported descriptively to document the distribution of responses across the three AIDA-related outcome areas without interpretation.

Table 2*AIDA-Based Categorization of Participant Responses*

Advertisement Focus Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Creating Awareness of the ARNG	97	24
Generating Interest & Desire in the ARNG	169	42
Motivating Action to learn more (e.g., visiting a website or contacting a recruiter)	134	34
Total	400	100%

Research Question 1

How do military marketing messages capture the attention of the military’s target market in the digital age, and what factors influence their initial engagement?

After being shown the marketing stimuli, participants were asked to respond to the statement, “*This advertisement captured my attention and made me consciously think about its message.*” This question was administered consistently following exposure to each advertisement to assess immediate attention-related responses. Table 2 reflects the aggregated participant responses across all advertisements.

Table 3

Attention Responses to Advertisements (“This advertisement captured my attention and made me consciously think about its message.”)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	51	13
Agree	139	35
Neither Agree nor Disagree	102	26
Disagree	55	14
Strongly Disagree	53	13
Total	400	100%

Note. Frequencies represent aggregated responses across all advertisements.

This question asked respondents to indicate whether the advertisements captured their attention and prompted them to consider the message consciously. When responses were aggregated across all advertisements, 48% (190) agreed or strongly agreed, while 26% (102) indicated neither agreement nor disagreement. The remaining 27% (108) reflected disagreement or strong disagreement.

Data Analysis Procedures. Qualitative responses related to attention were reviewed in their entirety and grouped based on content similarity. Responses were categorized into descriptive groupings reflecting common elements cited by participants. Verbatim statements were retained to preserve participant voice and ensure confirmability.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, closed-ended survey items associated with attention were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For each marketing stimulus, the respondents were asked to select “strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly

agree” with the following statement: *“This advertisement captured my attention and made me consciously think about its message.”* Responses to the Likert scale item assessing whether the advertisement captured attention and prompted conscious cognitive engagement were summarized using frequencies and percentages. These descriptive numeric summaries were used to document the distribution of participant responses across agreement levels and to provide context for overall attention patterns. No inferential statistical tests were conducted, and the numeric data were not used to examine relationships, predict outcomes, or test hypotheses. The descriptive statistics served solely as a supplementary representation of participant perceptions and did not alter the qualitative descriptive nature of the analysis.

Attention Drivers. This question asked respondents to identify specific elements of the advertisements that captured their attention or caused them to pause and think about the message. This question was administered multiple times across multiple advertisements, generating a substantial number of open-ended responses. The statements below represent a selection of responses, grouped descriptively to reflect the range of actions and intentions reported.

Note. All survey responses, as presented hereinafter, were pasted verbatim; however, any improper spelling was corrected. All references to “Army National Guard, National Guard, or the Guard” were replaced with “ARNG.”

Relatability and Everyday Life. “That anyone in the ARNG can still have a job or go to school while being in the ARNG”; “How they can balance their life outside of the military”; “the fact that it highlights that you can still have a ‘normal’ civilian life while still serving”; “The work life balance.”

Generational Targeting. “It targeted Gen Z and what they could do and become.”; “Maybe that it is aimed specifically at Gen Z.”; “The advertisement started by saying people think Gen Z is struggling...”

Personal Stories and Firsthand Accounts. “The first-hand accounts from people my age.”; “The ways the people spoke candidly about their experiences.”; “The stories of the different individuals and what they do for the ARNG.”; “Each person outlining their standard lives and the impact they make to the greater community.”

Visual and Message Elements. “The headline grabbed my attention.”; “The actions that each person put into being a part of the ARNG.”; “The picture caught my eye.”; “Specific accomplishments in ARNG.”

Limited or No Attention. “Yes”; “N/A.”

Research Question 2

What elements of military marketing messages generate interest and desire among the military’s target market, and how do they help decrease the knowledge gap between the military and its target audience?

After being shown the marketing stimuli, participants were asked to respond to the statement, “*This advertisement evoked an emotional response that made me feel interested in, and created a desire for, the Army National Guard.*” This question was administered consistently following exposure to each advertisement to assess emotional engagement and interest-related responses. Table 3 reflects the aggregated participant responses across all advertisements.

Table 4

Interest & Desire Responses to Advertisements (“This advertisement evoked an emotional response that made me feel interested in, and created a desire for, the Army National Guard.”)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	36	9
Agree	110	25
Neither Agree nor Disagree	111	28
Disagree	80	20
Strongly Disagree	63	16
Total	400	100%

Note. Frequencies represent aggregated responses across all advertisements.

This question asked respondents to indicate whether the advertisements evoked an emotional response that made them feel interested in, and created a desire for, the ARNG. Overall, 34% (146) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 28% (111) neither agreed nor disagreed. The remaining 36% (143) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

This question asked respondents to describe the emotions or feelings evoked by the advertisements and how those emotions influenced their level of interest or desire toward the ARNG. This question was administered multiple times across multiple advertisements, generating a substantial number of open-ended responses. The statements below represent a selection of participant responses, grouped descriptively to reflect the range of actions and intentions reported.

Data Analysis Procedures. Qualitative responses related to *interest* and *desire* were reviewed and grouped based on similarities in emotional tone. The influence of these responses on interest was then described. Responses were organized into descriptive categories to reflect common patterns, and verbatim statements were retained to preserve the participants' voices.

Closed-ended survey items related to interest and desire were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. For each marketing stimulus, the respondents were asked to select “strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree” with the following statement: *“This advertisement evoked an emotional response that made me feel interested in, and created a desire for, the Army National Guard.”* Likert-scale responses measuring emotional engagement, interest, and desire generated by the advertisement were summarized using frequencies and percentages to illustrate response trends across participants. These numeric summaries were used to support transparency in reporting participant reactions and to complement the qualitative thematic findings. No inferential analyses were performed, and the numeric data were not employed to explain or predict participant behavior. The primary analytic emphasis remained qualitative, with descriptive statistics used only to contextualize patterns observed within the qualitative responses.

Positive or Motivational Responses. “Encouragement, strong, this influences me because to gave me confidence to want to look more into how to be apart”; “Positive feelings, slight increase to level of interest/desire towards the ARNG - sense of being part of something bigger.”; “I felt, again, inspired by the leadership each of these people took. Whether it was small or big.”; “Pride, this is our future”; “My feelings that were evoked by this ad influenced my interest toward the ARNG by making me consider maybe joining.”

Pride, Patriotism, and Appreciation. “I felt proud, but my interest didn’t change much.”; “It made me feel happy for those enlisted in the ARNG if they feel happy. I’m happy for anyone living their purpose. No added interest.”; “They made me feel patriotic but I still would not join the ARNG.”; “May me feel glad that there are Gen Z's that are doing good work, but not enough to have me wanting to be part of it.”

Curiosity or Reflection. “Curiosity to learn more on how people are involved with ARNG while still being in school/working.”; “Realization.”; “Reflection.”

Neutral or No Emotional Impact. “No emotion, and no interest or desire.”; “No emotions were really evoked for me.”; “Did not evoke any emotion or influence regarding my interest in the ARNG.”; “Not many emotions. I have never been interested in an ARNG so it didn’t influence any kind of interest.”; “N/A”; “Yes.”

Negative Emotional Response. “This pissed me off.”

Pre-Assessment Knowledge. Table 4 presents participants’ pre-assessment knowledge of the ARNG before exposure to the advertising stimuli. This table summarizes the self-reported baseline levels of familiarity and understanding, providing contextual background for subsequent comparisons with post-assessment results. The data are reported descriptively to document participants’ initial knowledge of the ARNG before viewing the advertisements.

Table 5*Pre-Assessment Knowledge of the ARNG (n=20)*

Knowledge Item	Correct Answer	Correct n (%)	Incorrect n (%)	Unknown n (%)
ARNG obligation type	Part-time	3 (15%)	12 (60%)	5 (25%)
ARNG is part of the U.S. military	True	14 (70%)	1 (5%)	5 (25%)
ARNG and Army Reserve are the same	False	4 (20%)	8 (40%)	8 (40%)
ARNG and ANG same department	False	8 (40%)	5 (25%)	7 (35%)
ARNG offers educational benefits	True	16 (80%)	0 (0%)	4 (20%)
ARNG offers medical benefits	True	17 (85%)	1 (5%)	2 (10%)
ARNG offers hiring bonuses	True	16 (80%)	0 (0%)	4 (20%)
ARNG service compensation	Paid Service	17 (85%)	0 (0%)	3 (15%)
ARNG time counts toward retirement	True	2 (10%)	8 (40%)	10 (50%)

Note. Table 4 presents participants' knowledge of the ARNG before exposure to the advertising stimuli.

Post-Assessment Knowledge. Table 5 presents participants' post-assessment knowledge of the ARNG following exposure to the advertising stimuli. This table summarizes self-reported levels of familiarity and understanding after viewing the advertisements and is provided to support comparison with pre-assessment results. The data are reported descriptively to document participants' knowledge of the ARNG after exposure to the ad, without interpretation or analysis.

Table 6*Post-Assessment Knowledge of the ARNG (n=20)*

Knowledge Item	Correct Answer	Correct n (%)	Incorrect n (%)	Unknown n (%)
ARNG obligation type	Part-time	14 (70%)	5 (25%)	1 (5%)
ARNG is part of the U.S. military	True	14 (70%)	2 (10%)	4 (20%)
ARNG and Army Reserve are the same	False	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	9 (45%)
ARNG and ANG same department	False	3 (15%)	9 (45%)	8 (40%)
ARNG offers educational benefits	True	18 (90%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)
ARNG offers medical benefits	True	18 (90%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)
ARNG offers hiring bonuses	True	11 (55%)	2 (10%)	7 (35%)
ARNG service compensation	Paid Service	17 (85%)	1 (5%)	2 (10%)
ARNG time counts toward retirement	True	4 (20%)	7 (35%)	9 (45%)

Note. Table 5 presents participant knowledge of the ARNG after exposure to the advertising stimuli.

Pre- and Post-Assessment Comparison. Table 6 presents a comparison of participants' pre- and post-assessment knowledge of the ARNG. This table summarizes changes in self-reported knowledge levels before and after exposure to the advertising stimuli, providing a descriptive illustration of the differences observed across the two assessment points. The results are reported objectively without interpretation.

Table 7*Comparison of Pre- and Post-Assessment Knowledge Results*

Knowledge Item	Pre-Correct (%)	Post-Correct (%)	Direction of Change
ARNG obligation type	15%	70%	Increase
ARNG is part of the U.S. military	70%	70%	No Change
ARNG and Army Reserve are the same	20%	25%	Increase
ARNG and ANG same department	40%	15%	Decrease
ARNG offers educational benefits	80%	90%	Increase
ARNG offers medical benefits	85%	90%	Increase
ARNG offers hiring bonuses	80%	55%	Decrease
ARNG service compensation	85%	85%	No Change
ARNG time counts toward retirement	10%	20%	Increase

Note. Table 6 summarizes changes in correct responses between pre- and post-assessment knowledge measures.

This section examined participant knowledge of the ARNG before and after exposure to the advertising stimuli. Table 4 presents pre-assessment knowledge results across nine knowledge items, while Table 5 presents post-assessment knowledge results across the same nine items. Table 6 summarizes the changes in correct responses between the pre- and post-assessments. Across the knowledge items, some showed increases in correct responses following exposure to the advertisements, while others showed no change or a decrease.

Research Question 3

How do digital media platforms influence the transition from interest and desire to action in the military marketing funnel, and what messaging strategies most effectively encourage their target market to engage with call-to-action prompts (e.g., clicking a hyperlink to the website or calling the “800” number)?

After being shown the marketing stimuli, participants were asked to respond to the statement, “*This advertisement motivated me to take action, such as seeking more information or considering involvement with the Army National Guard.*” This question was administered consistently following exposure to each advertisement to assess action-oriented responses. Table 7 reflects the aggregated participant responses across all advertisements.

Table 8

Action Responses to Advertisements (“This advertisement motivated me to take action, such as seeking more information or considering involvement with the Army National Guard”)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	45	11
Agree	130	33
Neither Agree nor Disagree	100	25
Disagree	80	20
Strongly Disagree	45	11
Total	400	100%

Note. Frequencies represent aggregated responses across all advertisements.

This question asked respondents to indicate whether the advertisements motivated them to take action, such as seeking additional information or considering involvement with the ARNG. When responses were aggregated across all advertisements, 44% (175) indicated agreement or strong agreement, 25% (100) indicated neither agreement nor disagreement, and 31% (125) stated disagreement or strong disagreement.

Data Analysis Procedures. Qualitative responses related to *action* were reviewed and organized based on similarities in the described next steps or the lack thereof. Responses were

grouped into descriptive categories to improve readability, while preserving original wording to maintain participant voice and ensure confirmability.

Action and Behavioral Intent. This question asked respondents to describe what, if anything, the advertisement motivated them to do next. This question was administered multiple times across multiple advertisements, generating a substantial number of open-ended responses. The statements below represent a selection of participant responses, grouped descriptively to reflect the range of actions and intentions reported.

Seeking Additional Information or Research. “Strike an interest to want to find more information about what’s going on and how it could apply to me”; “Learn about level of involvement required by ARNG and general opportunities”; “To do more research.”; “Look up ARNG benefits”; “Research the ARNG”; “Possibly find out more of what this branch would be like”; “Look up the ARNG”; “Research more about the ARNG and how it helps our country historically and now.”

Reflection, Self-Improvement, or Personal Motivation. “Go and change something in my life”; “Keep on doing better for myself.”; “Apply myself”; “Reflect on my future”; “It motivated me to look in to doing something with my future that will make a difference.”; “To try my best to help people in need any chance I get.”

Considering Military or Recruitment-Related Actions. “If I was inclined towards a job, I would seek out a recruiter”; “Ask my parent what the ARNG does.”; “Look into joining the ARNG”; “Share this as a possible avenue for family that is looking into serving.”

Sharing, Advocacy, or Appreciation. “To spread the word.”; “Spread the word”; “Appreciate those who join.”

No Action or Negative Reaction. “Nothing”; “Truly nothing.”; “Not sure”; “N/A”; “Skip it or go back to whatever I was doing before.”; “Since I have strong feelings about not joining the ARNG, it didn’t motivate me to do anything next.”; “Literally report it on YouTube for false advertising. Anyone within earshot of me would hear me complain about how the American military goes after the most vulnerable populations.”

Minimal or Non-Substantive Responses. “Yes”; “N/A.”

Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

This section compares the study's findings with the existing research and theoretical framework presented in Chapters 1 and 2. The results are examined in relation to the cognitive, affective, and conative stages of the AIDA model, which guided the study's design and analysis.

Research Question 1

How do military marketing messages capture the attention of the military’s target market in the digital age, and what factors influence their initial engagement?

The findings related to RQ1 are consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, which pertains to the *cognitive* stage of the AIDA model, emphasizing attention and awareness as prerequisites for subsequent engagement. Prior research highlighted that digital audiences operate within an attention-saturated environment, requiring marketing messages to break through cognitive filtering mechanisms by leveraging relevance, relatability, and visual salience (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023; Romero-Jara et al., 2023).

The quantitative results indicated that a substantial portion of aggregated responses reflected agreement that the advertisements captured attention and prompted conscious consideration of their messages. This aligns with the cognitive processing framework discussed in Chapter 2, which emphasized that attention is achieved when messaging resonates with

existing mental schemas and perceived personal relevance (Hassan et al., 2015; Romero-Jara et al., 2023). The qualitative findings further reflected cognitive engagement drivers identified in the literature, including generational framing, relatable life contexts, first-hand narratives, and visually prominent elements. Collectively, these findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that digital military marketing messages must first achieve cognitive recognition before advancing individuals further along the marketing funnel.

Research Question 2

What elements of military marketing messages generate interest and desire among the military's target market, and how do they help decrease the knowledge gap between the military and its target audience?

The findings associated with RQ2 align with existing research addressing the *affective* stage of the AIDA model, which focuses on emotional engagement, *interest* formation, and *desire* creation (Hassan et al., 2015). Chapter 2 emphasized that affective responses are critical in sustaining attention and encouraging deeper processing, particularly among younger digital audiences who evaluate messaging through emotional resonance and perceived authenticity.

Quantitative results showed that a significant proportion of responses reflected emotional engagement associated with interest and desire, while others remained neutral or negative. This distribution aligns with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, which acknowledges that affective responses to military messaging are not uniform and are influenced by prior attitudes, values, and levels of institutional trust (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023; Romero-Jara et al., 2023). The qualitative findings further revealed affective responses such as inspiration, pride, curiosity, and reflection, consistent with research emphasizing the role of emotion in motivating sustained engagement.

The pre- and post-assessment knowledge results also relate to the affective stage by illustrating how emotional engagement may support, but does not guarantee, knowledge acquisition. Prior literature identified a persistent knowledge gap between the military and its civilian target audience. The observed increases in correct responses for several knowledge items following exposure to the advertisements are consistent with research suggesting that affectively engaging messages can enhance awareness and understanding. At the same time, items that showed no change or decreased accuracy align with the literature, indicating that emotionally driven messaging alone may be insufficient to clarify complex or counterintuitive information.

The observed increases in correct responses across several knowledge items occurred after only a single exposure to each advertisement. This outcome is consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 on Effective Frequency Theory, which posits that consumers often require multiple exposures to marketing messages to progress through the marketing funnel fully. Prior research has emphasized that repeated exposure facilitates information processing and supports the transition from initial awareness to a deeper understanding, particularly when messages involve complex or unfamiliar subject matter (Schmidt & Eisend, 2015).

As noted in the literature, there is no fixed number of exposures required to achieve optimal effectiveness, as effective frequency is influenced by factors such as brand familiarity, message complexity, and message novelty (Tellis, 1997). In the context of military marketing, where baseline familiarity and message complexity may vary among target audiences, the limited exposure used in this study provides a useful point of comparison to prior research. The modest yet observable increases in knowledge following a single exposure are consistent with existing theory, suggesting that strategically repeated exposure may yield higher levels of

efficacy in facilitating understanding and movement through the affective stage of the AIDA model.

Research Question 3

How do digital media platforms influence the transition from interest and desire to action in the military marketing funnel, and what messaging strategies most effectively encourage their target market to engage with call-to-action prompts?

The findings for RQ3 align with the *conative* stage of the AIDA model, which emphasizes behavioral intent and action. Chapter 2 highlighted that while digital marketing messages may successfully capture attention and generate emotional engagement, motivating concrete action often presents the greatest challenge within the marketing funnel (Hassan et al., 2015; Ormen & Gregersen, 2023).

Quantitative results indicated that although some respondents reported motivation to take action, a substantial portion of responses reflected neutrality or disagreement. This pattern is consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2, which identified structural, attitudinal, and contextual barriers that can inhibit the transition from interest to action in digital environments. The qualitative findings further reflected a range of conative outcomes, including information seeking, reflection, conditional interest, and resistance to recruitment-oriented calls to action. These responses align with existing research, which emphasizes that conative behavior is influenced by perceived personal relevance, readiness, and alignment with individual life goals.

Overall, the results for RQ3 support prior research indicating that while digital platforms are effective for awareness and engagement, motivating action requires messaging strategies that address both cognitive understanding and affective alignment, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Hassan et al., 2015; Ormen & Gregersen, 2023).

Summary of Comparison

In summary, the findings of this study are largely consistent with the existing research and theoretical framework outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. The results support the applicability of the AIDA model's cognitive, affective, and conative stages to military marketing in the digital age, while also highlighting challenges identified in prior literature regarding sustaining engagement, closing knowledge gaps, and motivating action among the military's target market.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this study, organized by the three research questions and grounded in the AIDA framework. The chapter reported quantitative and qualitative results related to how military marketing messages capture *attention* at the cognitive stage, generate *interest* and *desire* at the affective stage, and motivate *action* at the conative stage among the military's target market. Results were presented objectively without interpretation, using aggregated survey data, descriptive statistics, tables, and grouped qualitative responses aligned to each construct.

The findings for RQ1 revealed patterns in attention and initial engagement with military marketing messages in a digital environment. RQ 2 reported results associated with emotional engagement, interest, desire, and changes in knowledge following exposure to the advertisements. RQ3 reported findings related to behavioral intent and action, including both quantitative measures of motivation and qualitative descriptions of intended next steps. Collectively, these results were compared to the existing literature and theoretical framework discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 to assess consistency with prior research.

Chapter 5 builds on these findings by interpreting the results, discussing their implications for military marketing practice and theory, and offering conclusions and recommendations based on the study's outcomes.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem addressed in this qualitative descriptive study is that the military struggles to connect with its target market and maintain audience engagement due to the accelerated growth of the digital age (Romero-Jara et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to use QCA to explore how military marketing messages capture *attention*, generate *interest* and *desire*, and drive *action* among their target market in the digital age by using the AIDA model (Hassan et al., 2015, p. 8) as a framework.

This chapter provides an interpretive discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4, situating them within the context of the research problem, purpose, and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. A brief review of the methodology, design, results, and limitations is followed by a detailed discussion organized around the AIDA model, emphasizing cognitive, affective, and conative audience responses. The chapter also includes a comparative analysis of two major marketing campaigns and an interpretation of pre- and post-assessment outcomes. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice, directions for future research, and a concise summary of the study.

Discussion

This qualitative descriptive study employed QCA to examine how target market participants responded to ARNG marketing messages at each stage of the AIDA model. Data were collected using structured survey instruments that included open- and closed-ended responses and pre- and post-knowledge assessments. The analysis focused on identifying thematic patterns related to cognitive attention, affective engagement, and conative intent following exposure to 20 marketing stimuli.

Overall, the findings revealed that while marketing messages were generally effective in capturing cognitive attention, effectiveness diminished as respondents progressed toward affective interest/desire and conative action. These patterns highlight the importance of strategically aligning message content with desired psychological and behavioral outcomes. The findings of this study directly reflect the transition from the attention economy (Dai & Wang, 2023) to the engagement economy (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023) discussed in Chapter 2. While the ARNG marketing stimuli were largely successful in capturing cognitive attention at the top of the marketing funnel, they were less effective at sustaining engagement as respondents moved into the affective and conative stages. This outcome reinforces the notion that attention alone is no longer the most valuable commodity for the audience. As Ormen and Gregersen (2023) noted, true value in the engagement economy lies in the strength of the connection between audiences and organizations. The results of this study demonstrate that although attention was successfully obtained, the deeper emotional connection required to sustain engagement and guide audiences toward action was not consistently achieved.

Building on this distinction, this finding illustrates a clear delineation between the attention economy and the engagement economy. Attention represents the cognitive entry point of the marketing funnel, whereas interest, desire, and action require ongoing interaction, emotional resonance, and relational engagement. The limited progression observed beyond attention suggests that while the marketing stimuli were effective at capturing attention, they did not consistently foster the sustained engagement necessary to move respondents through the middle and bottom of the funnel. This gap underscores the importance of shifting military marketing efforts from one-way communication to engagement-driven strategies that prioritize relevance, interaction, and trust-building. Without this transition, marketing efforts risk

successfully attracting attention while failing to maintain engagement long enough to influence meaningful behavioral outcomes.

Cognitive Processing and Attention

Attention represents the cognitive entry point of the AIDA model, reflecting initial awareness, perception, and information processing. Findings indicated that attention was most strongly captured through visually compelling content, emotional intensity, and modern production techniques. Respondents frequently described advertisements as “*eye-catching*, *engaging*, and *visually impressive*,” demonstrating successful cognitive activation.

However, cognitive attention was not always accompanied by clarity of message or sustained processing. In several instances, respondents recalled the visuals or emotional tone but struggled to articulate specific takeaways. This suggests that while cognitive attention was achieved, deeper cognitive elaboration was sometimes limited, potentially constraining progression to subsequent AIDA stages.

These findings align with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 regarding the attention economy and the challenge of maintaining cognitive engagement in digitally saturated environments (Ormen & Gregersen, 2023; Romero-Jara et al., 2023). Within the AIDA framework, attention is necessary but insufficient on its own; it requires intentional message clarity and relevance.

Affective Processing and Interest/Desire

Interest and desire reflect affective processing, encompassing emotional resonance, personal relevance, and attitudinal alignment within the middle of the marketing funnel. The findings demonstrated that affective engagement varied considerably across advertisements.

Respondents expressed stronger interest and desire when messages emphasized identity, purpose, personal growth, and relatable human experiences.

Affective responses were characterized using first-person language, emotional descriptors, and expressions of perceived fit. Conversely, messages that emphasized institutional scale or abstract concepts without clear personal relevance elicited weaker affective responses. This distinction highlights the importance of framing marketing messages in ways that resonate emotionally and align with audience values.

The results support prior research discussed in Chapter 2, emphasizing that affective engagement is a critical bridge between awareness and action (Hassan et al., 2015). Without a meaningful emotional connection, attention often failed to evolve into desire.

Conative Processing and Action

Action represents the conative stage of the AIDA model, reflecting intention, motivation, and readiness to act at the bottom of the marketing funnel. Across the dataset, conative responses were less frequent and more tentative than cognitive or affective responses. When action intent was expressed, it most often involved exploratory behaviors such as seeking additional information or discussing the opportunity with others. Within the AIDA model, action represents the most fragile and difficult stage to achieve, as it requires audiences to translate cognitive understanding and affective alignment into tangible behavioral intent (Hassan et al., 2015).

The findings indicate a clear drop-off between affective engagement and conative commitment. This suggests that while marketing messages may successfully influence thoughts and feelings, additional strategic elements such as explicit calls to action and reduced decision-making friction are necessary to facilitate behavioral intent.

Comparative Campaign Performance Across the AIDA Model

A comparative interpretation of the findings revealed meaningful differences between the ARNG's *Next Greatest Generation* campaign (marketing stimuli 1-10) and *Uncommon Is Calling* campaign (marketing stimuli 11-20) in guiding respondents through the cognitive, affective, and conative stages of the AIDA model.

The *Next Greatest Generation* campaign demonstrated strong performance in capturing cognitive attention through high production value and emotionally charged imagery. However, attention often remained surface level, with limited translation into affective desire or conative intent. The campaign's emphasis on institutional legacy and scale appeared to constrain personal relevance for many respondents.

In contrast, the *Uncommon Is Calling* campaign more effectively engaged respondents across all AIDA stages. Cognitive attention was sustained through message disruption and identity-based framing. Affective engagement was stronger, as respondents frequently articulated emotional alignment, curiosity, and a sense of personal fit. At the conative stage, respondents exposed to *Uncommon Is Calling* were more likely to express specific, actionable intentions, such as seeking information or reflecting on next steps.

Overall, *Uncommon Is Calling* demonstrated a more complete progression through the AIDA model, while *Next Greatest Generation* was more effective at generating attention but less successful at sustaining engagement and prompting action.

Interpretation of Pre- and Post-Assessment Outcomes and Message Exposure Effects

An additional insight emerged from the comparison of pre- and post-assessment results that warrants specific discussion due to its implications for marketing practice. Following exposure to the 20 marketing stimuli, several assessment items demonstrated notable increases in

correct response percentages. In particular, questions related to education benefits and medical benefits showed consistent improvement in post-assessment responses. This pattern aligns with the content of the advertisements, as multiple stimuli explicitly communicated these benefits, reinforcing learning through repeated exposure.

In contrast, the assessment question related to hiring bonuses showed a decrease in correct responses from pre- to post-assessment. Upon further review, this decline was not attributable to message confusion or negative perception but rather to the absence of any marketing stimuli addressing hiring bonuses. This realization highlighted a critical methodological and practical insight: the study design did not include advertisements that communicated information regarding hiring bonuses, resulting in a lack of reinforcement or learning for that specific benefit.

A similar pattern was observed in two additional assessment items. The question assessing whether service in the ARNG is paid, voluntary, or unknown showed no change between pre- and post-assessment, with 85% of respondents answering correctly at both measurement points. Additionally, the item assessing whether time served in the ARNG counts toward military service or retirement showed only a marginal increase, from 10% correct to 20% correct. Notably, none of the marketing stimuli addressed compensation structure or retirement eligibility, which provides a clear explanation for the limited change in respondents' knowledge.

Collectively, these findings underscore a fundamental principle of marketing communication: audiences cannot learn about benefits or organizational attributes that are not explicitly communicated. The observed increases in knowledge occurred only in areas where benefits were directly presented in the marketing messages, while knowledge stagnated or declined in areas that were omitted. This outcome reinforces the importance of intentional

message strategy and content alignment when designing marketing campaigns to inform and educate target markets.

From an applied perspective, this unintended outcome served as a valuable diagnostic indicator, demonstrating that marketing effectiveness is not solely dependent on creative execution or emotional resonance, but also on the deliberate inclusion of informational content aligned with desired learning outcomes. The findings emphasize that organizations must proactively communicate the full spectrum of relevant benefits if they expect their target markets to develop an accurate understanding and informed perceptions.

The findings of this study can also be interpreted through the lens of advertising effectiveness factors identified by Tellis (1997), which emphasize the interplay between brand familiarity, message complexity, and message novelty. Brand familiarity shapes how readily audiences recognize and process organizational messaging, while message complexity influences the cognitive effort required to extract meaning from advertised content. Message novelty, in turn, determines the extent to which a message disrupts habitual attention patterns and prompts deeper consideration. Within the context of this study, variations in audience progression across the AIDA stages suggest that when messages balanced familiarity with novelty and maintained manageable levels of complexity, respondents were more likely to sustain cognitive processing and advance toward affective engagement and conative intent. Conversely, messages that relied heavily on familiarity without sufficient novelty or that introduced complexity without clear relevance appeared less effective in sustaining engagement beyond initial attention (Tellis, 1997). This outcome further reinforces the role of deliberate message design in shaping cognitive learning and highlights the risks associated with assuming audience awareness in the absence of explicit communication.

Effective Frequency Theory as an Explanatory Lens

The observed changes in pre- and post-assessment outcomes can also be interpreted through the lens of Effective Frequency Theory, which posits that message exposure must reach a sufficient threshold before learning, attitude change, or behavioral response occurs (Schmidt & Eisend, 2015; Vollrath & Villegas, 2022). In this study, increases in correct responses were observed only for benefit categories explicitly communicated in the marketing stimuli, indicating that even limited exposure can facilitate cognitive learning when message content is present.

Conversely, benefits that were not communicated at all, such as hiring bonuses and retirement-related information, failed to achieve any effective frequency, resulting in stagnant or declining knowledge levels. This outcome reinforces the principle that frequency alone is insufficient without message presence and relevance (Tellis, 1997). Effective frequency cannot be achieved for attributes or benefits that are omitted from the communication strategy, underscoring the importance of intentional repetition and content inclusion when designing marketing campaigns intended to inform and educate target audiences. Taken together, these findings suggest that effective marketing practice must move beyond creative execution alone and instead ensure that strategically important benefits are communicated with sufficient clarity, presence, and repetition to achieve meaningful cognitive learning, affective engagement, and conative response.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings, marketing practitioners should design campaigns that intentionally align cognitive, affective, and conative objectives. Attention-capturing tactics should be paired with clear messaging that facilitates deeper cognitive processing. Affective engagement should be driven by identity-based framing and personal relevance. To support conative outcomes,

marketers should incorporate explicit calls to action and reduce psychological barriers to engagement.

Additionally, organizations should ensure that all critical benefits are consistently communicated across campaigns. Omissions may result in missed learning opportunities and reduced effectiveness, even when creative execution is strong.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may explore longitudinal designs to examine how repeated exposure influences cognitive learning, affective engagement, and conative intent over time. Experimental comparisons of message framing, personalization, and benefit emphasis may further refine understanding of causal mechanisms. Researchers may also integrate behavioral data to complement self-reported intentions and address the limitations of single-exposure designs.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on marketing messages associated with a single military branch, thereby limiting the breadth of conclusions that can be drawn across the broader military landscape. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by examining marketing campaigns from other military branches to determine whether cognitive, affective, and conative responses differ across organizational cultures, brand positioning, or messaging strategies. Additionally, comparative studies juxtaposing multiple military branches could provide valuable insight into how distinct value propositions, benefit emphases, and identity framings influence audience progression through the AIDA stages. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of military marketing effectiveness and inform cross-organizational best practices.

Study Summary

This study examined how ARNG marketing messages influence cognitive attention, affective interest and desire, and conative action in this digital age of Industry 4.0 using the AIDA model as a guiding framework. The findings demonstrate that while attention is frequently achieved, sustained engagement and behavioral intent depend on emotional relevance, message clarity, and intentional inclusion of content. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that while ARNG marketing efforts were effective within the attention economy by capturing initial awareness, greater strategic emphasis on engagement-driven messaging is required to sustain effective connection and facilitate conative action across the marketing funnel.

The central conclusion of this study is that effective military marketing in Industry 4.0 requires more than capturing attention; it demands sustained engagement that intentionally guides audiences from cognitive awareness to affective connection and ultimately to conative action through strategically aligned, benefit-focused messaging.

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Appendix A

NVivo Coding Schema & Operational Definitions

Overview

This study employed directed qualitative content analysis using the AIDA framework as the a priori theoretical structure. Parent nodes were established for *Attention*, *Interest*, *Desire*, and *Action*. Sub nodes were derived deductively from marketing theory and inductively refined through iterative coding of participant responses (n = 20). Coding was conducted using NVivo, qualitative data analysis software by Lumivero®. Operational definitions were established prior to full coding and refined through analytic annotation to ensure consistency and conceptual clarity.

Parent Construct 1: ATTENTION

Theoretical Domain: Cognitive Processing

Operational Definition

Attention is defined as the degree to which the advertisement captured initial cognitive awareness, noticeability, and perceptual salience. This construct reflects stimulus recognition rather than emotional attachment or behavioral intent.

Sub Constructs

1.1 Visual Salience. Distinctiveness of imagery, color, motion, or production quality that draws notice.

Example Excerpt: “The visuals definitely grabbed my attention right away.”

Decision Rule: Code here if the respondent references visuals, design elements, editing, or aesthetic prominence without indicating emotional or behavioral response.

1.2 Message Clarity. Perceived understandability and straightforwardness of the message.

Example Excerpt: “It was clear what they were trying to say.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant comments on clarity, simplicity, or ease of comprehension.

1.3 Relevance Cue Recognition. Immediate recognition that the message relates to self or peer group.

Example Excerpt: “It seemed like it was targeting people my age.”

Decision Rule: Code when awareness is triggered by demographic or identity alignment.

1.4 Novelty or Distinctiveness. Perception that the ad felt different, unique, or unexpected.

Example Excerpt: “This one felt different from other military ads I’ve seen.”

Decision Rule: Use when respondents describe uniqueness as the reason attention was captured.

1.5 Informational Density. Perception of how much information was presented.

Example Excerpt: “It had a lot going on, maybe too much.”

Decision Rule: Code when the participant evaluates the volume or pacing of information at the awareness stage.

Parent Construct 2: INTEREST

Theoretical Domain: Cognitive Engagement and Early Affective Response

Operational Definition

Interest reflects sustained cognitive engagement beyond initial exposure. It includes curiosity, desire to learn more, and early evaluative processing.

Sub Constructs

2.1 Curiosity Activation. Expression of wanting additional information.

Example Excerpt: “It made me want to look into it more.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant indicates exploratory motivation without commitment.

2.2 Perceived Credibility. Evaluation of trustworthiness or authenticity.

Example Excerpt: “It seemed realistic and not overly scripted.”

Decision Rule: Code when participant assesses believability.

2.3 Informational Value. Perception that the ad provided useful or relevant knowledge.

Example Excerpt: “I didn’t know about those career opportunities.”

Decision Rule: Apply when respondent references learning or informational gain.

2.4 Identification with Content. Cognitive recognition of personal alignment.

Example Excerpt: “I could see myself in that situation.”

Decision Rule: Code when participant mentally places themselves into the scenario.

2.5 Skepticism. Critical questioning or doubt.

Example Excerpt: “It felt a bit like propaganda.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant questions authenticity or intent.

Parent Construct 3: DESIRE

Theoretical Domain: Affective Evaluation

Operational Definition

Desire represents emotional resonance, attitudinal favorability, and aspirational alignment. This stage moves from cognitive evaluation to emotional attachment.

Sub Constructs

3.1 Emotional Resonance. Positive emotional reaction such as pride, excitement, inspiration.

Example Excerpt: “It gave me chills.”

Decision Rule: Code when participant references emotional feeling states.

3.2 Aspirational Appeal. Perceived enhancement of identity, status, or future self.

Example Excerpt: “It made serving look honorable and meaningful.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant links the message to personal growth or purpose.

3.3 Social Belonging. Perceived community or camaraderie.

Example Excerpt: “It showed strong teamwork.”

Decision Rule: Code when respondents emphasize belonging or unity.

3.4 Perceived Benefits. Recognition of tangible or intangible rewards.

Example Excerpt: “The benefits seemed like a good opportunity.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant references advantages such as education, skills, or stability.

3.5 Value Congruence. Alignment with personal beliefs or morals.

Example Excerpt: “It aligns with my values.”

Decision Rule: Code when respondent links message to personal ethical framework.

3.6 Emotional Neutrality. Absence of emotional connection.

Example Excerpt: “It didn’t really move me.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant explicitly states emotional disengagement.

Parent Construct 4: ACTION

Theoretical Domain: Conative Intention

Operational Definition

Action reflects behavioral intention or readiness to engage in a next step, including inquiry, sharing, or enlistment consideration.

Sub Constructs

4.1 Behavioral Intention. Stated likelihood of taking next step.

Example Excerpt: “I would consider reaching out for more information.”

Decision Rule: Code when participant expresses future oriented action.

4.2 Low Commitment Inquiry. Interest in seeking minimal information.

Example Excerpt: “I might check the website.”

Decision Rule: Apply when participant suggests exploratory action without strong commitment.

4.3 Active Rejection. Explicit refusal or negative action.

Example Excerpt: “This wouldn’t convince me to join.”

Decision Rule: Code when the participant clearly states no intent.

4.4 Social Sharing Intent. Willingness to share or discuss.

Example Excerpt: “I’d probably send this to a friend.”

Decision Rule: Apply when action is indirect influence.

4.5 Conditional Action. Intent dependent on external factors.

Example Excerpt: “Maybe if I were younger.”

Decision Rule: Use when intent is contingent on life stage, eligibility, or circumstance.

4.6 Conversion Readiness. Strong immediate action orientation.

Example Excerpt: “This makes me want to sign up.”

Decision Rule: Apply only when explicit, high certainty behavioral intent is stated.

Cross-Cutting Analytical Categories

These secondary coding layers were used for pattern analysis across constructs:

- Positive Valence
- Neutral Valence
- Negative Valence
- Generational Framing
- Gender Referencing
- Risk Perception
- Career Orientation
- Patriotism Framing
- Economic Motivation
- Lifestyle Evaluation

Coding Procedures and Consistency Protocol

1. Each response was coded at the smallest meaningful unit of analysis.
2. A segment could receive multiple codes if conceptually justified.
3. Emotional statements without behavioral reference were coded under *Desire*, not Action.

4. Cognitive evaluations without emotional reference were coded under Attention or Interest.
5. Behavioral statements required explicit or implied intent language.
6. Ambiguous segments were annotated and reviewed in iterative coding rounds.