

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE BRANDING OF THE SERBIAN ARMED FORCES

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The structure of the military organization, its social, normative and legal role, doctrine, history and tradition, specific internal relations, combat readiness, weapons, external features, the attitude and behaviour of personnel to its fundamental values and, finally, the way it communicates with the public, make the totality of the identity of the Serbian Armed Forces. The way that the public perceives the identity characteristics of the military represents a dynamic category that we call an image. A reputation, like an image, is based on the subjective perception of an identity, with the difference that establishing a reputation requires personal experience in relation to the organization and the period in which such an experience is confirmed.

Brand and branding are occasionally, theoretically inconsistently, related to the Serbian Armed Forces as an organization, while the main properties of these concepts established in marketing are ignored. This paper analyses various definitions and determinants of the concept of brand, and offers an answer to the question: whether and in which case it is possible to talk about “the brand of the Serbian Armed Forces” and why its public image should primarily be considered and studied through the prism of an organizational identity, image and reputation.

The paper proposes that the organizational image and reputation of the Serbian Armed Forces be used as conceptual frameworks for considering its image in the public, while the concept of brand can be used in the sense of branding the Armed Forces as an employere.

Key words: *Serbian Armed Forces, brand, branding, identity, image, reputation*

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Introduction

Are the Serbian Armed Forces a brand? Is there a theoretical basis and, ultimately, a practical basis for considering an armed force in such a context? There is no doubt that the military has its place in the information and communication system of a country, and that society, that is, the public, shows interest and takes positions in relation to its fundamental role, defined by the Constitution and laws, as well as processes and events that influence to a greater or lesser extent its ability to respond to those roles. "The state can be considered one of the main agents of the information and communication system (...) Its role in the normative and legal framing of the relation between the institutions and channels that make up the information and communication system is certainly in the first place".¹

It is also clear that the attitude of social groups or society as a whole, i.e. the segmented public and the general public towards the defence system and the military as its key element, influence the functioning of such a system.²

Depending on which scientific field one approaches the issue of internal and external communications of an armed force, in this case the Serbian Armed Forces, there are theoretical and thus conceptual differences in the identification and interpretation of those activities and processes, as well as their effects.³

Brand and its properties

The introductory question, precisely due to the specificity of the concept, requires an approach from the aspect of marketing, since the concept of brand was created as a product of marketing practice and, as such, is dominantly studied in this scientific discipline. According to Peter D Bennett, marketing is "the process of planning and implementing the concept, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to establish an exchange that accomplishes individual and organizational goals".⁴ The latest agreed definition of the American Marketing Association is that marketing is "an activity, a group of institutions (harmonized laws of practice – author's comment) and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offers that have value for customers, clients, partners and society as a whole".⁵

¹ Miroljub Radojković i Branimir Stojković, *Informaciono-komunikacioni sistemi*, Klio, Beograd, 2004, pp. 48-49.

² *Constitution of the Republic of Serbia*, Article 139.

³ Social and humanistic sciences approach this problem from a sociological, political and communicational perspective, while organizational sciences take the postulates of management, marketing and public relations as their starting point (author's comment).

⁴ *Dictionary of Marketing Terms*, second ed., edited by Peter D. Bennett, published in conjunction with American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, USA; and NTC Publishing Group: Lincolnwood, IL, USA, 1995.

⁵ „Definition of marketing” (approved 2017), April 11, 2022, American Marketing Association, <https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>

The same organization defines brand as “a name, term, design, symbol or any other characteristic that identifies the goods or service of a seller as different from the goods or service of other sellers”.⁶ In the Anglo-Saxon literature, one often comes across formulations such as “differentiation in relation to competition”. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) states that “brand identifies goods, services or the entity itself as different from what is offered by the other entity”, which means that it “can thus be associated with an entity, product/service, product lines/portfolio, city, region, etc.”⁷

Most marketing theorists and practitioners agree on several key characteristics of brand: 1. it has some visual or verbal characteristics, 2. it directly refers to the product or service of a particular company/organization or to itself. 3. it makes the goods, service or company be different from the competition 4. as an intangible property it implies mental or emotional engagement because it is based on the experiences, impressions and/or benefits of the consumer, i.e. client. 5. It has measurable value and brings financial benefit.

The personality of the organization

Studies on the phenomenon of brand occupy a wide area of marketing and sometimes spread to the fields of other sciences - psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, etc. However, the flexibility of the concept of brand and branding, and above all the colloquial use of these terms, occasionally leads authors to neglect fundamental theoretical assumptions.

In the paper “The Serbian Armed Forces as a brand”, Perić expresses the opinion that the Serbian Armed Forces are one of the oldest Serbian brands and that they have an exceptional foundation and history. “The Armed Forces are the brand that is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people (...) it is the brand that causes emotions, and they are crucial in the branding process”.⁸ In this statement, the author correctly emphasizes the emotional property of “the brand of the Serbian Armed Forces”, whereas some other, also fundamental properties of the brand call into question the purpose of using this term.

Every modern company, organization or institution tends to constitute, organize and profile a system of (corporate) communications or relations with the public. It is a management function that includes a great number of different jobs and tasks at different levels of organization and management, aimed at creating a positive image of the organization.⁹ In public relations activities Filipović and Kostić-Stanković include internal

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Međunarodna organizacija za standardizaciju (International Organization for Standardization – ISO), *Brand evaluation – Principles and fundamentals*, <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:20671:ed-1:v1:en> April 13, 2022.

⁸ Nenad Perić, “Vojska Srbije kao brend”, *Vojno delo*, Vol. 60, no. 2, 2008, pp. 127-135.

⁹ Dr Vinka Filipović, dr Milica Kostić Stanković, *Odnosi s javnošću*, Beograd, 2014.

communication, corporate identity, image and reputation, organization of special events, sponsorships, lobbying, media relations and public relations in crisis situations.¹⁰

The concepts of an identity, image and reputation are often encountered in literature in considerations of corporate strategies, corporate or organizational culture, and integrated marketing communications, since these categories correlate with brand and branding. Patric de Pelsmacker, Maggie Geuens and Joeri van der Bergh inextricably link culture, personality (of an organization, author's comment) and its identity with corporate strategy.¹¹ Nigel Markwick and Chris Fill believe that organizations, like people, have a personality that arises from strategic priorities, on the one hand, and corporate culture, on the other.¹² According to Edgar H. Schein corporate culture could be defined as "a deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs among members of an organization that functions unconsciously and defines the way the organization, taking it for granted, perceives itself and its environment".¹³

The personality and organizational culture of the Serbian Armed Forces is limited by a series of established norms that have shaped its identity over time, on the one hand, and multi-layered public perception and a deeper, experiential and personal experience of such an identity, on the other, which is manifested in its organizational image and reputation.

The organizational identity of the Serbian Armed Forces

A corporate or organizational identity is the manner a certain entity has chosen to present itself to relevant target groups with some symbols, communication and behaviour.¹⁴ The military is also publicly represented by an orderly, but a highly complex system of signs and symbols.

A corporate identity, however, is a much broader category than its visual aspect and represents "a portrait of a company" (or an organization, author's comment),¹⁵ which is expressed through its philosophy, history, culture, strategy, management method, reputation, behaviour of employees.¹⁶

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Patric de Pelsmacker, Maggie Geuens and Joeri van der Bergh, *Marketing communications*, Pearson Education Limited, England, first edition 2001, p. 11.

¹² Nigel Markwick, Chris Fill, „Towards a framework for managing corporate identity”, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, No. 5/6, pp. 396-409.

¹³ Edgar H. Schein, *Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture*, Sloan Management Review, 1984 <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/coming-to-a-new-awareness-of-organizational-culture/>

¹⁴ Patric de Pelsmacker, Maggie Geuens and Joeri van der Bergh, *Marketing communications*, Pearson Education Limited, England, first edition 2001, p. 12.

¹⁵ John M. T. Balmer, Edmund R. Gray „Corporate brands: what are they? What of them?”, *European Journal of Marketing*, 2003, 40(7-8), pp. 730-741.

¹⁶ Milovan Vuković, Aleksandra Vuković, Ivana Mladenović Ranisavljević, Snežana Urošević, "Analiza odnosa između korporativnog identiteta, imidža i reputacije", *Tehnika*, 2021, Vol. 76, no. 4, pp. 499-505.

The structure of the military organization, its social, normative and legal role, doctrine, history and tradition, specific internal relations, combat readiness, weapons, external features, the attitude and behaviour of personnel to its fundamental values and, finally, the way it communicates with the public as a whole or certain target audiences (groups), make the totality of its identity.

The organizational image of the Serbian Armed Forces

A corporate/organizational image is the perception of a corporate/organizational identity among certain target groups or audiences. It is “the attitude of the public towards the organization - a subjective and multidimensional impression” of it.¹⁷ All companies/organizations, including the military, strive for their identity properties to be publicly recognized in the desired way, that is, to minimize the difference between an organizational identity and image.

The Serbian Armed Forces, like any army in the world, have the ambition to be perceived by the public as strong, competent, equipped and decisive, thus ready and capable of protecting the state and citizens from external threats and, in addition, to perform other missions and tasks. Furthermore, the Armed Forces try to present themselves as an apolitical, highly structured organization that functions strictly within legal framework, and its members as model members of society, patriots ready to make the greatest sacrifices for the defence of the country.

Reducing or completely cancelling the difference in the way the organization views itself and the manner the public perceives it is an ideal and could be considered one of the basic goals of its communication activities. An unavoidable factor in creating the image of great organizations, such as the Armed Forces, is the perception of one’s identity among its employees or members.

Companies and organizations more or less successfully achieve the desired image by implementing marketing and communication tools, which is reflected, in a commercial sense, on the sale of their goods and services, that is, the trust of target groups or the public. Sanja Vučinić points out that in practice there is often a discrepancy between the image of a company and its identity. She states that “an image that is not based on real facts and the true state of affairs in an organization is not sustainable in the long term. This means that the situation when an image is much better than an identity is a threat and cannot last long. On the contrary, the situation when an identity is better than an image is an indicator of unused potential. Therefore, organizations should strive to create an image that is based on an identity, and this requires strategic communication”.¹⁸

¹⁷ Patric de Pelsmacker, Maggie Geuens and Joeri van der Bergh, *Marketing communications*, Pearson Education Limited, England, first edition 2001, p. 15.

¹⁸ Dr Sanja Vučinić, *Strategije komunikacije u kriznim situacijama*, Čigoja štampa, Beograd, 2015.

While an identity is a relatively stable category, an organizational image is changeable and dynamic. Changes in a positive sense are reflected in making a corporate image closer to the idea of a corporate identity, while negative changes are reflected in the increased mismatch between the two categories.

The organizational reputation of the Serbian Armed Forces

The reputation of an organization is, like its image, based on the subjective perception of the public or a part of it. The difference is that establishing a reputation requires personal experience in relation to the organization and the period in which this experience is confirmed. A reputation is “a general belief about an organization, after the visual and experiential perception of the public, which is acquired over time”.¹⁹ According to Vuković, a reputation grows over time into “a reputational capital” and is an intangible asset of the organization.²⁰

According to Ronald J. Burke and Graeme Martin, a corporate reputation is based on “emotional appeal, vision, leadership and integrity, social responsibility and a work environment that supports performance. A reputation comes from direct experience with an organization, by word of mouth, advertising and media coverage. It takes a lot of time to develop an outstanding reputation; yet the reputation can be damaged in an instant.”²¹ The same authors refer to the research by the audit firm Ernst&Young, which states that the intangible value of a company accounts for between 30 and 50 percent of its total value, while other, also credible sources, estimate such an intangible value up to 70%.²²

The reputation of the military in these territories has deeper and different roots compared to any company or organization and was established during the centuries-long, war-burdened history of our people in these territories. The occasional surveys of public opinion on trust in institutions place the Serbian Armed Forces at the top or at the very top of those most trusted by the Serbian citizens, which can be attributed to its great reputational capital.²³

The experience of the military has been an important factor of its reputation for decades, since until 2011 all adult, healthy men had a legal obligation to perform military service. After the completion of the service, continuity has been achieved by

¹⁹ Dr Vinka Filipović, dr Milica Kostić Stanković, *Odnosi s javnošću*, Beograd, 2014.

²⁰ Milovan Vuković et al., *Analiza odnosa između korporativnog identiteta, imidža i reputacije*, Tehnika, Vol. 76, no. 4, pp. 499-505, 2021.

²¹ Ronald J. Burke, Graeme Martin, *Corporate Reputation: Managing Opportunities and Threats*, Burlington, VT, 2011, pp. 1-120.

²² Ibid.

²³ The CESID (Centre for Free Elections and Democracy) research with the USAID support, “Public Opinion - Political Activism of Serbian Citizens”, from 2017, showed that more than 30% of the Serbian citizens trust only five institutions. The Serbian Armed Forces took the first place, with 57% of respondents trusting it.

the introduction of persons into the reserve, occasional military exercises, and the organization of various “open” events and manifestations - exercises, parades, arms displays, demonstrations, air shows and “open day” activities. However, the key factor in maintaining the high reputation of the Serbian Armed Forces was the engagement within its third mission, “support to civil authorities in combating security threats”, i.e., “assistance to civil authorities in responding to natural disasters, technical and technological disasters and other accidents”.

Simović states: “The fact is that there were several catastrophes and natural disasters when soldiers and officers played the main role and showed that they are more organized than members of other protection and rescue entities. That is why the saying ‘that will do the military’ became famous among the people”.²⁴

The military – more than a brand

If the property of a brand is viewed in relation to the possession of specific visual and verbal characteristics, it can be concluded that the Serbian Armed Forces as an organization have them, and that, in such a sense, it could be referred to as a brand. The other property of a brand that could be attributed to them, to some extent, is the existence of an intangible property, that is, the emotional engagement of people towards them, although it is not about consumers, clients or, literally, about service users, as marketing science views it. It is similar with the brand property that it directly refers to the product or service of a particular company/organization or to itself.

However, there are two brand determinants that have little or no relation to the military as an organization. The first is the measurability of the brand value and the fact that the brand directly or indirectly brings material benefit to its owner or right holder. Although there are examples of some armies in the world commercializing certain elements of their visual identity, there is no basis for expressing the value of “the Serbian Armed Forces brand” in a monetary form.

Richa S. Tiwary defines a brand value as “a value that a brand adds to the internal value of a product or service, or the total financial value associated with the brand market power. Brand equity takes into account all the different assets and liabilities of a brand. It is largely defined by the consumer and the value that the consumer attaches to some brand”.²⁵ Terzić and Đalić state that “understanding a brand value creates the conditions for more extensive investment in brand, and in this way the ultimate effects of managing this category are accomplished, which is an increase in the overall value of the company. Modern business treatment of a

²⁴ Milosav Simović, Iskustva Vojske Srbije u vanrednim situacijama 2014. godine, Vojno delo, Vol. 68, No. 6, 2016, pp. 100-122.

²⁵ Richa S. Tiwary, PhD, MLS, *Brand Management. Research Starters: Business*, 2021, April 11, 2022, <https://ezproxy.nb.rs:3507/eds/detail/detail?vid=5&sid=2258d309-14bd-45cd-a71f-717235a325d4%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=89163548&db=ers>

brand is primarily based on its value, positioning and market reputation. In the second plan, formal rights and signs of an identity (name, logo, slogan, colour, design, etc.) come to the fore (...) Between the mentioned marketing and accounting concept, the difference is in the form of tangible and intangible. (...) Brand management is in a direct correlation with other intangible elements, i.e. segments of intangible assets, such as intellectual capital, licenses, franchise, etc.”²⁶

The last brand property to be considered here is the differentiation from the competition. Even if it is concluded that the military functions in the social framework and the legal system as a “provider” of some “service”, it is clear that its “clients”, i.e. the users of its “services”, are, without exception, all citizens who do not have the possibility of choosing between several “armies”. Therefore, since the military is the only legal and legitimate armed force that primarily protects state from external threats, the concept of monistic institution is used in the military sociology, and since, as such, does not have “competition”, it cannot be spoken of as a brand.

Even in recent scientific discussions that emphasize the blurring and expansion of the concept of brand and branding in the world of hyper-linked communications, where countries, people and ideas are branded in addition to companies and organizations, the main meaning of a brand is not abandoned - to separate, differentiate, make a difference.²⁷ If there is no need to differentiate an organization from the competition or other complementary organizations through the process of branding, in addition to all other properties that the process entails, the theoretical and practical basis for considering it as a brand is lost.

When we talk about the Serbian Armed Forces, it is important to understand that the brand, although a modern and colloquially popular term, is theoretically inadequate on the one hand, and too narrow on the other to encompass the entirety of the public attitude or a part of the public to it. The organizational image, as an image and experience of the identity of the Serbian Armed Forces, particularly their reputation, as a long-term experience defined by a personal relationship, are the frameworks in which their character can be viewed more precisely and fully in the public mirror.

The brand of the Armed Forces as an employer

Starting from the fundamental properties of a brand, first of all the fact that branding makes sense only in the context of the differentiation from the competition, we are also faced with a case in which the Serbian Armed Forces could still be branded. It is about the branding of the Serbian Armed Forces as an employer, i.e. “employer branding”.

²⁶ Svetlana Terzić, Irena Đalić, *Analiza vrednovanja brenda na bazi kombinovanih metoda vrednovanja*, Anali Ekonomskog fakulteta u Subotici, Vol. 55, No. 42/2019, pp. 033-048.

²⁷ Vanitha Swaminathan, Alina Sorescu, Jan-Benedict E.M. Steenkamp, Thomas Clayton Gibson O’Guinn, Bernd Schmitt, *Branding in a Hyperconnected World: Refocusing Theories and Rethinking Boundaries*, Journal of Marketing, 2020, Vol. 84(2), pp. 24-46.

Employer branding is a relatively new practice in the corporate world and it has occurred as a necessity, primarily in high-tech companies, to attract and later retain high-quality personnel. According to the data by the National Employment Service, unemployment in Serbia has decreased from 743,158 to 512,844 persons since 2015, which is a decrease of 31%.²⁸ The competition on the labour market, especially in the developed regions of Serbia, conditions the need for the Serbian Armed Forces to brand themselves as a desirable employer in a systematic and planned manner. It should be emphasized that one of the key tasks of the Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Defence in the past two years was the organization and execution of the marketing and PR campaigns aimed at the general popularization of military profession among younger population, as well as support to the promotion of specific actions and competitions for admission to professional military service, enrolment in military schools and voluntary military service.

As mentioned, the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces, in addition to PR activities, implement and combine with them marketing techniques that, in most cases, cannot be clearly defined as ATL, BTL or TTL campaigns, but involve the production of multimedia materials (flyers, leaflets, posters, magazines, billboards, advertorials, video spots and radio jingles) and their dissemination, among other things, by renting advertising space in the media.

As three main components of employer branding, Bryan Adams mentions an organizational reputation, an offer presented to a future employee and the experience of the current employees. In this triangle, both theoretically and practically, one could look for a framework for positioning the marketing performance of the Serbian Armed Forces on the labour market. "Contemporary job seekers attach great importance to a reputation of a future employer in their decision to apply for a job or accept an offer, because they are very aware of the impact it will have on their reputation and the way others consider them. (...) An offer that the employer makes clearly articulates the 'give and take', which defines the relationship between the employer and employee in a particular organization. It establishes expectations for the employee's performance and behaviour and compensation and reward for fulfilling those expectations... (...) The employees' experience is extremely valuable and plays a great role in building the employer's reputation. However, if the employer brand is weak, even the best employees' experience will not put a company on the radar of the most demanding ones. The character of the employees' experience is directly related to the company's ability to accomplish an offer. (...) A positive employee's experience is reflected in their better work performance and the total organizational performance."²⁹

²⁸ Nacionalna služba za zapošljavanje, *Mesečni statistički bilten: Nezaposlenost i zapošljavanje u Republici Srbiji*, no. 235, March 2022.

²⁹ Bryan Adams, *Make Your Employer Brand Stand Out in the Talent Marketplace*, *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, 2022, pp. 1-7.

Conclusion

The Serbian Armed Forces defend the country from external armed threats and perform other missions and tasks, in accordance with the Constitution, law and principles of international law governing the use of force.³⁰ Its role in the legal system of the country is defined by the Constitution and laws and is unique in its character. Therefore, it can be said that the Serbian Armed Forces, from the perspective of marketing theory, are not a brand, unless they are considered in the capacity of an employer that “competes” on the labour market. The military is an institution whose position in the public is defined by three categories - its organizational identity, image and reputation.

This does not mean that within the military, or more broadly - the defence system, there are no organizations and institutions that are brands and where, without a doubt, there is both theoretical and practical justification for the use of this concept. These are, for example, the Military Academy, the Military Medical Academy, the Military Technical Institute, the Technical Test Centre, the Media Centre “Obrana”, the Military Film Centre “Zastava Film”, the Artistic Ensemble “Stanislav Binički”, etc. Each of the mentioned organizations, i.e. institutions, in addition to their place and role within the defence system, performs a specific activity recognized and evaluated in the wider national and often international frameworks. They have complementary entities in specific fields, i.e. the competition that they differentiate and stand out from by the properties of their brands. The brands of the mentioned institutions are a part of the organizational identity of the military, while their value is interdependent with the image and reputation of the entire military organization.

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Summary

Are the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) a brand? Is there a theoretical or, ultimately, a practical basis for considering an armed force in that context? The concepts of brand and branding have originated as products of marketing practice and as such are predominantly studied by this scientific discipline.

Most marketing theorists and practitioners agree on several key features of a brand - 1 it has certain visual or verbal features, 2 it directly refers to the product or service of a particular company/organization or to the company itself, 3 it distinguishes goods, services or a company from the competition, 4 a brand is an intangible asset implying mental or emotional engagement since it is based on the consumer's or client's experiences, impressions and/or benefits, 5 brands have measurable value and bring financial benefits.

Occasionally and in a theoretically inconsistent manner, brand and branding are brought into relation with the Serbian Armed Forces as an organization, neglecting the basic characteristics of these concepts established in marketing. There is no sense in branding the armed forces as an organization because, first of all, it has no competition. In addition to this, it would not be possible to express the value of the armed forces' brand.

The Serbian Armed Forces can be regarded as a brand only if they are considered in the capacity of an employer that competes on the labour market. In addition, certain brands such as the Military Academy, the Military Medical Academy, the Military Technical Institute, etc. exist as elements of the organizational identity of the Serbian Armed Forces.

The structure of the military organization, its social, normative and legal role, doctrine, history and tradition, specific internal relations, combat readiness, armament, insignia, service members' attitude and behaviour towards its fundamental values and, finally, the way it communicates with the public constitutes the totality of the Serbian Armed Forces' identity. The way in which the public perceives the identity features of the military is a dynamic category called an image. A reputation, like an image, is based on the subjective perception of an identity, with the difference that building a reputation requires personal experience with the organization and a period of time in which that experience is confirmed.

The article analyses various definitions and determinants of the concept of brand, and offers an answer as to whether and in which case we can talk about the "SAF brand" and why its public image should primarily be viewed and studied through the prism of an organizational identity, image and reputation. The author proposes that the organizational image and reputation of the Serbian Armed Forces be used as conceptual frameworks for perceiving the image of the military as a mirror of public opinion, while the concept of brand is usable in the sense of branding the military as an employer.

Key words: Serbian Armed Forces, brand, branding, identity, image, reputation

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