ORIGINAL SCIETNTIFIC PAPER

BRANDING THE SERBIAN ARMED FORCES AS AN EMPLOYER TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN TOP TALENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on research examining the possibilities of attracting and retaining the best talents through the employer branding process of the Serbian Armed Forces. The aim of the research was to determine whether, and if so, to what extent, there was a relationship between the branding process of the Serbian Armed Forces and the work environment, through the level of job satisfaction, possibility for advancement, and leadership style within the defence system of the Republic of Serbia. The main motive for writing this paper was to examine whether the branding process of the Serbian Armed Forces affects the attraction of new talents and the retention of existing high-performing personnel. The paper also presents the opportunities that the Serbian Armed Forces, as an employer, can utilize in order to attract potential new employees.

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INTRODUCTION

Viewed through the lens of marketing, the Serbian Armed Forces represent one of the oldest Serbian brands, with enormous historical and traditional value.

Previous empirical studies have confirmed that companies have intensified the competition for employees with professional and managerial skills in recent years. Therefore, attracting new employees and retaining existing ones has become a matter of great importance for organizational management. The Serbian Armed Forces, as one of the employers on the labour market, must respond to new demands and take measures to present themselves, particularly to younger generations, as an attractive and secure employer, while preserving their organizational and traditional values.

This paper highlights, through conducted research, the opportunities offered by the branding process to help the Serbian Armed Forces attract new employees and retain the best talents. The following hypotheses were tested:

$\boldsymbol{H_1}$: There is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "Job Satisfaction" and "Army as a Brand";

$\boldsymbol{H_2}$: There is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "Possibility for Advancement" and "Army as a Brand";

$\boldsymbol{H_3}$: There is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "Work–Life Balance" and "Army as a Brand";

$\boldsymbol{H_4}$: There is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "Leadership Style" and "Army as a Brand".

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Serbian Armed Forces are a brand that is well known throughout the country and represent one of the oldest national brands, with exceptional social influence and importance [1]. Despite all the tragic events of the 1990s, they remain a brand that evokes positive emotions and is firmly rooted in the public consciousness [2].

When discussing the branding of the military as an employer, it should be noted that Ambler and Barrow first coined the term employer branding by combining the concepts of human resource management and marketing. They defined the term as "a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the company" [3]. In the literature, employer branding is often described as a three-step process [4]. First, the employer develops a distinct value proposition for both potential and current employees. The second step is external marketing, which serves to attract the target group, while the third step consists of internal marketing, which includes fulfilling the "promise" made to the target group [5].

The trend of a shortage of human capital in the labour market has intensified competition among companies for employees in recent years. As a result, attracting and retaining qualified employees has become a global challenge, the solution to which requires a well-designed strategic approach [6]. In such business conditions, most companies have begun to recognize the importance of an effective employer branding strategy in order to attract a higher-quality workforce [7]. Therefore, it has become imperative for organizations to understand the expectations of both potential and current employees and to develop an employer branding strategy that will attract and retain talent [8].

In his study, Kumar notes that candidates consider a company's reputation when applying for a job. He also states that a positive company image and reputation help attract and retain employees [9]. Retaining valuable employees is a major challenge for modern organizations, and a company's brand image is a key factor in attracting and retaining employees [10]. In this context, it has been suggested that successful employer branding facilitates recruitment and employee engagement, increases creativity and job satisfaction, and consequently improves employee retention. Therefore, employer branding has effectively become a tool for retaining employees [11].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of conducting empirical research on the possibilities of attracting and retaining the best talents through the branding process of the Serbian Armed Forces, a survey method was used, specifically a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The participants in the survey were employees within the defence system of the Republic of Serbia, ranging from personnel engaged in technical and operational duties, through employees performing highly specialized tasks in institutions of the Ministry of Defence and units of the Serbian Armed Forces, to managers in the sectors and administrations of the Ministry and the Armed Forces, as well as in the Rectorate of the University of Defence.

The first part of the questionnaire contained socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, including questions related to gender, marital status, level of education, length of service, type of work performed, monthly income, and lifestyle.

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions concerning the importance and influence of the Serbian Armed Forces as a brand, their current reputation, and their presence in the public sphere and the media, particularly on social networks.

The third part of the questionnaire included questions related to the respondents' work environment, including the degree of job satisfaction, opportunities for further training and development, the establishment of a balance between work and private life, and assessments of leadership and management practices by superiors.

The survey was conducted by distributing the questionnaire to the e-mail addresses of 103 members of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces, of whom 92 participated in the survey. Consequently, the survey conducted in March 2024 achieved a response rate of 89.32%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 92 respondents participated in the study, with slightly more men, 52 (55.4%), than women, 40 (44.6%). Regarding the level of education, most respondents held a master's degree, 39 (41.7%). Furthermore, 17 (18.7%) respondents had completed undergraduate studies, 27 (29.7%) had secondary or vocational education below the seventh qualification level, while 9 (9.9%) respondents held a PhD degree.

With regard to length of service, more than two-thirds of the respondents, 70 (75.8%), had over 15 years of service. A total of 14 (15.4%) respondents had less than 5 years of service, while only 8 (8.8%) participants had between 5 and 15 years of work experience.

The structure of the sample according to the type of job was relatively balanced. The largest group consisted of respondents in management positions, 27 (29.6%), followed by those in administrative positions, 24 (25.3%), and highly professional positions, 21 (23.1%). The smallest number of respondents were employed in technical-operational positions, 13 (14.3%), and other jobs, 7 (7.7%).

Regarding marital status, the majority of respondents were married, 63 (68.1%), while only 2 (2.2%) respondents were in an extramarital union. The criterion "monthly income level" indicates that more than half of the respondents, 52 (55.0%), had a monthly income exceeding RSD 100,000, which corresponds to the educational structure of the sample, where more than 70% of respondents had higher education qualifications. Only 9 (9.9%) respondents reported a monthly income below RSD 70,000.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents (N = 92)

Variables	N	%	Cumulative %
Gender			
Female	40	44,6	44,6
Male	52	55,4	100
Educational level			
Secondary school	14	15,4	15,4
Vocational studies	13	14,3	29,7
University (basic studies)	17	18,7	48,4
Master's degree	39	41,7	91,1
PhD	9	9,9	100

Length of Service			
Up to 5 years	14	15,4	15,4
From 5 to 15 years	8	8,8	24,2
From 15 to 25 years	37	39,5	63,7
Over 25 years	33	36,3	100
Type of job			
Management	27	29,6	29,6
Highly professional jobs	21	23,1	52,7
Administrative jobs	24	25,3	78,0
Technical-operational jobs	13	14,3	92,3
Other jobs	7	7,7	100
Marital status			
Single	19	20,9	20,9
Married	63	68,1	89,0
Extramarital union	2	2,2	91,2
Widowed	2	2,2	93,4
Divorced	6	6,6	100
Monthly Income Level			
Up to RSD 70.000	9	9,9	9,9
From RSD 70.000 to RSD 100.000	31	34,1	45,0
From RSD 100.000 to RSD 130.000	16	17,6	62,6
Above RSD 130.000	36	38,4	100
Total	92	100	

Source: Authors' calculations

Within the questionnaire, each variable was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "completely incorrect" and 5 indicated "completely correct". In order to determine the existence and strength of the relationships among the five variables, namely "Army as a Brand", "Job Satisfaction", "Possibility for Advancement", "Work–Life Balance", and "Leadership Style", a descriptive analysis of the observed variables was first conducted (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of variables

Variables	N	min	max	M	SD
Army as a Brand	92	1	5	3,99	0,625
Job Satisfaction	92	1	5	3,16	0,663
Possibility for Advancement	92	1	5	3,23	0,823
Work–Life Balance	92	1	5	3,95	0,666
Leadership Style	92	1	5	3,78	0,756

Source: Authors' calculations

The descriptive statistics of the analyzed variable "Army as a Brand" clearly reflect the respondents' attitudes, given that the mean values of all observed variables are above average. The highest-rated variables were "Use of social networks in promotion" (M = 4.38, SD = 0.90), "Use of social networks in the representation of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces" (M = 4.32, SD = 0.97), and "Introduction of compulsory military service" (M = 4.29, SD = 1.08).

It can be stated with confidence that the contemporary era is characterized by the widespread use of the Internet and social networks, which is confirmed by the survey results, where more than 85% of respondents indicated that the use of social networks is important for promoting and presenting the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces. In recent months, the possibility of reintroducing compulsory military service has increasingly been discussed by the state and military leadership. As many as 80% of respondents believe that the reintroduction of compulsory military service would contribute to strengthening the brand of the Serbian Armed Forces. Until 2011, all able-bodied men of legal age were obliged to perform military service. Subsequently, continuity was maintained through reserve units, military exercises, tactical-technical gatherings, and similar activities [12]. However, as the current situation has not produced noticeable results, the reintroduction of compulsory military service is increasingly viewed as the most viable option.

Regarding the variable "Job Satisfaction", the respondents evaluated the individual items somewhat unevenly. Among the highest-rated items were "Performing different types of work" (M = 4.12, SD = 1.15) and "Attractiveness of the workplace" (M = 3.93, SD = 1.02). The lowest-rated item was "Possibility of working from home" (M = 1.42, SD = 0.88). This confirms the specific nature of military work, where very few duties can be performed remotely. In addition, military service is generally not characterized by frequent business travel, which was confirmed by more than 40% of respondents.

For the variable "Possibility for Advancement", all analyzed items received relatively positive evaluations. The highest-rated item was "Openness to acquiring other professional skills" with a mean score of M = 3.95 (SD = 1.12). This result indicates a clear willingness among respondents to improve various professional competencies. However, only 24% of respondents stated that they had opportunities to do so. This finding may negatively affect the attractiveness of the Serbian Armed Forces as an employer. Therefore, managers throughout the defence system should ensure equal opportunities for professional development and specialization for all employees.

The range of average scores for the variable "Work–Life Balance", from M = 3.33 (SD = 1.32) to M = 4.59 (SD = 0.78), indicates generally positive attitudes among respondents. The highest-rated items were "Possibility of leaving work earlier" (M = 4.59, SD = 0.78) and "Communication with colleagues" (M = 4.23, SD = 0.81). These findings reflect the specific nature of military service, where team spirit and strong interpersonal relationships are particularly important, given the considerable amount of time spent together outside regular workplaces, during field exercises, training activities, shooting practice, and similar settings. In his research, Kovačević states that good interpersonal relations are the factor that most strongly influences the motivation of professional members of the Serbian Armed Forces, while working conditions and leisure time are ranked somewhat lower [13].

When analyzing the variable "Leadership Style", a relatively wide range of scores was observed. The lowest-rated item was "Tasks outside the job description" (M = 3.00, SD = 1.40), while the highest-rated item was "Manager's attitude toward employees" (M = 4.40, SD = 0.77). The remaining ratings also indicate a high level of trust that employees place in their managers and superiors, as well as confidence in their competencies and leadership style. Research conducted among Swedish soldiers confirmed that constructive leadership has a significant positive effect on job satisfaction, whereas destructive leadership has the opposite effect [14].

The statistical technique selected for hypothesis testing was correlation analysis. Before conducting the analysis, several preparatory steps were undertaken. First, reverse coding was applied to items containing negatively worded statements or negative connotations. This procedure was applied to certain items within the variables "Army as a Brand", "Job Satisfaction", and "Leadership Style". The recoding process was performed using the Transform and Recode functions in the SPSS software package.

Subsequently, average scores were calculated for each of the five scales used in the study. The next step involved calculating Cronbach's alpha (α), which provides information regarding the reliability of the measurement scales. Furthermore, the internal consistency of the items within each scale was assessed through factor analysis using principal component analysis. Finally, the assumptions required for conducting correlation analysis were examined, including linearity and homogeneity of variance.

The obtained mean values for the scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and the results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean scale scores, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and factor analysis results

Questionnaire Scale	M	A	FA			Number of Extracted Factors	% of Explained Variance
			KMO	BT	Sig.		
Army as a Brand	3,9856	0,791	0,754	387,296	0,000	1	40,151
Job Satisfaction	3,1619	0,784	0,718	356,137	0,000	1	46,376
Possibility for Advancement	3,2276	0,775	0,732	244,489	0,000	1	46,533
Work–Life Balance	3,9452	0,762	0,752	194,983	0,000	1	57,359
Leadership Style	3,7778	0,807	0,846	293,939	0,000	1	48,721

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient; FA = factor analysis; KMO = Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy; BT = Bartlett's test of sphericity; Sig. = level of statistical significance.

The mean scores obtained for each scale ranged from M = 3.2276 to M = 3.9856, indicating that the majority of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward the issues examined in the questionnaire. All obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.700, leading to the conclusion that the scales used in the study demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability.

The calculated values of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy for each scale were greater than 0.700, while the values of Bartlett's test of sphericity were statistically significant, indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. The factor analysis results revealed a single extracted factor for each scale, with percentages of explained variance exceeding 40%, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency among the items within each scale used in the study.

The assumptions required for conducting the correlation analysis, namely linearity and homogeneity of variance, were examined using scatterplots, which did not reveal any non-linear relationships or significant outliers. Given that respondents evaluated the items using a five-point scale, the four hypotheses proposed in this study were tested using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rho). The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of the Correlation Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Army as a Brand (1)	-	0,475**	0,548**	0,460**	0,467**
Job Satisfaction (2)		-	0,764**	0,552**	0,442**
Possibility for Advancement (3)			-	0,585**	0,448**
Work–Life Balance (4)				-	0,340**
Leadership Style (5)					-

Note: * Correlation is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; ** Correlation is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

Based on the results of the correlation analysis, the relationship between "Army as a Brand" and "Job Satisfaction" was positive and statistically significant (rho = 0.475, $p < 0.005$). According to Cohen's criteria, the strength of this relationship can be characterized as moderate. The calculated coefficient of determination indicates that these two groups of variables share 22.56% of the common variance. This relationship is also supported by the findings presented earlier, where certain items within the "Job Satisfaction" variable received particularly high ratings, namely "Performing Different Types of Work" (M = 4.12) and "Attractiveness of the Workplace" (M = 3.93). Therefore, hypothesis H_1 was confirmed.

The results of the correlation analysis regarding the relationship between "Army as a Brand" and "Possibility for Advancement" were also positive and statistically significant (rho = 0.548, $p < 0.005$). According to Cohen's criteria, the strength of this relationship can be considered strong. The calculated coefficient of determination indicates that these two groups of variables share 30.03% of the common variance. The specific nature of the military profession requires continuous professional development and advancement, which is also reflected in respondents' evaluations of this variable (M = 3.23). Based on these findings, hypothesis H_2 was confirmed.

The variables "Army as a Brand" and "Work–Life Balance" also demonstrated a positive and statistically significant relationship (rho = 0.460, $p < 0.005$). The calculated coefficient of determination indicates that these two groups of variables share 21.16% of the common variance. According to Cohen's criteria, the strength of this relationship can be classified as moderate. As previously noted, military service is characterized by strong team spirit and collegial relationships, which is reflected in the observed relationship between these variables. Consequently, hypothesis H_3 was confirmed.

The relationship between the variables "Army as a Brand" and "Leadership Style" was likewise positive and statistically significant (rho = 0.467, $p < 0.005$). According to Cohen's criteria, the strength of this relationship can be described as moderate. The calculated coefficient of determination indicates that these two groups of variables share 21.80% of the common variance. Therefore, the statistical results also confirmed hypothesis H_4.

CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this paper aimed to examine the possibilities available to the Serbian Armed Forces, as an employer, to attract new talents and retain existing employees through the promotion, greater utilization, and further development of their employer brand.

The results of the study indicated a positive and statistically significant correlation between the variables "Army as a Brand" and "Job Satisfaction". According to the results of the correlation analysis, the strength of this relationship was assessed as moderate, thereby confirming Hypothesis H_1.

Furthermore, the results of the correlation analysis between the variable "Army as a Brand" and the variables "Possibility for Advancement", "Work–Life Balance", and "Leadership Style" showed positive and statistically significant correlations in all cases. The relationships between the observed variables were assessed as strong or moderate, which provided grounds for confirming Hypotheses H_2, H_3, and H_4.

It can be concluded that the Serbian Armed Forces, as an employer brand, have much to offer in the labour market. The trust and reputation that the Armed Forces enjoy within society represent a solid foundation for attracting new talents and retaining existing employees. The implementation of new development and modernization programs, the provision of equal opportunities for all employees, and a more active presence on social networks would further enhance the attractiveness of the Serbian Armed Forces, particularly among younger generations, thereby contributing to the attraction of new talents.

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