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Becoming a Part of Something Bigger

A Study on Employer Branding and Identity in the Swedish Armed Forces

by

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Abstract

Title: Becoming a Part of Something Bigger - A Study on Employer Branding and Identity in the Swedish Armed Forces

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs and communicates its employer brand, and how employees interpret and experience it in practice. The study seeks to contribute to a deepened understanding of employer branding as an interpretative process.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in social constructionism and the interpretivist tradition, with symbolic interactionism as the specific theoretical perspective applied in the analysis. An abductive research approach allowed iterative movement between empirical material and theory. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees in roles relevant for studying employer branding within the Swedish Armed Forces.

Theoretical Framing: The theoretical framework draws on literature concerning employer branding, identity across individual, group and organizational levels, and motivation.

Contributions: This study contributes to the understanding of how employer branding is constructed, communicated and perceived by the employees. It explains how symbolic values operate as strategic and motivational mechanisms. Furthermore, it extends Gabriel and Lang's consumer theory to show how the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces is selectively consumed, actively reinterpreted and reshaped.

Key Words: Employer Branding, Identity, Organizational Identity, Motivation, Symbolic Values, Public Sector, Organizational Identification, Armed Forces

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Organizations today operate in an increasingly competitive and dynamic labour market. Rapid technological developments, shifting competence needs, and demographic changes place a growing pressure on employers to secure the skills they require (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014, p.49). As employees become more selective and expectations rise, employers must work harder to compete. This is reflected in reports about Swedish employers having difficulties finding the right competence (SCB, 2026). Thus, many organizations have developed formal employer branding programs to enhance attractiveness and secure long-term competence supply (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.501). These challenges are particularly prominent in the public sector, where competition with private employers and evolving societal expectations intensify the demand for effective talent management strategies.

As we study the Swedish Armed Forces, we look at an organization that not only takes part in the same competition for talent as other organizations, but also operates in a unique and complex environment shaped by national security demands, political directives and societal expectations. In recent years, a shifting geopolitical landscape and Sweden's accession to NATO have further underscored the importance of a robust and well-functioning defence organization. According to the Swedish Armed Forces (Försvarsmakten, 2026), NATO membership entails new responsibilities, deeper international cooperation, and increased readiness requirements. Simultaneously, political decisions have mandated a substantial expansion of Sweden's defence capabilities, including a planned increase in personnel from approximately 60,000 to 100,000 by 2030 (Försvarsmakten, 2025). This means that the Swedish Armed Forces must not only grow, but grow fast, while undergoing the most powerful transformation in decades (Regeringskansliet, n.d). While doing this, they also need to uphold their core values of credibility, capability and public legitimacy (Försvarsmakten, 2025).

To meet these external demands, the Swedish Armed Forces must ensure a sustainable supply of both military and civilian competences. The ability to attract, recruit, and retain skilled employees therefore become a central strategic concern, one that affects not only operational

capability and long-term preparedness, but the organization's fundamental ability to fulfil its mission. It is within this landscape that we situate our study, as we consider the Swedish Armed Forces to offer a particularly compelling case for examining employer branding in practice. The organization is large, complex and undergoing one of its most significant transformations. All this while it must attract both military and civilian competences, navigate institutional constraints, and communicate a meaningful and credible employer brand, while facing high expectations and a volatile environment.

1.2 Problematization

As labour markets grow more competitive and employees more selective, the ability to attract and retain skilled people has become a strategic priority for organizations across all sectors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer branding has emerged as a central tool in this effort, and is a way for organizations to communicate to current and potential employees the package of benefits that is offered by employment, both in terms of functional, economic and psychological benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p.187). Yet employer branding is not simply a matter of crafting the right message. Research suggests that how an employer brand is received and interpreted by employees and potential recruits matters just as much as how it is constructed and communicated (Cushen, 2009). The relationship between what an organization intends to convey and how individuals actually make sense of it in their everyday lives and internalize it remains an underexplored dimension of employer branding research.

This is particularly interesting to examine within the public sector. Much of the existing employer branding literature is rooted in private sector contexts, where organizations have considerable freedom to shape their offering. Public sectors, by contrast, operate under institutional constraints that limit this flexibility. How they construct and communicate an attractive employer brand under such conditions, and how employees experience it in practice, remains a less developed area of research.

The Swedish Armed Forces represents an especially compelling context in which to explore these questions. It is a large, complex, and rapidly expanding organization facing simultaneous pressure to grow its workforce substantially, secure competences across a wide range of both military and civilian roles, and do so within the constraints of a government

organization. At the same time, the pause of mandatory military service has created a generation with little or no personal connection to the organization, making the work of building familiarity and attractiveness an active and ongoing effort. The current geopolitical situation that is marked by war in Europe and Sweden's recent NATO accession adds yet another layer of complexity, reshaping both how the organization is perceived externally and how its own employees experience meaning of their work.

Taken together, these conditions make the Swedish Armed Forces a particularly rich and timely context for exploring employer branding in practice, from the perspective of the people within the organization. Rather than seeking to fill a specific theoretical gap, this study aims to deepen and challenge existing assumptions about employer branding by exploring how these processes unfold in practice within a unique organizational context.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs and communicates its employer brand, and how employees interpret and experience it. By adopting a qualitative approach grounded in social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, the study seeks to capture how employees and organizational actors make sense of attraction, recruitment, and retention in their everyday work.

The study is thereby guided by the following research question:

How is the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces constructed and communicated, and how is it perceived and interpreted by employees?

1.4 Research Outline

The thesis is structured in the following way: **Chapter 1** introduces the background, problematization, purpose and research question, and lastly the outline of the study. **Chapter 2** presents the literature review, covering employer branding and identity as the central theoretical concepts. **Chapter 3** outlines the methodological approach, including the philosophical grounding, research design, data collection and analytical process that guides this thesis. Furthermore, the ethical considerations, credibility, limitations and reflexivity of the thesis is also reflected on. **Chapter 4** presents and analyzes the empirical findings, examining how the Swedish Armed Force's employer brand is constructed, communicated

and perceived. **Chapter 5** discusses the findings from the analysis in Chapter 4 in relation to the existing literature in Chapter 2. Finally, **Chapter 6** concludes the thesis by summarizing the main insights and presenting theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we will explore existing literature on employer branding, identity and motivation to provide an overview of how organizations attract, retain and make sense of their work force. As there is a considerable amount of literature in the fields of employer branding, identity and motivation, we present the literature that we consider as relevant for understanding the specific findings in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces. We summarize the literature by presenting the interrelations and highlighting what we believe to be a shortage of understanding in this specific context.

2.1 Employer Branding

As labor markets become more competitive and employees more selective, the ability to attract and retain employees has become a strategic priority for organizations. Employer branding has emerged as an important tool for this. This section introduces the concept of employer branding, examines how it is communicated, and considers how employees and candidates interpret and makes sense of organizational messages.

What is employer branding?

Employer branding is the efforts a company takes to promote, both internally and externally, what makes them different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.502; Lievens, 2007 cited in Edwards, 2013, p.390). The purpose of it is to differentiate the organization and its characteristics as an employer, in order to stand out against competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.502; CIPD, 2016 cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, p.150). Employer branding ranges from attraction and recruitment of candidates, to being able to retain them within the organization as well (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, pp.150-151). Employer branding therefore spans through the full employment cycle, from attracting to retaining. This underscores the purpose for studying everything from the very definition of the employer brand, to how it is communicated and finally internalized.

A central component to employer branding is to develop an employer value proposition (EVP), which represents ‘the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment’ (Ambler and Barrow, 1996 cited in Edwards, 2013, p.390). The

EVP functions as the core message of employer branding and guides how organizations communicate their attractiveness as employers. In this sense, employer branding is closely connected to the broader corporate brand of the organization, since employer attractiveness is shaped through the associations, values and identity connected to the organization itself (Aaker, 2004). The term 'brand' describes "anything carrying a distinct identity, and the reputation, good or bad, associated with that identity" (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.68). A corporate brand is exactly the associations that are made with an organization, and by leveraging the corporate brand, an organization can differentiate itself through these organizational associations (Aaker, 2004, p.7).

A strong corporate brand provides a value proposition that helps differentiate the company (Aaker, 2004, p.14). Aaker (2004, p.14) argues that for a corporate brand to work in the best way, it should deliver a functional benefit. Functional benefits can be things such as a safe working environment, top quartile pay or an attractive working environment (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.69). However the corporate brand can also be based on more subtle and complex values, and deliver emotional or self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 2004, p.14; Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.69). Many brands now focus more on the emotional benefits and how it makes you feel as a person, since that makes it easier to differentiate themselves, rather than focusing on what the brand does since that is easier for competitors to copy (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.69). This suggests that employer attractiveness is not only based on material conditions such as salary or working environment, but also on the symbolic meanings and emotional attachment associated with the organization. While Aaker (2004) primarily emphasizes differentiation and strategic brand value, Barrow and Mosley (2005) places a greater focus on the emotional attachment and psychological relationship between the employee and the organization. According to Johnson and Jackson (2009, pp.915-916), values can be used strategically in recruitment and publicity to attract potential applicants. The authors even argue that applicants may choose organizations based on symbolic features in order to shape how others perceive them.

Understanding the EVP as the brand's core message, it is also important to consider how brand equity, familiarity and image shape candidate and employee responses. The concept of brand equity centers on the added value that a strong brand generates in the form of favorable responses from current and potential employees (Theurer et al., 2018, p.156). The employer knowledge framework shows that individuals' behaviour is guided by three dimensions

which are familiarity, reputation and image. The familiarity is about the awareness of the organization, the reputation is the beliefs about how the public evaluates it, and the image is the specific associations that are held by the individual (Theurer et al., 2018, p.162). In a military context, these associations can often be categorized into instrumental and symbolic attributes (Lievens et al., 2005, pp.555-556). For military organizations, symbolic attributes such as excitement tend to contribute more to organizational attractiveness than purely instrumental factors such as pay (Lievens et al., 2005, p.553,563). Furthermore, brand familiarity serves as an anchor in the way that when familiarity about the organization is high, the employer image and attractiveness becomes more effective (Lievens et al., 2005, p.555, 564).

From a resource-based perspective, employer branding can be understood as a strategic organizational resource. The resource-based view (RBV) suggests that organizations achieve competitive advantage through resources that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, pp.48-49). Inimitability is often found in a “socially complex phenomena”, such as an organization’s unique history and culture that differentiates it from competitors (Barney & Wright, 1998, cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, p.49). Trust and good relationships are examples of characteristics that can provide a firm-specific asset that is valuable, rare, and difficult for competitors to imitate (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, p.49). This relates to what Aaker (2004, p.8) writes about that associations of a corporate brand can be connected to things such as the values and priorities of the organization, meaning what is considered important and will not be compromised. The heritage, meaning the brand’s history and roots can also be emphasized in order to create a distinct identity which creates a genuine feeling for candidates and employees. It can also be related to citizenship, if there are respectful and good people within the company and if the company is concerned with social and environmental problems (Aaker, 2004, p.9). This will in order create positive attitudes, respect and trust. In this sense, the EVP can be seen as the expression of these strategic resources by communicating the attributes that differentiate an organization as an employer. From this perspective, the symbolic and relational aspects of the employer brand may also function as strategic organizational resources that are difficult for competitors to replicate.

Having established what employer branding is and how the employer brand knowledge operates, we now look into how organizations communicate and embed the brand within the organization.

Communication of the Employer Brand

Once the value proposition has been defined, the organization must communicate it effectively, both externally to attract candidates and internally to ensure employees experience and embody what the brand promises. Communication of the employer brand involves both external marketing to attract applicants and internal marketing to ensure that employees live the brand. Sokro (2012, pp.165-166) conceptualizes this as a three-step process: developing the value proposition, external marketing of this to attract targeted applicants and lastly the internal marketing of this, where the brand's promise is incorporated into the culture of the organization so that employees actually live it. Internal branding efforts are often initiated through the induction process where the organization "sells" their core values to the new employees. This helps the new employees to adjust their work environment and get a positive image of the organization from the beginning, which is important so that the employees later carry the brand image throughout their time in the organization (Sokro, 2012, pp.126-169). This aligns with Akeer's (2004, p.11) argument that a corporate brand needs to be supported internally through the organizational culture, values and mission so that the employees actually buy into the goals and values of the corporate brand. Without genuine buy-in, the brand risks becoming an empty external message rather than a lived organizational reality which will affect how the corporate brand is perceived by the outside world. This reinforces the idea of this study to not only study the construction of the employer brand but also how it is perceived by employees.

The risk of this type of gap between promise and reality is however already somewhat thoroughly studied. Cushen's study (2009, p.111) shows that branding attempts can fail when they do not match employees' lived experience, leading to cynicism rather than commitment. Hatch and Schultz (2001, p.130) similarly argue that organizations must align image, vision, and culture to achieve a successful corporate brand. In cases of misalignment, such initiatives may increase cynicism and highlight contradictions between communicated values and actual organizational practices (Cushen, 2009, p.111, Hatch & Schultz, 2001, p.130, Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.508). Efficient employer branding is therefore not only dependent on how it is constructed and communicated, but also on whether it is substantiated by the organizational reality.

Communication of the employer brand further extends beyond the formal employment period itself. By viewing employer branding through an expanded employee life cycle, the organization can begin building relationships with potential candidates in the pre-employment phase such as through school collaborations to secure future competence supply (App et al., 2012, pp.270-274). Likewise, this perspective also emphasizes the importance of post-employment, where former employees can act as important ambassadors who maintain the organization's reputation. This long-term perspective underscores that employer branding is not just a recruitment message but an ongoing relational process that spans beyond just formal employment.

Interpreting the Employer Brand

Communication only matters as far as it is interpreted, and employees and external audiences are not passive recipients of organizational messages, and therefore this section focuses more on how employees perceive what is communicated. Gabriel & Lang (1995, p.65), argue that consumers have the ability to “alter rather than just receive and carry messages”, meaning that they do not simply receive and repeat messages exactly as they are communicated but instead change and interpret them based on their own experiences and perspectives. Consumers are described as people who search for a sense of identity and use products and brands for example to help define who they are (Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p.81). Gabriel and Lang (1995, p.94) argue that identity contains “truths, half-truths and wish-fulfilling fiction”, meaning that individuals may engage with organizational messages through aspirations or fantasies about who or what they wish to be.

For employer branding work to lead to genuine engagement, certain psychological conditions should be met (May et al., 2004, p.11). May et al. (2004, p.30) identifies the experience of meaningfulness as the strongest driver for employees to invest their “human spirit” in their work. Where this experience is present, a strong psychological contract between the individual and organization can develop. The psychological contract refers to the informal and implicit expectations and obligations that are between the employee and organization, separate from the formal contract (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.69). While the formal contract is about salaries, hours, and role, the psychological contract touches on the more emotional dimensions of the employment such as a sense of mutual investment, reciprocity, and trust.

These psychological benefits and the emotional attachment among the employees can also strengthen the psychological contract between the individual and the organization, which is different from the more tangible and functional benefits shown in the formal employment contract (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p.69). The opposite, however, is equally true. Cushen's study (2009, p.109) showed that when employees perceive inconsistencies between what is communicated and the actual everyday reality, they may reinterpret or reject the employer branding initiatives, potentially leading to cynicism or disengagement rather than commitment.

By having a distinct employer brand, the organization is not only advertising a job, but specifically appeals to people who will most likely thrive and perform the best within the unique organizational culture that the organization possesses (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, p.150). Recruitment and selection, which are key parts of employer branding, is described as a social process where not only the organization selects the candidate but also the other way around (Nickson et al., 2008; cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2017, p.150). According to Sokro (2012, pp.167-168), an organization's public reputation is one example of a crucial predictor of a candidate's decision to pursue employment within an organization and then also remain within it for a long time after they have been recruited. In this sense, how employees make sense of it all not only shapes engagement but also the workforce that the employer brand attracts. As it appears that symbolic values and interpretations are important for how the employer brands are understood, the following sections move to the field of identity to deepen this perspective.

2.2 Identity

Identity serves as the central link between the organization's communicated brand promises and the employees' internal self-understanding, which is crucial for understanding how employer branding is internalized and experienced in practice. This section examines identity across individual, group and organizational levels.

Identity sits at the heart of organizational life, quietly shaping how people understand who they are and how they fit into the wider collective. It is considered a "root construct", since it addresses the foundational questions of an entity: "Who are we?" or "Who am I?", and by doing so it also considers what actions appear reasonable within them (Albert et al., 2000,

p.13; Sveingsson et al., 2021, p.587). These self-understandings make some actions appear more reasonable than others, linking identity directly to behavior. A clear sense of identity may act as a "rudder for navigating difficult waters," providing direction and stability when organizational life becomes complex (Albert et al., 2000, p.13).

Sveningsson et al. (2021, p.587) highlights that identity is shaped through the interplay of external forces, such as organizational culture and professional standards or societal ideals, and internal forces such as personal experiences and values. This means that identity is both something people think and something that they live. Hallonsten and Sveningsson (2025, p.139) notes that identity is shaped by everyday organizational practices, expectations, and norms which employees internalize over time. Whetten and Godfrey (1998, p.19) reinforce this by emphasizing that identity is socially constructed through interactions, and fundamentally relational, as individuals define themselves partly by labels they assign themselves and partly by comparing themselves to others around them.

In the organizational context, identity spans into multiple levels such as individual, group, and organizational dimensions (Cornelissen et al., 2007, pp.2-3). Identity is increasingly viewed through an interpretive and process-oriented perspective, rather than a static condition (Brown, 2021, p.1205). Instead of assuming that individuals automatically adopt an identity as a direct function of an organization's brand, which is a more functionalistic view, identity is seen as an interpretive process where employees actively create meaning. Identities are therefore described as multiple, fluid and rarely fully coherent, consisting of the meanings that the individuals attach to themselves to answer existential questions such as "who am I?" and "how should I act?" within a specific context (Brown, 2021, p.1206; Sveningsson et al., 2021, p.586). A part of this process is identity work, which are the range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present and sustain identities that support their self-concept (Brown, 2021, p.1206). This work involves a constant effort to form and revise constructions that provide a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson et al., 2021, p.589).

Individual Identity

The individual dimension of identity relates to the "personal sense of self within the organization" (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p.2). Albert et al. (2000, pp.13-14) argues that organizations must increasingly reside in the heads and hearts of its members. When individuals internalize the group or organizational identity as a part of their self definition,

they gain a sense of meaningfulness and connectedness, which explains why individuals act on behalf of the group or organization even without explicit instructions (Albert et al., 2000, p.14). Gabriel & Lang (1995, p.85) similarly emphasize how the individual identity is drawn from identification with the group as their sense of self through the shared ideals and norms of the collective that they belong to.

Identity construction at an individual level is closely related to how employees internalize organizational norms and expectations. Hallonsten and Sveningsson (2025, p.139) show how normalized behaviours, such as working over-time, can gradually become part of an individual's self-image as they adapt to these expectations. The individual begins to see oneself as "reliable" or "committed", showing how identity is shaped through the organizational expectation. Identity is therefore not only cognitive but also embedded in everyday routines. Alvesson and Empson (2008, p.14) further elaborates on this relational dimension by describing the relationship between organization and individual as mutual, meaning that the organization shapes the individual identity through membership and socialization, and individual characteristics and self image shape the organizational identity.

The mutuality is also evident in how individuals navigate the expectations from their surroundings. Hallonsten and Sveningsson (2025) argue that identity is influenced by the desire to meet expectations from others, including managers, colleagues or the general profession itself (2025, p.176). Whetten and Godfrey (1998, p.20) add to this by saying that individuals often maintain several "social selves", each activated in different contexts. This reflects the idea that identity involves balancing distinctiveness with similarity, in other words wanting to be unique while still wanting to belong (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998, pp.19-20). This allows individuals to adapt their self-presentation while still feeling like the same person. In this sense, identity is not only internal but also relational, and shaped by how individuals believe that others expect them to behave.

At a deeper level, identity construction is also influenced by the narratives that individuals create about themselves. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p.122) describes identity as an ongoing process where people weave together past experiences, present situations and future aspirations. This helps individuals maintain a sense of coherence even when expectations or roles shift. Watson (2008, p.122) similarly argues that individuals engage in "identity work" as they navigate tension between their internal self-understanding and the external social

identities available to them. This highlights that identity is not only shaped by expectations from others, but also managed by individuals and how they try to present themselves.

Understanding individual identity also requires some attention to motivation, as that is what translates identity into long-term commitment and behavior. Sveningsson and Hallonsten (2025, p.170) argue that people's loyalty to an organization is affected by their motivation, and distinguish between three forms of motivation: inner motivation, instrumental motivation and interactive motivation (2025, p.170). *Inner motivation* is connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, meaning that lower needs in the hierarchy of physiological needs, safety and community has to be fulfilled before higher needs of satisfaction can be fulfilled (Sveningsson & Hallonsten, 2025, p.171). According to the two-factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959; cited in Sveningsson & Hallonsten, 2025, p.174), in the same way as these lower needs in the hierarchy exists, there are hygiene factors such as a good working environment and reasonable salary that can make employees dissatisfied. Motivational factors, on the other hand, are rewarding factors such as recognition and personal development that only leads to satisfaction for the employees if it is fulfilled. Meanwhile, *instrumental motivation* is rewards or punishments in terms of salary, relationship with colleagues or manager and similar things (Sveningsson & Hallonsten, 2025, p.175). Thereby, the motivation of an employee to perform at work is affected by which instrumental incitements there are. *Interactive motivation* is based on wanting to meet the expectations of the surroundings through meeting values, ideals, morals and identity that exists commonly in a group. The desire to fit in, be loyal to the organization, and "act normal" is something that motivates the individual. Different professions and occupational groups carry different identities that share ideals, which leads to motivation (Sveningsson & Hallonsten, 2025, p.176). This connects to Gabriel and Lang's (1995, p.94) idea about the ego-ideal, which is the ideal version of who the individual wishes to be, and this ideal can motivate the individual to seek recognition and thus behave in ways that aligns with the social expectations.

This motivational dimension is further reinforced by Whetten and Godfrey (1998, p.184) who note that individuals often seek organizations where they can enact their deeply held personal values, and that identification can help the individual feel more "complete" or "whole". This thus suggests that identity is not only cognitive but also motivational, and shaping why individuals commit to certain organizations. The authors furthermore argue that organizations actively foster identification because it motivates the employees to act in ways which align

with the organizational interests (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998, p.158). Identification has been linked to increased compliance, lower turnover, and behaviors consistent with the organization's identity (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998, pp.184-185). This demonstrates how identity and organizational values can create a sense of belonging and purpose, thereby motivating employees to engage with and commit to the organization.

Group Level Identity

The group dimension of identity, according to Cornelissen et al. (2007, p.3), relates to the shared identity of teams and sections within organizations. As individuals categorize themselves as group members, they emphasize their perceived similarity to the group prototype and adhere to the collective norms of the group (Albert et al., 2000, p.16). Ybema (2009, p.301) argues that this identification is shaped through ongoing interaction between the personal motives and the external expectations.

However, Hallonsten and Sveningsson (2025, p.176) note that individuals often adopt group behaviours simply to fit in or just avoid the potential social consequences, even when the behaviors are not personally meaningful. This highlights that social pressures shape group-based identification. Similarly, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002, p.630) emphasize that organizations can regulate identity by categorizing individuals into social groups which fosters a feeling of belonging and community. Such categorizations can become a significant source of self-understanding.

Haslam and Reicher (2006, p.1037) further argue that social identity, the sense of belonging to a group, is essential for effective cooperation between members of the organization. They further argue that the shared social identity also shapes how individuals support one another: when acting in terms of a team member, individuals are more likely to support other members, and receive support in return (Haslam & Reicher 2006, p.1037). This suggests that it is not about the group membership alone, but to what extent the membership is internalized as a shared identity that determines whether the group functions as a cohesive collective (Haslam & Reicher 2006, p.1049)

Group identity is further shaped through discursive and symbolic practices. Watson (2008, p.123) notes that individuals draw on socially available “personas” or social identities when

interacting with others, which means that the group identity is partly constructed through shared language, stories and expectations.

Organizational Identity

Albert and Whetten (1985, p.80) define organizational identity as what makes the organization unique in relation to others, typically expressed through questions such as “Who are we?”. According to Cornelissen et al. (2007, p.6), organizational identity refers to what is collectively considered “central, enduring and distinctive in character”. It acts as a cognitive frame or perceptual lens that guides individual sense-making and information processing (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p.6).

However, organizational identity is rarely fixed or universally agreed upon. Albert et al. (2000, pp.15-16) highlights that identities may be multiple, contested or subject to change as organizations interact with shifting environments and stakeholder expectations. This view complements the notion of identity as “central, enduring and distinctive”, by emphasizing that endurance may involve continuity rather than complete stability. Sveningsson et al. (2021, pp.588-589) develop this further, emphasizing that organizational identity is often fragmented and shifting, especially in complex or changing environments. The authors argue that individuals may draw on multiple, sometimes even contradictory, identity elements when answering “who are we” as an organization. Whetten and Godfrey (1998, p.21) similarly argue that organizations can present multiple identities to different audiences, without appearing inconsistent.

Organizational identity is further shaped through socialization processes and recruitment. Hallonsten and Sveningsson (2025, p.139) highlight that organizations actively cultivate identity by training the employees to adopt the shared norms and values, both through formal programs and everyday practices. Recruitment similarly aims to attract the individuals who have values and personality traits that align with the desired identity of the organization (Hallonsten & Sveningsson, 2025, p.139).

Beyond internal socialization, Hallonsten & Sveningsson (2025) further note that organizational identity is increasingly used as a strategic tool. Organizations communicate specific values, ideals, and narratives through employer branding to encourage identification among employees and external audiences (Hallonsten & Sveningsson, 2025, p.140). Through

slogans, storytelling, and value statements, organizations attempt to create a sense of shared purpose and meaning. This illustrates how identity and image are intertwined, not only internally but also in how organizations present themselves to the outside world.

Identity is also affected by moments of disruption. Sveningsson, et al. (2021, p.592) argue that identity is intensified during times of uncertainty, change, or threat. Grant (2021, pp.147–149) argues that negative social evaluation can trigger strong identity responses, as employees attempt to protect or reconstruct the organization's identity during times of crisis. This highlights that organizational identity is not only shaped in stable periods, but also tested and reconstructed during moments of disruption, where identity work becomes a central mechanism for navigating tension and preserving a sense of belonging.

2.3 Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 has reviewed the theoretical foundations that guide this study. The first part introduced employer branding as a process through which organizations seek to attract, recruit and retain employees by communicating both functional and symbolic values. Central to this is the employer value proposition, which shapes how organizations differentiate themselves as employers. The literature further highlights that the employer brand is not simply transmitted but actively interpreted and negotiated by employees and candidates through their own sensemaking processes. Overall the literature explored points to the importance of examining employer branding as a meaning-making process, which is in line with what we aim to do with our study.

The second part examined identity across individual, group, and organizational levels. Identity is understood as socially constructed, relational and continuously shaped through interactions, expectations and everyday organizational practices. Individuals engage in identity work to create coherent self-understandings, while groups foster belonging through shared norms and collective meanings. Organizational identity is presented as both enduring and dynamic, particularly in complex or changing environments. Since identity appears to influence how employees perceive organizational messages, the literature provides us with an important foundation for understanding how the employer brand is experienced in the organization that we study.

Together, the literature provides the theoretical lens through which this study examines how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs and communicates its employer brand, and how employees interpret and internalize it as part of their own sense of identity and belonging. Together, the literature explored highlights the need to understand employer brand not only as a strategic tool but as something that is interpreted and lived by employees, reinforcing the relevance of our study.

3. Methodology

The following section describes the chosen methodology for this thesis, in order to address our research question and fulfill the purpose of the study. Firstly, the philosophical grounding that this paper is based on is explained. Secondly, we outline the research approach that laid the foundation of the thesis. Thirdly, the research design and process is explained to understand the context of the study and how the data was collected. Lastly, it is described how the data was analyzed, and the chapter ends with a discussion about the credibility, limitations and reflexivity of the study, and ethical considerations that should be addressed.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

This study was grounded in social constructionism, which served as our primary ontological stance. From this perspective, social reality is not a fixed external entity but is constantly under construction through human interactions and acts of interpretation (Prasad, 2018, pp.13-14). We viewed knowledge as being generated through these interpretative acts rather than being “discovered” as an objective truth. Our study therefore follows the interpretivist tradition, which takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2018, p.13). Instead of positivism, which views reality as concrete and separate from the researcher, interpretivism instead sees reality as socially constructed through acts of interpretation and sensemaking (Prasad, 2018). Rather than seeing reality as a fixed, interpretivism sees reality as created through how people understand and interpret their experiences (Prasad, 2018, p.14). This reflects the principle of “verstehen”, which is about understanding how people themselves experience and make sense of their situation from their own perspective (Weber, 1949; cited in Prasad, 2018, p.14). Thereby, we aimed to capture how the interviewees themselves described their work and the organization. The concept of “Lebenswelt” further highlights the importance of everyday experiences, since our purpose with the study was to see how the employer brand is understood in the employees everyday work life (Prasad, 2018, p.14). Within the interpretivist tradition, we specifically applied the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism to analyze our data. Symbolic interactionism allowed us to understand how people create meaning through social interactions (Prasad, 2018, p.19-21). It enabled us to view employer branding as a socially constructed process shaped by the interviewee's individual interpretations. This allowed us to understand employer branding in terms of a “negotiated order”, which in simple terms means

that the social reality of it is not fixed, but continuously shaped through negotiations in everyday interactions and negotiations with people, explicitly or implicitly (Prasad, 2018, pp.22-23).

3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

We utilized a qualitative approach as our overall methodology, with the purpose of understanding processes, meanings, and qualities. A qualitative approach allows for collection of non-structured data and allows for a focus on the interviewees' perspectives and what they believe is important (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp.395-396). We did this in order to explore the processes, meanings and interpretations within the organization and focus on the interviewees' own perspectives and what they themselves considered to be important. The idea of using a qualitative approach also agrees with the description of qualitative research by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, pp.10-12), that the purpose of qualitative research is not to measure how much or how many, but to understand processes, meanings and qualities. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.19) specifically mention a motive for qualitative research being "to illustrate and specify how people, institutions and organizations perceive each other", which is very much in line with the purpose of this study. The authors argue that qualitative data is inherently messy and needs to be worked on through interpretation, creativity and analytical decisions (2018, pp.10-12).

3.2.2 Abductive Approach

In this study, we adopted an abductive approach in order to bridge the empirical data and the literature review. An abductive approach is appropriate for qualitative studies, which aims to understand how interviewees interpret and understand their everyday work. By using an abductive approach, it allowed us to stay empirically grounded in the interviewees' interpretations, while also flexibly and reflexively engaging with theory. This approach allowed us to move iteratively between the empirical material and theory (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p.46). As we followed this approach and thus started with gathering the empirical material, we were able to then move back and forth between theory and our empirical findings to gradually build plausible connections as new patterns or interpretations emerged. By remaining open to clashes between theoretical assumptions and empirical findings, we could refine our understanding of what we were studying.

Following Bell et al.'s (2019, p.24) description of abduction, and moving back and forth between data and theory, we let the data guide us in our search for relevant categories of literature and theory. Patterns in the interviews generated suggestions for concepts and theories that we used to re-code and reinterpret the material, and then those reinterpretations pointed to new theoretical connections to find plausible interpretations and explanations of the observations. Theory was thereby not treated as a fixed thing that would explain everything in the empirical material, but helped us to continuously evolve our interpretations, and was developed together in a dialogue together with the findings.

The abductive approach is also closely connected to the interpretivist tradition, which is also the tradition used for this study, and thereby the abductive approach makes a logical choice (Bell et al., 2019, p.24). Since our purpose was to understand how employees and representatives interpret attraction, recruitment and retention, an abductive approach became logical as it allowed us to stay empirically close to the interviewees own interpretations, while still engaging with theory in a reflexive and flexible way.

Therefore, the following analysis chapter should be read as an interpretative exploration of how the employees of the Swedish Armed Forces experience and make sense of the employer brand, rather than as an objective description of reality.

3.2.3 Research Ambition

Our philosophical grounding and research approach served as a guidance for this study. Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, p.247) argue that studies become interesting when challenging what is normally taken for granted. This was also the guiding principle for our study, since we rather explored than sought coherence with existing ideas. The idea was not to challenge existing ideas and theory, but rather to contribute to a deeper understanding of how employer branding is interpreted and negotiated in practice (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p.252). This ambition aligns with Bell et al.'s (2019, p.377) idea of qualitative research as a process which develops rich, conceptualized understandings of how people make sense of their everyday reality. The authors also emphasize that qualitative studies often aim to generate nuanced insights rather than generalizable findings (2019, p.377). In line with this, the aim of this study was not to produce a generalizable result, but instead to develop a deeper understanding of how the interviewees experience and make sense of their everyday work in a specific

context. Our aim with the study was also to contribute to academic literature in the field that we are studying.

3.3 Research Design and Process

3.3.2 Data Collection

Choice of Study Object

The empirical material is based on semi-structured interviews with people working in roles connected to employer branding within The Swedish Armed Forces. From the beginning, we were interested in studying employer branding as a concept. We then contacted interesting companies for this via email, including The Swedish Armed Forces. We had an initial meeting with them to discuss our intended purpose of the study, ideas about the research question, and if it would be possible for us to conduct our study together with them. The person that we had the initial meeting with offered to provide us with several people working with related roles, to help us study employer branding within the organization. This resulted in a conscious sampling that provided us with interview objects that would fit the research purpose in the best possible way (Bryman & Bell, 2017, p.406). We got a list of names that we could contact ourselves, although beforehand our initial contact had already contacted them to let them know what we intended to study and what kind of questions we would ask during a potential interview. This helped us to later get in contact with them, as they already expected to hear from us and knew what the interview would entail, and because a colleague of theirs had advised them to participate. Later, some of these people also recommended their colleagues with similar roles which we could contact and interview. This enabled a snowball sampling, which is when the interview objects advise someone else who might add value to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp.411-412). Our aim with the study was to gain a holistic view of the employer branding within the Swedish Armed Forces. Thereby, getting in contact with people with different kinds of roles, ages, genders, departments, hierarchical positions and geographical areas was beneficial. All of the anonymized interviewees have roles that we considered reasonable for the purpose of our thesis and the research question. We have chosen to not disclose the interviewees roles and areas of work, in order to maintain anonymity in the best way. From a reflexive perspective, it is important to acknowledge that the interviewees discussed their own workplace and organization, which may have influenced how openly certain experiences or opinions were expressed. Although the participants were

anonymized in the thesis, their professional affiliation with the organization may still have shaped how they framed their answers.

Semi-structured interviews

In order to gain insight into the interviewees' interpretations and experiences, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Bryman & Bell (2017, p.388) emphasises the value flexibility in qualitative research meaning that minimal structure increases opportunities to capture the interviewees perspective. This means that we followed an interview guide that we had done beforehand with different themes and questions, although we stayed open to potential other things that emerged and allowed flexibility through follow-up questions (Bryman & Bell, 2017, pp.452-453). For this thesis, semi-structured interviews were considered as suitable since this allowed the interviewees to articulate their thoughts and experiences, while still allowing us as interviewers to guide the conversations towards those things that were relevant to our research question. We let the interviews follow a natural conversation rather than having a totally fixed set of questions. Thereby, the questions were asked in different orders, we did not ask exactly the same questions to everyone and especially we focused more on some questions depending on the role or experience the different interviewees had. As we gradually gained more knowledge and understanding of different themes, we adapted the questions to gain an even stronger interpretation of it and uncover some more interesting things. The interviews lasted between 40-75 minutes to gain rich material from them, at the same time without there being too much material. Most interviews were conducted via Google Meet since we did not have the opportunity to do them physically and visit them on-site. Although some were also done only through a phone call, either because of technical issues or because it was requested by the interviewee. The negative aspect of this is that there is a possibility of missing out on body language, tone and other subtle signs that can provide underlying meaning in physical meetings. Although in this case, we felt that the online interviews did provide us with this as well, at least to some extent and we believe that it did not affect the outcome of our study. We did the interviews in Swedish, since all interviewees and us as researchers have Swedish as their native language. This allowed for a more relaxed setting and let every interviewee speak completely freely and unhindered, and without language barrier. We recorded the interviews via voice memo with the interviewees' consent. We transcribed them using Klang.ai. To ensure utmost credibility, we proofread the transcript both before and after translation. The transcription was then also in Swedish, and we later did the coding and sorting with the Swedish transcription in order to understand what had been

said in the best possible way and not miss out as easily on any tones in the transcription. The analysis was also made on the quotes that were in Swedish, and they were later translated to English. When we translated the quotes to English, it was not necessarily done word by word but we translated them in a way to capture the essence of what was explained by the interviewee in the best way possible. We conducted a total of eleven interviews, since we after a while experienced theoretical saturation, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new insights, themes or perspectives relevant to the study.

Interviewee	Date	Time in minutes
Sara	2026-02-25	40 minutes
Maria	2026-03-20	72 minutes
Anna	2026-03-24	56 minutes
Emma	2026-03-27	40 minutes
Lars	2026-03-31	70 minutes
Peter	2026-04-01	52 minutes
Jonas	2026-04-08	44 minutes
Sofia	2026-04-13	47 minutes
Karin	2026-04-17	60 minutes
Erik	2026-04-21	40 minutes
Marcus	2026-04-29	50 minutes

Table 1: List of Interviewees

3.3.2 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we followed the process of sorting, reducing, and arguing as suggested by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018). This allowed us to treat the interview material not as a mirror of reality, but as a socially constructed narrative that requires active interpretation. Our sorting process was guided by the analytical distinction between “what”- and “how” questions (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.55). We first focused on the “what”, the substantive content of the interview, meaning the specific phenomena and meanings reported in the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.55,71). Then we employed analytical bracketing, by also looking at “how” those things are talked about to focus on the constitutive

activity (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.55,79), meaning how the interviewee used language and categories to construct a specific social reality. This back-and-forth movement allowed us to move beyond solely reproducing what was said in the interview to also interpreting it, making the results more complex and nuanced (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.83). When sorting, we began with initial coding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.78), meaning that we read the transcription closely but openly and added comments to the document where we summarized or interpreted the content of quotes. At first, we commented spontaneously, and saw what seemed to be interesting things that were talked about. Later, we chose quotes more limitedly by identifying things that recurred several times, which enabled an identification of patterns and through a more focused coding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.78). We saw what the interviewees seemed to talk about the most. When we had done this sorting, we also had a better understanding of what our focus of the analysis would be. So after sorting, we began to reduce by selecting and excluding from the empirical material, in order to get the most theoretically interesting categories that would help us fulfill our thesis purpose and answer our research question (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, pp.96-97). Later in the analysis, we presented our findings using excerpt-commentary-unit, each consisting of an analytical point, an orientation, the empirical excerpt, and an analytical comment (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.155). This ensures our study is not just a report of what was said in the interview, but a narrative that is more analytical and general than the direct observations. The interview excerpts are thereby not treated as direct reflections of an objective reality, but as the interviewees' own interpretations of their experiences and the organization. This logic makes sure that quotes are not presented as self-evident but are unfolded and interpreted in relation to our study (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.161). Similar to Alvesson and Sandberg's idea (2011, p.247) we treat tensions, contradictions or surprises as analytically valuable rather than problematic. The reason being that these elements help us to question the established assumptions about employer branding and identity, thus it may reveal new perspectives and contribute to deeper understanding.

Our analysis is guided by symbolic interactionism, and thereby signified by the symbolic character of everyday life and how the participants understand their social situations (Prasad, 2018). Thereby, the analysis focuses on how employees give meaning to their everyday experiences. This means that how they talk about their work, their relationships and their experiences within the organization is not seen as having a fixed meaning, but is rather seen as getting their meaning through how the employees describe and give meaning to it. In the

analysis, we therefore pay attention to how the interviewees describe and make sense of different aspects of their job. We do not only focus on what is being said, but also how it is expressed and what meanings that are attached to it. Thereby, we aim to not give the reader solely a mirrored reflection of the empirical findings, but rather we aim to highlight unexpected, contradictory or less obvious aspects of organizational life.

Since interpretations are inevitably shaped by us as researchers and our theoretical interests and prior assumptions, we critically encountered the data with reflexivity through considering how our background, conditions and theoretical glasses has affected our interpretations of the empirical material (Prasad, 2018, p.221). Through our position as master students in the field that we are studying, we have an ambition of producing a thesis that lives up to certain scientific requirements and with a theoretical weight. We were aware that this creates the risk of field bias, which entails a tendency of looking after “mysteries” or tensions in the data where it might not actually be most prominent to the employees themselves. Furthermore, we were aware of the potential intellectualist bias entailing the risk that we saw the challenges in the Swedish Armed Forces as interesting academic objects rather than actual practical problems that exist for the organization and its employees (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 cited in Prasad, 2018, p.221).

3.4 Credibility, Limitations, and Reflexivity

During the interviews, we followed a shared interview guide and used it for all interviews to ensure that each interview had the same conditions. This was done to reduce variability and ensure that all interviews were comparable. As our transcriptions were translated it is important to note that translation involves interpretive choices and thus some nuances of what has been said by the interviewee risk being lost or altered. To reduce this risk, we have compared translations with the original Swedish transcriptions to ensure that as few nuances as possible are lost in the translation. Therefore, some parts have been translated less literally in order to best capture the original tone, jargon, and intended meaning of the quote.

To assess the quality of our study, we primarily draw on the interpretive standards of plausibility and coherence which we consider most consistent with our social constructionist and interpretivist approach (Prasad, 2018, pp.9,326-330). Plausibility means that our analysis

feels probable and is deeply anchored in the specific context of the Swedish Armed Forces. We have strived to present our findings in a way that remains faithful to the participant's lived experiences. Our goal was not to present an absolute objective truth, but to construct an interpretation that the reader finds reasonable and convincing given the empirical material. The quality of our work also depended on the coherence, meaning how well we connected different parts of the data into a meaningful whole (Prasad, 2018, pp.35-36). We moved back and forth between individual interview excerpts and the overall organizational culture to create a clear and consistent understanding. Furthermore, to provide more than a "literal translation" of the data (Prasad, 2018, p.4), we have focused on richness in our analysis. This means that we have not simply reported what was said but have actively looked for "webs of significance" and layers of meaning beneath the surface (Prasad, 2018, p.87).

Bell et al. (2019, p.156) note that qualitative researchers must remain aware of how the presence of their prior knowledge and interpretive frameworks influence the research process. They mean that reflexivity is something necessary to ensure transparency and credibility. Following their view, we actively reflected on our role as master students and how this may have shaped our interpretations. Being aware of the risks helped us to remain attentive and to focus on the participants' own perspectives rather than imposing our own academic perspective onto the material.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All interviewees received information about the purpose of the study and possible interview questions before agreeing to participate. This ensured that each of them could make well-informed decisions about whether they wanted to take part in the study or not. Before each interview was audio recorded, participants were also asked for permission to record the conversation. In addition, all participants were given the opportunity to review an anonymized draft of the findings and provide comments or approval before publication. This aligns with Bell et al.'s (2019, p.115) emphasis on the need to ensure that participants are not harmed, and that informed consent is obtained in a transparent manner.

To make participants feel more comfortable answering openly, all interviewees were anonymized. We anonymized them through changing their names into pseudonyms and using these when addressing them. The chosen pseudonyms are completely random. Bell et

al's (2019, p.115) highlights that maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is a central ethical consideration, especially in qualitative research where the smaller sample size could increase the risk of identification. Furthermore, we also carefully considered how the collected data should be handled. All raw data, meaning the audio recordings, will be permanently deleted once the thesis has been examined and graded.

3.5.1 Usage of AI

For this thesis, the usage of generative AI tools has been for the purpose of support and improvements in different stages of the research process. Generative AI, such as CoPilot, has been used to improve clarity and fluency of the text, such as suggesting synonyms and translation from Swedish to English when necessary. However, it is important to note that GenAI has not been used to generate original content or any analytical insights. All theoretical and empirical reasoning and conclusions have been developed by us as researchers. We have sometimes asked GenAI for feedback on ideas and early drafts, but in that way only used it for assistance and a supportive tool for language refinement, structure and general guidance. A list of prompts that have been used, including examples of how AI has supported us during the writing of this thesis, is included in the appendix at the end of this thesis, to ensure transparency.

Furthermore, during the data collection phase, Klang.ai was used for automatic transcription of the recorded interviews. Klang.ai was chosen for this purpose as it is considered to be a good tool for this purpose, since it complies with the guidelines for GDPR and thereby ensures safe and responsible handling of the data (KlangAI, u.å). The usage of AI to transcribe did not replace our own engagement with the material, it only served as a technical support which allowed us to focus more on the analytical process.

4. Analysis

This chapter will examine why employer branding has become increasingly important for the Swedish Armed Forces, and how the employer brand is constructed, communicated, interpreted and experienced within the organization. Furthermore, the chapter explores tensions, limitations, and challenges related to the employer brand and its reception among the employees.

The analysis is structured into four sections. Section 4.1 outlines the factors that make employer branding important in the current context. Section 4.2 examines how the employer brand is constructed and communicated by the organization. Section 4.3 explores how the employer brand is received and interpreted by employees. Lastly, 4.4 highlights critical perspectives, tensions, and limitations related to the employer brand. The chapter concludes with a summary and a table that illustrates the relationship between the construction and the reception of the employer brand, and highlights areas of overlap between the organizational intentions and employee experiences. An overview of the structure of the analysis is presented in Figure 1, which is available to help the reader follow the sequence of the following analysis.

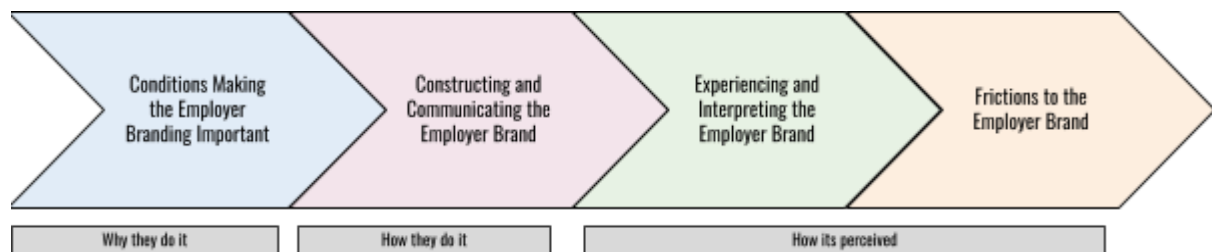


Figure 1: Themes that structure the narrative of Chapter 4

4.1 Conditions Making the Employer Brand Important

This section will present the factors that make employer branding increasingly important for the Swedish Armed Forces in order to remain an attractive employer that is capable of attracting new competences, while also retaining those competencies. The empirical material suggests that knowledge gaps, changing societal perceptions and generational shifts creates a growing need for the organization to actively manage its attractiveness as an employer.

Knowledge Gaps and Stereotypes

Emma describes how the pause of the military service has led to a generation with limited or no personal and familiar connection to the Swedish Armed Forces. Without these references, the organization becomes somewhat unfamiliar to that generation, and potential applicants lack the basic knowledge about the organization:

“Since military service was paused for a number of years, there is now an entire generation that has never done military service, and maybe does not either know anyone who has. So there is this kind of information barrier that we need to overcome by actually going out and informing people about this. Then you need to explain what the Swedish Armed Forces actually is, and what is our purpose? And what do you get if you get involved in the Swedish Armed Forces?” - Emma

This seems to illustrate how the absence of personal experiences or connections to the organization creates a boundary due to lack of information, which the employer brand works to overcome. When individuals have no one in their surroundings who has done military service, and in general lack references to it, the organization becomes distant and less accessible. Emma’s description suggests that this knowledge gap functions as a practical barrier for the employer brand.

Karin reflects on the challenge of reaching young people who lacks a natural point of reference to the organization, and also how personal experiences of war among individuals may create a significant distance to the Swedish Armed Force’s mission:

“There is a kind of knowledge gap there. They no longer have parents who have done military service or who knows what it’s like [...]. And then they get worried. They get scared and do not understand what our mission is either [...]. Especially when it comes to individuals with a foreign background who may have parents who have actually fled a country at war. They have absolutely no idea what we actually do.” - Karin

This reveals a socio-cultural boundary where this knowledge gap creates a barrier of anxiety, which prevents some specific groups from perceiving the employer brand in the way that is

intended by the organization. Sofia further emphasizes this by saying that *“for many people, it is probably still something very unfamiliar, something they can not really associate with so much, because they have no personal connection to it”* which further strengthens how some people still do not really know what the Swedish Armed Forces stand for and what they do.

Some respondents describe that it is not unusual that people outside the organization associate the Swedish Armed Forces with narrow or stereotypical assumptions. These assumptions usually revolve around combat or weapons:

“I think many people might get discouraged because they think that if I seek out, then I will be on the front line with a weapon. But that is not the case for everyone. And I think that is what many people do not really understand. That I will never be out there. I am a civilian employee working on a staff. So that is not my mission” - Karin

This suggests that there may be a gap between how the organization is perceived, and how the reality as an employee is actually like. The external audience seems to remain a bit narrow and stereotypical in its militarized perception. This suggests that the employer brand may not always fully reach or convince the external audiences.

Furthermore, there are similar external misconceptions regarding war and weapon handling that creates a kind of barrier for potential applicants:

“Fear of war and handling weapons is usually something that people bring up. That ‘this sounds great, but I do not want to shoot anyone’. And then there’s this discussion where we explain that we do not want that either. In a perfect world, my job would not be needed at all” - Sofia

This suggests that there may be a gap of misconceptions between the organizational image of the Swedish Armed Forces and the personal values or assumptions held by some individuals. The organization has to actively try to counter out these stereotypes about the Swedish Armed Forces, which may be overly generalized or inaccurate assumptions. The employer brand thus encounters misconceptions about that all roles within the organization involve weapon handling, and this requires active work to overcome.

Generational Differences

There also appear to be generational differences in attitudes towards organizational loyalty and long-term commitment:

“With the current generation that is doing military service and all that [...]. Students graduate, do their military service and then move on into working life. They change jobs with much closer intervals compared to the generation that is maybe 50 plus today. Because they became loyal to their employer in a completely different way, there was this feeling that ‘I have been given so much by my employer, so now I have to stay’. Whereas the generation that there is now, it’s more of an employee’s market.” - Karin

This excerpt explains a generational difference in attitudes towards employment, loyalty, and long-term commitment. Karin describes how older generations often stayed in an organization for their whole career, whereas younger employees are more likely to view it as just one step in their career. This may create tensions for the organization that relies on producing their military competence in-house over long periods. It suggests that younger employees may not internalize loyalty or the employer brand in the same enduring way as previous generations. Sofia similarly describes how *“For the older generations, this was a life profession. And for young people today, they might not see it as ‘I will join the Swedish Armed Forces and then I will work there until I retire’”*. Together, this shows how changing generational expectations may challenge more traditional ideas of organizational loyalty and long-term attachment.

Shift in Attitude and Geopolitical Change

Sofia contrasts today’s positive attitude towards the Swedish Armed Forces with previous decades of criticisms, which has had an impact on how the employees perceive the mission of the organization:

“The work has changed a lot during the years that I have worked with recruitment. And also the attitude towards the Swedish Armed Forces. In the beginning, people could shout ‘murderers’ at us. Where people just saw us going abroad and fighting someone else’s war. Whereas today, that doesn’t happen. Now it’s more like, it has changed that people are grateful that we exist. So it’s a huge, huge change in both

what our task looks like and what the mission looks like, but also in how people see us.” - Sofia

The shift from being called “murderers” to being met with gratitude suggests that public attitudes towards the Swedish Armed Forces may have changed considerably over time. Earlier public reactions appear to have been more critical and hostile, whereas today the organization is perceived differently. This could be viewed as an indication that the employer branding efforts may have contributed to the generation of a more positive image.

Maria similarly contrasts different moments in time where the earlier one was marked by uncertainty and scepticism, and the more recent one was characterised by confidence, recognition and interest:

“When I stand at career fairs, students come up and they look at me, then they look at our booth and my colleagues, and they asked the question somewhere back in 2019, 2020, like: ‘What are you doing here? Who are you?’ That was the question we often got. Now, six years later, they walk straight up to us, look us in the eyes and say: ‘Okay, the Swedish Armed Forces, I have read a bit about you. What do you have to offer me?’ You understand the difference. A lot has happened. - Maria

Here, Maria explains a shift from “Who are you?” to “What do you have to offer me?”, illustrating a change in how the Swedish Armed Forces is perceived by potential recruits. Instead of questioning the presence, students now approach with greater familiarity, recognition and interest. The shift that Maria describes suggests that the organization has become more visible and established among the younger audiences over time, indicating that their employer branding has led to increased familiarity and interest.

Overall the empirical material suggests that knowledge gaps, external stereotypes and misconceptions, and generational differences creates a practical need for the Swedish Armed Forces to actively work with its employer brand.

4.2 Constructing and Communicating the Employer Brand

The interviews suggest that the Swedish Armed Forces constructs an employer brand that is centered around meaningfulness, contribution, and a sense of belonging. Rather than

primarily presenting employment through salary or other functional benefits, the organization appears to emphasize values that are connected to a broader social purpose.

Meaningfulness, Societal Contribution and Belonging

Several interviewees describe meaningfulness as the core of the employer brand. Maria describes how the organization's core message is centered around societal contribution and meaningfulness:

“It's very much about meaningful work. [...] ‘You make a difference’ is our slogan. You make a difference in everyday life, in society, for our democracy. You are part of a larger system that contributes to making Sweden a good nation. [...] It is one of our strongest cards our surveys also show. Many people think it feels meaningful to work with us.” - Maria

This suggests that the Swedish Armed Forces frames employment as connected to a broader societal purpose. The emphasis is therefore placed on a meaningful societal contribution, where employees are presented as participating in something that extends beyond just the individual career.

Emma reflects on how the organization's position as a government organization makes it necessary to offer alternative forms of value, that shifts focus from financial incentives to a higher purpose:

“Since we are a government organization, you need to pitch other things than perhaps the salary. We don't really win there, so you have to use all other means then. And then it's exactly this about giving back to society because you're involved and contributing to something bigger.” - Emma

The Swedish Armed Forces produces an employer brand that brings forward meaningfulness and societal contribution as a compensation for the organization's inability to compete with salaries. The organization consciously constructs its brand around symbolic rather than material values. By acknowledging that they do not “win” on salary, they instead position the work as an act where the employee gives back to society. Peter further develops this by explaining that *“and we don't really want people who are interested in a high salary. We want people to be interested in working in the Swedish Armed Forces, but at the same time of*

course it has to be a reasonable compensation". This suggests that commitment to the organization and its mission is constructed as a more desirable form of motivation among employees than purely interest in a high salary.

Emma also reflects on how the organization's marketing campaigns emphasizes collective belonging and contributing to a broader purpose:

"That's what it is, it's really the group sort of. That's what we try to show, and that you contribute to something bigger, simply. I think that's present in many of our campaigns." - Emma

This suggests that the construction of the brand is based on deliberately showing the group feeling that is present in the Swedish Armed Forces, and emphasizing the contribution to society. By highlighting these things in their campaigns, the organization appears to project an image of itself as a place for social cohesion and meaningfulness. The campaigns therefore seem to communicate symbolic and relational values as central aspects of the organization's attractiveness as an employer.

More Than an Ordinary Job

Lars explains how the Swedish Armed Forces has used communication strategies to make the organization appear more accessible and relatable to people, by presenting the work as understandable and manageable:

"Once there was this commercial with, I think it was a camouflage-painted lady wearing a beret that said: 'Welcome to the Swedish Armed Forces. A completely ordinary job, almost.' And then they added this last part which means: yeah, it is like a normal job, but it is also so much more than that." - Lars

This reveals how they try to present the organization as both ordinary and special at the same time. On the one hand, military work is framed as a normal job that many people can relate to. On the other hand, they also emphasize that the work has a greater purpose that makes it different from other jobs. Through the slogan "A completely ordinary job, almost" and by adding the "almost", the organization attempts to make the profession feel less intimidating and to show that applicants do not need to be extraordinary individuals to fit in. At the same

time, Lars' phrase "but so much more" highlights that the work also has a deeper meaning and purpose that separates it from ordinary occupations. The Swedish Armed Forces thereby presents an image of itself as both a normal workplace, but also as an organization with an important mission.

Lars further describes how the Swedish Armed Forces uses the idea of being the "opposite pole to the office job" to attract people:

"We name it the opposite pole to the office job. [...] In the Swedish Armed Forces, you also sit at a desk and calculate. [...] Then you go out somewhere to an exercise area and test: Does this work for real? Either it bangs or it doesn't. [...] So here you have, like, the best of both worlds. [...] Our engineers are actually out with our units a lot to see how the technical systems are used, how they work, and then take home the knowledge of how to make them even better." - Lars

When targeting specialists such as engineers, the Swedish Armed Forces appears to position itself as a unique workplace where intellectual work is combined with practical and physical experiences. By describing themselves as the "opposite pole to the office job", the organization seems to distance itself from a stereotypical desk job which may be more associated with routine-based or abstract tasks. Instead, the Swedish Armed Forces emphasizes the possibility of combining advanced technical expertise with directly testing their ideas in practice, and this provides hands-on experiences.

Functional Benefits

The Swedish Armed Forces is further described as a large and diverse organization, that offers a wide range of roles, career paths and development opportunities:

"It's a very big organization with 30 000 employees [...] ranging from more basic administrative tasks to researchers and highly complex strategic positions [...] which means that we need to offer a very broad range of competence development opportunities." - Maria

Maria describes the organization as extensive and professionally diverse, with opportunities ranging across multiple occupational fields and levels of specialization. The breadth of roles

and internal development opportunities can be seen as an important and attractive part of the employer offering itself. Peter similarly highlights this diversity by explaining that “*we basically have everything from farriers to surgeons in the Swedish Armed Forces.*”

Maria further explains the extensive development opportunities that are available within the organization:

“There are courses, a lot of courses, an enormous amount of courses offered internally. But also budgets for competence development funds where you can apply for funds for external courses, external networks and such. We have different personnel tools that we call mentorship programs. Personnel loans between different agencies. We have our own career development program.” - Maria

Here, the organization is framed as offering extensive opportunities for competence development and professional growth. By emphasizing the large amounts of courses and unique offerings such as personnel loans between agencies, the Swedish Armed Forces appears to position itself as an organization that actively invests in employee development and long-term career progression.

Lars links these opportunities for internal mobility to continued employment. Rather than requiring employees to change employer, development can take place within the organization:

“The Swedish Armed Forces is an exciting organization with a wide variety of roles. [...] You don’t need to change employers to build a career, instead, in the Swedish Armed Forces you have the same employer. You transition between different roles over time as you get better.” - Lars

This suggests that internal mobility and career development opportunities are constructed as ways of enabling continued employment and loyalty to the organization. Employees can make career changes and progression without leaving the organization, and thus remain loyal while pursuing individual desires.

Maria highlights the Local Readjustment Funds as a generous resource that allows for studies on paid working time:

“This thing called LOM, local transition funds. [...] They set aside 0,2% of the salary sum for all employees into a fund that becomes a competence development fund for people [...] It is an enormous amount of money flowing into that fund within the Swedish Armed Forces every year, as you can imagine [...] It is also incredibly generous. If I tell my friends who work in municipalities or regional governments about it, they are like ‘What? That is so unfair.’ Like, ‘Why do you get those things? How is that even possible?’ They think it sounds incredibly generous, and there is a huge amount of money available to apply for through that budget” - Maria

Maria presents the Local Readjustment Funds as very generous and unique. She specifies that employees can be granted *“up to 52 weeks of full-time studies, so that is a year of full-time study during paid working hours”*, clarifying the extent of the Local Readjustment Fund and how generous it is. By emphasizing the scale of the fund and the possibility of undertaking up to a year of full-time studies during paid working hours, the Swedish Armed Forces appears to frame itself as investing significantly in employee competence development and long-term professional growth. Maria’s comparison with other public-sector employers further suggests that these opportunities are perceived as unusually extensive and attractive.

Maria also highlights benefits such as training during working hours and extensive vacation time as valuable aspects of the employment:

“Three hours of training during working hours per week is incredibly luxurious, especially as a parent of young children. To have the opportunity to do it and have time to do it. It makes me feel good, and so that I stay healthy and last in the long run. So for me it is very valuable.” - Maria

“I can’t imagine reducing my vacation time to work in the private sector. I have seven weeks of annual leave per year now that I am over 40 years old. It is very good.” - Maria

These excerpts highlight benefits that are linked to their work-life balance and wellbeing. Together, this suggests that the organization appears to frame employee health and everyday quality of life as important parts of the employer offering that extends into everyday life.

Employer Branding Activities

Lars explains how the organization must take an active role in the initial attraction phase by seeking out to potential candidates in environments where they are located, such as fairs:

“It is not enough to post an ad and think that ‘this will be good’. We must be out there and show ourselves there, and fairs are a major part of the so-called attraction phase.” - Lars

Lars emphasizes that the attraction phase requires visibility and physical presence. Rather than expecting potential applicants to seek out to the organization themselves, the Swedish Armed Forces seems to emphasize outreach, personal interaction, and direct engagement in environments where potential candidates are already present.

Karin touches on a similar theme, and describes how school visits are used to spread awareness and increase familiarity with the organization among the youths:

“The purpose of the school visits is really to give them information. [...] The more they understand, the better they can prepare themselves and the more influence they can have over their own military service. But we also see that the more secure and comfortable the individual feels before and during military service, the greater the chances are that we can keep them in the Swedish Armed Forces and recruit them further down the line. So all of this becomes like a chain where everything is connected.” - Karin

The school visits are described as deliberate attempts to reduce unfamiliarity and increase understanding of the Swedish Armed Forces prior to military service. Providing information and creating a sense of security before military service appears to improve the overall individual experience, but also increasing the likelihood of continued employment within the organization after military service.

Maria explains how military service functions as the primary entry point for military personnel, and emphasizes that the Swedish Armed Forces is unique in the sense that it creates its own professional competence from the bottom up:

"The military service is like the motorway into the Swedish Armed Forces. It is our largest influence channel for getting people in. [...] We produce the core military competence ourselves in-house." - Maria

The military service is described as the primary entry point into the Swedish Armed Forces and as an important process through which military competence is developed internally. By producing the military competence in-house, it suggests that employees are trained and introduced to the organization from an early stage within the organization itself.

Emma also emphasizes that the organization engages in a broad range of physical outreach activities and public events:

"We also do many large events. And it is everything from like the gymnasium- and SACO fair, to the Stockholm Horse Show and everything in between. [...] And we are now trying to make a slight shift in that we will come out into the country and meet more regionally as well. Together with SHL, the Swedish Hockey League, we have organized events at local arenas around the country. So it has been very beneficial to reach out that way as well" - Emma

Emma describes how these public events range from educational fairs to regional sport arenas. She further explains how the organization tries to shift from only being present at larger events in larger cities, to also having a more regional presence. This suggests that they want to increase their visibility in more local contexts, in order to broaden their visibility and create familiarity with the Swedish Armed Forces across different parts of the country. Erik also explains how the organization attempts to reach some specific target groups that may be difficult to reach through more traditional recruitment channels: *"So the only way to reach them is through the gaming world. So that is an area that we are looking at now, how to approach and get into the gaming world, and so we have exhibited at DreamHack a few times now."* This further suggests that the organization attempts to reach potential applicants through environments and platforms that are already familiar to these specific target groups.

Beyond physical outreach, Sofia describes how social media is also an important channel:

“Social media is really important because that is where a lot of young people are. But I also think that the most important thing for us is to be out and meet people.” - Sofia

Digital channels are presented as significantly important for reaching younger audiences in environments where they already spend much of their time. However, Sofia emphasizes that she believes that being out and meeting the people is still most important, suggesting that the physical meetings are the most efficient. Peter similarly describes the digital channels as: *“the most important source of news for young people. They don't watch much linear TV anymore.”* Together, these descriptions suggest that the organization combines digital visibility with physical interaction in its outreach.

Furthermore, Peter describes a Youtube series that is aimed at encouraging those doing military service and those who are already in the organization to continue within the Swedish Armed Forces, and apply for future roles within it:

“It's on our YouTube channel. And it has a slightly different angle. It's not primarily intended to attract young people to do military service, but it's intended to get those who are already in it, soldiers and sailors or other civilian employees for example, to become interested and apply to become officers. [...] Last year there were two point six million views and the year before that one point eight. So that's going in the right direction. Now we're working on season three of this series.” - Peter

This illustrates that while some outreach activities appear directed towards attracting new applicants, this YouTube series instead focuses on encouraging continued commitment and internal career progression within the organization. The excerpt therefore shows how the employer branding efforts extend beyond initial attraction and also include retention.

To summarize, the empirical material suggests that the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces is centered around meaningfulness, societal contribution, and belonging. At the same time, the employer offering is also complemented by functional benefits such as a variety of roles, opportunities for internal mobility, and extensive competence development. The organization also emphasizes benefits related to employee wellbeing, including generous vacation time and training during working hours. The employer brand is communicated

through digital platforms and targeted outreach activities, where physical presence through school visits, fairs, and public events appears to play a particularly important role.

4.3 Experiencing and Interpreting the Employer Brand

While the previous section examined how the employer brand is constructed and communicated, this section focuses on how it is interpreted and experienced by the employees in practice.

Experiencing Meaningfulness and Contribution

Many employees seem to experience their work as meaningful and strongly connected to a broader societal purpose. Emma describes how joining the organization created a sense of purpose:

“When I started, it was during the pandemic and everything was quite chaotic in society. Then you felt that you were actually doing something useful when going to work, that you were giving something back. Regardless of what role you have, you feel that you contribute to something bigger than yourself.” - Emma

This excerpt reflects how meaningfulness and societal contribution are not only values that are communicated through the employer brand, but also something that employees seem to experience in their everyday work. Krisin’s description indicates that contributing to society and being part of something larger than oneself are experienced as meaningful aspects within the organization.

Maria similarly reflects on how the current global uncertainty influences how employees perceive the meaning and importance of their work:

“Many people think it feels like meaningful work. We are working for a democratic society that should not have to be subjected to pressure from foreign states. Right now, I believe even more that it is relevant and that it is needed, and unfortunately the uncertain global situation shows that this is meaningful.” - Maria

Here, meaningfulness is closely connected to the organization's societal role and responsibility. Maria describes how the uncertain global situation reinforces the perception that the work is relevant, necessary and socially important. Since Maria mentions that the work is even more relevant right now, it suggests that the employees experience the organization's value and societal mission as particularly meaningful during times that are marked by international and geopolitical uncertainty.

Several respondents describe the societal role of the Swedish Armed Forces as central when talking about the organization's attractiveness and purpose. In Emma's description, themes such as stability, security, and contributing to society become recurring ways of explaining both the role of the organization, and what appears to resonate internally:

“Partly it is about stability, a sense of security in the country. I also think that it shows, what should I say, a societal engagement and that you can simply contribute to something bigger there. So that is what I think are the big parts. Both that we want to communicate, but also that we receive from the surveys. Those are the values that exist and that are visible.” - Emma

This excerpt indicates that employees do not only recognize the values communicated through the employer brand, but also appear to reproduce and reinforce it in their own words. Emma states that these values are reflected both in what the organization communicates but also in responses they get from surveys that are filled by employees. This indicates a degree of alignment between the employer brand and employees' own experiences and understandings of the organization's societal role.

Furthermore, Erik reflects on how meaningfulness may influence individuals' career choices:

“When it comes to ready-made skills, those are the kind of people who suddenly start to feel like ‘Why should I work seventy hours a week and maybe not do something that is so meaningful? If I am going to do something going forward, it should be something that makes a difference for real’” - Erik

This suggests that the transition to the Swedish Armed Forces is described not merely as a career change, but as a search for more meaningful work. Thereby, meaningfulness and societal contribution may function as important motivations for seeking employment within

the organization. Erik contrasts long working hours with the desire to do something that makes a difference for real, which indicates that the organization may attract individuals who are searching for a stronger sense of purpose in their work.

Belonging and Team Culture

The employer brand also seems to be experienced through relational and collective aspects of work. Teamwork and shared responsibility are described as central:

“In a military role, the entire culture is built around being one large team where people do a great deal together [...] the team comes before the individual.” - Anna

This excerpt highlights that the employees seem to describe their work through a collective and group-oriented understanding, where teamwork is prioritized over individuality. The employer brand's emphasis on unity and shared purpose therefore also appears to be reflected in how employees describe their work.

Emma further highlights how this collective orientation extends across different roles and functions:

“There is a strong focus on the group [...] and this extends to civilian roles as well. [...] Relationships with colleagues are very strong. It is the team that is important” - Emma

This suggests that employees experience the employer brand through the social environment and sense of collective belonging within the workplace. Belonging, teamwork and interpersonal relationships appear to be central aspects of how the employees describe their workplace, both in military and civilian roles.

The interviewees also describe a sense of emotional attachment to the organization. One interviewee notes that:

“Sometimes people say it almost becomes like a ‘defence family’. You feel at home and safe, I think.” - Maria

Maria's description suggests that the organization is experienced as more than merely a professional environment, but also as a socially familiar and emotionally meaningful community. The references to feeling "at home and safe" indicates how belonging appears to contribute to emotional attachment within the organization.

Sofia describes how the entry requirements helps to build group cohesion:

"You are selected on certain premises. You complete the same tests. We do things together that not everyone else does." - Sofia

The excerpt shows that the selection process contributes to group cohesion and a sense of belonging within the organization. By emphasizing that everyone undergoes the same tests and shared experiences, Sofia seems to describe how this creates a feeling of belonging and mutual recognition within the group. This further reinforces the perception of being trusted, selected, and included within the organization.

The importance of group belonging is also evident in how the interviewees describe shared experiences, particularly during military service:

"So there is a group feeling that is quite important. I remember some night where you have been spooning with a friend out in the woods in Älvdalen. There is something in that. The camaraderie, the group." - Jonas

Jona's description suggests that intense shared experiences during military service or training contribute to social connection and a sense of camaraderie within the organization. This further indicates that the sense of belonging and group feeling are not only communicated values, but also a lived experience which is reinforced through shared situations during military service.

Sofia further describes how everyday life in the field is characterized by simple conditions and common challenges, which appears to create a unique type of community and workplace culture:

"We live out in tents and have a bit of a hard time, and sometimes go abroad and things like that. So there is a community that I think is hard to find in all workplaces."
- Sofia

This illustrates how fellowship and group cohesion are strengthened through having a bit of a hard time together. Here it seems like in an environment where people live closely in simple conditions, a strong group feeling is created and relationships become deeper than it would in a typical workplace. Sofia further describes that this connectedness would be hard to find in other workplaces, suggesting that this is a unique experience.

Maria also talks about the group, and describes how individuals “find their role” within it:

“You get to know each other, you make friends for life, that is what people say. And you get together as a group. Sure, you might clash and clinch with someone and you find someone incredibly annoying. But in the big picture, you become a team. And that is something the military is really good at, I would say. That you form a team in an incredibly short amount of time. You basically throw together a bunch of individuals [...] So you come in and you get to be a part of the team. You find your role. You do great teamwork. Team up well, develop. You complete heavy, exciting and challenging tasks. You create the team. It becomes personal development for people. And that is what many people are attracted to. And to feel that this context is exciting and rewarding. I want to stay in this, in some way.” - Maria

Maria explains how a rapid team is formed as individuals are brought together and becomes a functioning team quickly. The excerpt illustrates how strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging seems to develop quickly within the organization. Maria furthermore describes that people “get friends for life”, which suggests that the relationships may even go beyond the formal workplace. The team experience is described as both rewarding and developmental, and it suggests that the team experience is a reason why people are drawn to the organization and even for remaining within it.

Shaped by Geopolitical Factors

Karin describes how the content of cover letters changed after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. She notes a shift in how applicants motivate their desire to become a part of the organization:

“I think a lot happened when Russia invaded Ukraine. I think that especially it was the applications to the Home Guard that increased a lot [...] A much higher pressure on open positions, with more people applying. And when I read personal letters for example, a lot of people who express that they want to make an effort, that they want to be part of contributing to something bigger. I believe I can read that in the applications, that people motivate it in a completely different way. It is not just this anymore that ‘This was an exciting position, I think this sounds really exciting’, but there are a lot of people who explicitly say that ‘I want to contribute, I want to be part of the Swedish Armed Forces, I want to contribute to actually protecting Sweden.’” - Karin

Karin describes a shift in applicants’ language and motivations when applying to the Swedish Armed Forces. The motivation undergoes a noticeable change where applicants move from being attracted by factors such as excitement, to the organization’s moral purpose of protection and social contribution, in response to a changing geopolitical situation.

Peter also describes the increased interest in the organization following the start of the war in Ukraine:

“When the war in Ukraine started, the Home Guard got a huge number of applications in a short time. I don’t have the exact numbers, but I think it was about as much as they got in two years, they got in just a week or so.” - Peter

This further illustrates how the geopolitical situation may affect the Swedish Armed Forces’ recruitment, since it influences how the organization is perceived and valued by potential applicants. The sudden increase in applications indicates that when international uncertainty arises, the public interest in the organization and motivation for applying may increase.

Emma further reflects on how these societal shifts appears to influence people’s tendency to apply to the Swedish Armed Forces, and how they perceive the organization’s role:

“There are changes in society, and then we somehow become the stable party that people may be drawn to or want to contribute to.” - Emma

This suggests that periods of societal instability affects the Swedish Armed Forces' status, and turns it into a safe harbor that applicants are drawn to. The organization then seems to function as a source of stability in times of uncertainty.

Sofia adds to this and reflects on how recruitment work is influenced by societal changes, and describes the moral ambivalence surrounding the organization growth during periods of crises:

“When things are going well for Sweden and people can pick and choose between jobs, that is when it is more difficult for us. But now, with the recession and all the engineers not getting jobs anymore and stuff like that, then the security becomes something where people feel like ‘I want a secure employer’, and then a government organization is better. So it is a bit awful in many ways that when things are going well for us, things are going badly for many others. But we need to take advantage of that in some way right now. That the economy is bad, there is chaos in the world. But we are growing.” - Sofia

This illustrates that in times of economic stability, attracting candidates is described as more difficult when they can “pick and choose”, but in times of crisis the Swedish Armed Force's stability and security strengthens the organization's attractiveness. Sofia's discomfort with benefiting from societal difficulties highlights the moral dilemma that seems to surround the organizational growth during periods of crises and uncertainty.

Being Part of Something Bigger

Employees also describe their work as connected to something larger than themselves. Emma explains:

“Regardless of what role you have, you feel that you contribute to something bigger than yourself.” - Emma

This excerpt reflects how employees appear to describe their work as connected to a broader collective purpose, rather than individuality. Work is thus not only described as a set of tasks, but as a participation to a broader purpose, regardless of the role.

Sofia similarly describes how the organization's reason for existing and its important role in society constitutes the primary reason for her long-term commitment to the Swedish Armed Forces:

“I think our mission is important [...] In a perfect world, we would be so skilled and perceived as so professional and capable that no one would want to challenge us. [...] That we pretend, practice and train ourselves, but that nothing ever happens. So that is perhaps the most important job we have. And then if something were to happen, then we are there and should be able to help. So I think that we have a very important job, and I can really stand behind it.” - Sofia

This excerpt seems to suggest how Sofia sees her work as highly meaningful and strongly connected to a broader societal mission. Her description indicates that the organization's purpose and role in protecting society are closely linked to her personal motivation. The statement that she can “stand behind” it further reflects a sense of personal identification with the organization, and its mission and values.

Karin reflects on what motivates her in her daily work and explains how she understands her role in relation to the broader mission of the Swedish Armed Forces:

“I know that what I do at work is something that contributes to something bigger, and that is what I want to feel when I get up and go to work in the morning. So that is a big driving force in my everyday work, even though, well, we are kind of living in peacetime, of course. But I kind of feel that everything I do at work is focused on helping us grow, become bigger and ultimately become more dangerous to the enemy. That is really the whole purpose of why we exist, and that is my job.” - Karin

Karin describes her motivation as connected to contributing to something bigger. Rather than talking about specific administrative tasks, she talks about her work in terms of the overall mission and strategic objectives of the Swedish Armed Forces. Although she has a civilian role with a focus on recruitment, and not a military role, she expresses that they need to become more “dangerous for the enemy” as the end goal of her work. Thereby, she seems to understand her work as directly contributing to the organization's broader societal mission.

Marcus expresses a sense of pride as he reflects on the Swedish Armed Forces from a broader perspective:

“If you look at it from an international perspective, I am actually very proud to belong to the Swedish Armed Forces. I think we have a good approach. It feels like the way of thinking is modern and up to date. And I really like that many people are very world-oriented and understand the context. That you are part of something larger, but at the same time you do your own thing.” - Marcus

Marcus describes pride in relation to the organization’s mindset, knowledge and way of approaching its mission. His emphasis on being modern, world-oriented and able to understand the bigger picture suggests that employees may value how the organization positions itself in relation to both international developments and broader societal contexts, as well as how the organization understands and presents itself.

Maria further suggests that the demanding nature of military service may contribute to experiences of personal development and transformation:

“I think it is exciting, developing work tasks. An exciting organization to be a part of. I also think, from what I hear from everyone who has done military service, it is an incredibly intense and exciting period. Intense, with a lot of both physical and mental challenges that you do together in a group. I would have liked that, I can say. I think that, I am kidding a little when I say that, but it is what turns boys into men.” - Maria

Although this excerpt is expressed in a humoristic manner, it still reflects the idea that the Swedish Armed Forces is a place where individuals seem to undergo a kind of transformation and “become someone”. The organization thus not only provides employment, but is also described as functioning as a pathway to maturity, competence and self-development.

Enduring Attachment

Lars describes an enduring attachment to the organization, which has persisted beyond formal employment:

“What has been a bit fascinating is that those who believe that they have received a better offer, usually financially, they call me again in two years and ask: ‘Hey, Lars, when is the next job opening coming?’ So I have actually brought several people back who turned us down the first time, who are actually now in the system again. And then you can interpret that as the old cliché, that the grass was perhaps not greener on the other side.” - Lars

In this excerpt, Lars gives an example of how attachment seems to persist even when employees leave the organization for other alternatives. He describes how some individuals who left the Swedish Armed Forces for external opportunities later have returned, suggesting that the organization continues to hold significance even outside formal employment.

Marcus further elaborates on this by describing how some individuals return after leaving the organization for higher salaries elsewhere:

“I think that they probably realize that maybe this high salary wasn’t that fun after all. And they start feeling that: ‘I think I should go back to the Swedish Armed Forces, it was more fun there.’” - Marcus

Marcus gives an example of how individuals who leave for seemingly more attractive employment conditions sometimes realize that they enjoyed working at the Swedish Armed Forces more. This suggests that the values of the organization may not be easily replaced elsewhere.

Peter further elaborates on this by describing the pride and enduring attachment that the veterans show even long after retirement:

“When you meet those soldiers and officers on Veterans Day, many of them have retired, but some are still active. There is an incredible sense of pride. It really stays with them. And I mean, if you did your military service and then you were in Lebanon thirty years ago and then they come to Veterans Day, it is like they come alive again there when they meet their old comrades.” - Peter

This suggests that the emotional attachment associated with the Swedish Armed Forces may persist for long periods of time, even after retirement. Veterans Day is described as a context where former employees reconnect with old colleagues and experience feelings of pride and

excitement. This indicates that the organization leaves a long-lasting mark on individuals, and how relationships with the organization and colleagues persists even outside formal employment and after a long time.

Karin describes the enduring connection she felt to the organization during a period of time where she had left the Swedish Armed Forces, before later returning again:

“I have never really let go of the Swedish Armed Forces, because I think it is a good employer and it is also something that I stand for. It is a part of my moral compass.” -

Karin

In this excerpt Karin describes a long-lasting attachment to the Swedish Armed Forces as she says she “never really let go” of it, indicating that the attachment remained even during the time she wasn't formally a part of the organization. In her experience, the organization has even become a part of her moral compass, making it more than just an employment. It indicates that what the organization stands for aligns with what she also values personally.

Overall, the employees generally describe their work as meaningful and connected to a broader societal purpose. The empirical material further suggests a strong sense of team belonging and collective attachment within the organization. Furthermore, geopolitical uncertainty seems to amplify the interest and motivation among people to join the organization. The material also indicates that there is an enduring emotional attachment between individual and organization, that may persist even beyond the formal employment.

4.4 Frictions to the Employer Brand

This section examines the empirical material that points to frictions between the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces, and everyday organizational life. The interviewees describe aspects that are perceived as less attractive within the organization, such as slow processes, bureaucracy and limits in offering economic incentives.

Time-Consuming Processes

Administrative complexity and long lead times are described as challenges that may weaken the Swedish Armed Forces ability to compete for talent in a fast-paced labour market. Lars describes the internal administrative difficulties that follows after a successful interview:

“It is a mess [...] The time it takes for this is between four and six months [...] Not everyone feels like they can wait. In the meantime, we know that we are exposed to competition.” - Lars

This highlights that lengthy administrative processes may complicate recruitment by increasing the risk that potential candidates choose alternative employers during the waiting period. Lars’s description indicates that the organization may experience difficulties in competing for talent in situations where the recruitment processes are perceived as too slow.

Anna adds to this and explains the time consuming security check that is a required part of the recruitment process:

“What especially takes quite a long time is that once you have chosen a person that you want to move forward with, they have to do something called a security clearance. Everyone in the Swedish Armed Forces does that. It can take up to a year depending on the security class. But it is like a very in-depth interview about yourself and your private life and history and stuff. And then it has to be reviewed by Säpo and Must.” - Anna

This excerpt also points to the time consuming recruitment process, but specifically explains the security clearance. This is a process that is mandatory and despite that a person have already been chosen, they still need to pass the security check, which makes the process even longer depending on the security class. This adds to the whole risk of losing talent due to lengthy processes that was mentioned in the previous excerpt.

Jonas emphasizes how the long waiting times may affect especially the younger applicants, whose life situations has the tendency to change rapidly:

“It is quite a long time, especially at that age. Let’s say you are twenty-five. In ten months you have time to fall in love and be sad and move and have kids and that whole thing in ten months almost. So time is a factor, absolutely.” - Jonas

This excerpt indicates how the organization’s lengthy recruitment processes potentially becomes a practical barrier for individuals who can not, or do not want to, wait several months for a decision. The long waiting period becomes a boundary for the organization, as Jonas describes how changing life circumstances during the waiting period may result in potential employees losing interest or going with another employer before the process is completed. The organization’s slow internal tempo appears to risk undermining their ability to attract and retain potential talent.

Structural Limitations

The material also highlights internal tensions related to bureaucracy and hierarchical organizational structures. Some interviewees describe a frustration around these aspects.

“I think what sometimes makes me doubt staying is the bureaucracy. And those are the disadvantages of a large organization. And that it is very hierarchical. That bothers me sometimes [...] Everything you do has to be raised very high up in the hierarchy, decisions have to be made by managers. It is not a flat organization in any way. And very bureaucratic and slow-moving. Everything takes time, it is like a heavy machinery.” - Maria

This shows how bureaucracy and hierarchical structures create frustration among some employees, which may complicate employee retention. The metaphor of a “heavy machinery” illustrates a conflict where the scale and stability of the organization simultaneously results in slowness and inefficiencies in everyday work processes. The excerpt thereby seems to highlight a tension between the organization’s somewhat bureaucratic structure, and the employees’ desire for flexibility, engagement and development.

Maria describes a tension that arises when the employees’ desires for professional development clashes with the organizational and managerial needs:

“It has to align with the individual’s own wishes and how they want to develop. We are not just robots that can be placed anywhere. There can be lots of good courses and development opportunities, but sometimes a manager might stop and say ‘no, no, no, we can’t let go of Kalle or Stina here for development on that. We need them here and now.’ And then you say no to maybe competence development or something like that. But then the individual eventually gets tired of it and quits instead.” - Maria

By using the metaphor of “robots”, Maria expresses resistance towards being treated as interchangeable organizational resources. The excerpt suggests that managerial priorities and immediate operational needs may limit employees’ opportunities for competence development or career progression. The managers appear to function as a kind of gatekeeper, who can restrict access to the development opportunities that the organization otherwise promotes as part of its employer offering. Maria further indicates that this might eventually increase the risk of employees leaving the organization.

A similar concern appears in relation to the geographical positioning of military personnel. Karin highlights the risk of treating the individuals as organizational resources that can simply be relocated according to operational needs:

“We can’t just put people wherever we want just because they are military and then say like: ‘these are military, we can do whatever we want with them.’ That doesn’t work, because they are individuals too.” - Karin

This statement further criticizes the idea of treating employees as interchangeable units. Karin emphasizes that employees’ individual circumstances and personal lives must be taken into account. The excerpt therefore highlights a tension between the organizational flexibility and the recognition of the employees as individuals with needs that go beyond the organization itself.

Limitations to the Financial Offering

Another tension that emerges in the interviews concerns the attractiveness of the employment conditions. While the interviewees express a strong attachment to the organization, they also

acknowledge that there are other employers that may offer more attractive material conditions, particularly in relation to salary:

“For example, I had a colleague who left for the Swedish Prosecution Authority. He got fifteen thousand kronor more in salary, and less responsibilities. But he actually worked on the same things as you do here.” - Karin

This highlights that external employment opportunities may in some cases appear more attractive due to higher salaries and more favourable working conditions. It therefore illustrates a tension between the strong symbolic attachment that is expressed towards the Swedish Armed Forces, and the material advantages that are offered by competing employers. Thereby, this further indicates that symbolic values may not always outweigh economic incentives.

4.5 Chapter Summary

The analysis chapter has examined how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs and communicates its employer brand, as well as how employees interpret and experience it in practice.

The empirical material suggests that the employer brand is constructed around symbolic values such as meaningfulness, societal contribution, belonging, and collective purpose, while also being supported by functional benefits including competence development, internal mobility, and employee wellbeing initiatives. The organization further communicates these values through extensive and targeted outreach activities across both physical and digital platforms.

The material also indicates an overlap between the communicated employer brand and employees' lived experiences of the organization. Many interviewees describe their work as meaningful, socially important, and connected to strong experiences of teamwork, belonging, and long-term attachment to the organization. Geopolitical uncertainty further appears to strengthen both the perceived relevance of the organization, and the motivation to join it.

At the same time, the analysis highlights several tensions related to bureaucracy, lengthy and slow processes, hierarchical structures, and limitations in material compensation. These

factors appear to somewhat complicate recruitment and retention, and create friction between the employer brand and everyday organizational realities.

Overall, the analysis suggests that there is a substantial overlap between how the employer brand is constructed and how it is experienced by the employees. Many of the values and themes that are emphasized in the organizational communication are also reflected in how the employees describe their everyday experiences within the organization. At the same time, the material highlights certain tensions that may complicate the alignment between the communicated employer brand and the organizational realities. These overlaps and tensions are summarized and illustrated in Table 2 below.

The table summarizes the relationship between the values the Swedish Armed Forces actively constructs and communicates through its employer brand, and how these are interpreted and experienced by employees. It therefore reflects areas where organizational intentions and employee experiences overlap. Frictions and tensions, such as bureaucracy, hierarchical structures and slow processes, are not included in the table as they fall outside what the organization chooses to present as part of its employer brand. These dimensions are instead further discussed in Chapter 5.

Theme	Organizational Construction	Employee Interpretation	Overlap
Meaningfulness	Work is framed as socially important and connected to national security. Societal contribution is used as compensation for an uncompetitive salary.	Employees consistently describe their work as meaningful and connected to something bigger than themselves, regardless of role. Geopolitical uncertainty further intensifies this perception.	Strong overlap The communicated message is closely reflected in employees' own descriptions, and appears to have been genuinely internalized rather than merely recognized.
Belonging	Campaigns emphasize teamwork, togetherness, and a strong collective culture. A sense of belonging is presented as an important part of the workplace.	Employees describe strong camaraderie and emotional attachment, with recurring expressions such as "defence family" and "team before individual." Shared challenges appear to strengthen these bonds.	Strong overlap The communicated emphasis on collective belonging is confirmed and deepened by the lived experiences employees describe. Shared hardship appears to function as the mechanism through which the brand message becomes real.

Societal contribution	The organization presents itself as protecting democracy and society. The slogan “you make a difference” links individual work to a larger national purpose.	Employees express pride in contributing to society, and employees across roles describe their daily work in terms of the organization’s overall mission.	Strong overlap The mission is not only recognized by employees but actively used to make sense of their own roles.
Work-life benefits	Training during working hours, vacation time, and job security as a government employer are highlighted as distinctive features of the employment offering.	Employees describe these benefits as genuinely valued in everyday life. Job security is described as increasingly attractive during economic downturns.	Strong overlap The benefits resonate because they connect to employees’ lives outside work. They appear to complement the symbolic values.
Development opportunities	Extensive offering of internal courses, mentorship programs, personnel loans between agencies, and up to 52 weeks of paid studies.	Employees seem to value the range of opportunities and the possibilities for career progression within the organization.	Moderate overlap The opportunities are not only communicated as a good offer but also experienced as valuable. However, it is worth noting that access is described to possibly be uneven as organizational priorities may block the usage of it.

Table 2: Alignment between the communicated employer brand and employees’ lived experiences in the Swedish Armed Forces.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the empirical findings of the study in Chapter 4, in relation to the literature presented in the literature review in Chapter 2. Building on the analysis, the chapter examines how the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Force is not only constructed and communicated by the organization, but also how it is interpreted, internalized and reshaped by employees and external audiences. The discussion is organized into three main parts. First, the chapter discusses why employer branding has become increasingly important for the Swedish Armed Forces. Then, it discusses why symbolic values such as meaningfulness, societal contribution and belonging appear central to the organization's employer brand. Second, the discussion examines how employees engage with and internalize these symbolic values, as well as how organizational practices and social processes reinforce identification and attachment to the organization. Finally, we discuss the frictions and tensions that complicate the idea of a fully internalized employer brand by highlighting selective interpretations and criticism toward certain organizational aspects. Together, the discussion contributes to a deeper understanding of employer branding within the Swedish Armed Forces as a dynamic, socially constructed and continuously negotiated identity process.

Figure 2 below visually illustrates how the discussion is organized, and how different parts of the discussion build upon each other.

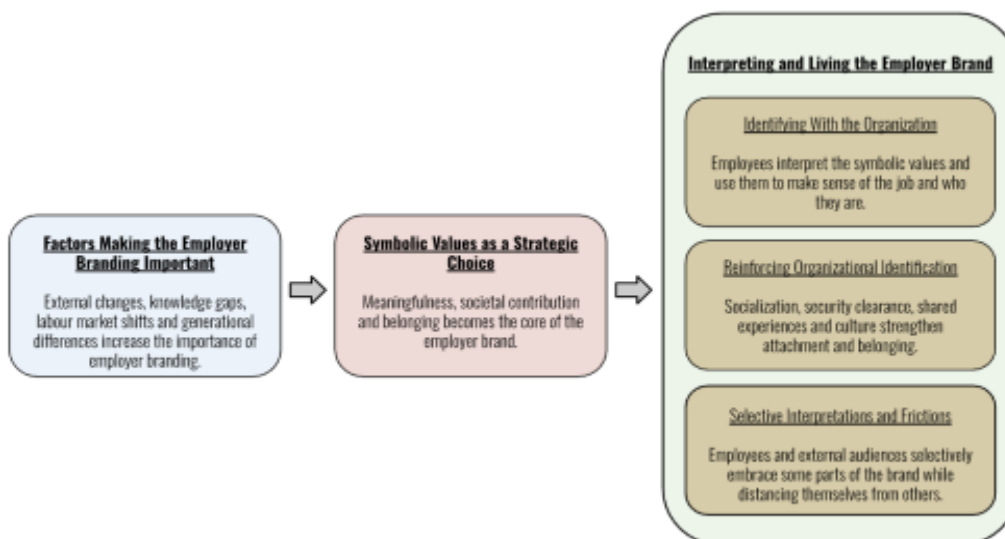


Figure 2. The structure of the discussion chapter.

5.1 Factors Making the Employer Brand Important

In order to understand why employer branding becomes increasingly important to the Swedish Armed Forces, it is necessary to reflect on the conditions that make such work increasingly significant. There are external developments that have fundamentally changed the recruitment environment and increased the importance of the employer brand.

The first factor is the generational knowledge gap that has been generated by the pause of mandatory military service in Sweden. Emma gives a quite clear explanation that there is now “an entire generation that has never done military service, and maybe does not either know anyone who has”. Meanwhile earlier generations inherited a familiarity as a standard through parents, relatives or their own service, however that transmission was broken when the mandatory service was paused. Due to this, the Swedish Armed Forces became somewhat distant or unfamiliar to a significant amount of the population that the organization now needs to recruit from. Theurer et al. (2018) argue that brand familiarity is important for employer attractiveness. When familiarity is high, the employer image becomes more effective. When familiarity is absent, even a strong employer brand struggles. This is particularly relevant in a military context, where Lievens et al. (2005) similarly find that familiarity functions as an anchor that strengthens the effect of employer attractiveness. This further underscores the importance of early and long-term relationship building, as App et al. (2012) argue that organizations can begin establishing relationships with potential candidates already in the pre-employment phase, for instance through school collaborations, in order to secure future competence supply. Therefore, we consider active employer branding important for the Swedish Armed Forces in order to increase the familiarity to be able to effectively recruit and retain competence.

Furthermore, the existing knowledge gap leads to the continuance of misconceptions and wrongful stereotypes about the Swedish Armed Forces. The analysis reveals existing uncertainties among external audiences about the daily worklife, role expectations and organizational culture, which amplifies fear or false assumptions regarding daily work in the organization. This therefore suggests that the employer brand must do more than just advertisement, it must try and correct misunderstandings, show credible everyday practices,

and properly introduce and inform people with no prior exposure to the organization. This aligns with Hatch & Schultz (2001) argument that the organization needs to align the image, vision and culture. If the external audience holds distorted images, the organization must work harder to communicate a coherent and realistic employer identity.

Furthermore, the shift in generational attitudes towards employment also makes employer branding work increasingly important for the Swedish Armed Forces. As Karin describes, the younger generation today change jobs with much closer intervals in comparison to the elder generations who often stayed loyal to one employer, as they felt that they “had been given so much by my employer, so now I have to stay”. This has led to what interviewees call “an employee’s market”. Nickson et al.’s argument that is cited in Beardwell & Thompson (2017) stresses the importance of the employer brand for this reason, as they describe that the recruitment and selection process is not only the organization selecting the candidate anymore, but also the other way around.

Because the Swedish Armed Forces produces its core military competence internally, losing candidates is a challenge since they are not easily replaced. The combination of a decrease in familiarity and a more mobile younger labour force therefore increase the strategic value of early, credible engagement. Since many young people today lack prior exposure to military service, the organization must actively provide information early on in order to increase awareness, reduce misconceptions, and help potential recruits to understand what military service and employment within the Swedish Armed Forces actually involves. It also stresses the importance of retention measures that can convert an initial interest into a sustained commitment. This increases the importance of employer branding because, as both Sokro (2012) and Beardwell & Thompson (2017) argue, employer branding is not only important for attracting new talent but also to retain them. When employees no longer have to stay due to obligation, the organization needs to offer a compelling offer that makes them want to stay. It also connects to the resource-base view (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017) that highlights that organizations that have resources that are valuable, rare, and imitable, such as the Swedish Armed Forces in-house developed military capabilities, should strategically use and protect these resources. In this sense, employer branding becomes strategically important for securing and retaining military human capital, since this type of competence can not be directly replaced through recruitment from the external labour market.

In conclusion, the generational knowledge gap and changing employment norms make the employer branding work both more necessary and more demanding. The organization has simultaneous needs of informing unfamiliar audiences, engaging them, and to ensure that internal practices can substantiate the claim used to attract them in order to retain them.

5.2 Symbolic Values as a Strategic Choice

To understand the strong emphasis on symbolic values within the employer branding of the Swedish Armed Forces, it is important to consider both the organization's structural conditions and its broader societal role.

The analysis of the empirical material shows how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs its employer brand through emphasizing meaningfulness, societal contribution and belonging. This is also strongly evident in their slogan which is “you make a difference”. This aligns with Aaker (2004) and Barrow and Mosley (2005) who both highlight the idea of an increasing use of symbolic and emotional values, rather than purely functional and material. This is particularly evident in a military context, where Lievens et al. (2025) find that symbolic attributes tend to contribute more to organizational attractiveness than instrumental factors such as pay. In the case of the Swedish Armed Forces it can be interpreted as not incidental, but as a strategic response to the organization's structural conditions. Several interviewees highlight that as a government organization, they can not compete with salaries. Although this does not imply the absence of functional benefits, the employees also highlight things such as competence development and training during working hours as valuable. The symbolic emphasis is however clear, they do communicate more symbolic values heavier. This is consistent with what Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) describes as a distinctive value proposition. In the case of the Swedish Armed Forces, the symbolic position does therefore not seem to be incidental. In our interpretation, it rather seems like a strategic choice by deliberately attempting to differentiate the organization in a competitive labour market. The Swedish Armed Forces' reliance on more symbolic values in their employer branding could thus be seen as a response to these limitations. Backhaus & Tikoo's (2004) and Beardwell & Thompson's (2017) views that employer branding creates a distinctive value proposition, and in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces, we argue that the distinctive resources are symbolic rather than monetary or material benefits. However it is worth noting that the existing literature tends to frame the emphasis on symbolic values as a strategic choice in a position

with options and not because material alternatives are unavailable (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). However, the case of the Swedish Armed Forces complicates this picture as the turn to symbolic values here is not framed as a choice from a menu of options, but rather a necessity as they cannot meaningfully compete on salary.

This strategy also makes sense from a motivational perspective, as the symbolic focus can be seen as an intentional attempt to activate the employees' interactive motivation (Sveningsson & Hallonsten, 2025). The interactive motivation is driven by a desire to meet the values and norms of the group. Rather than motivating through salary or material rewards, the organization appeals to the wish to belong, and to act in alignment with the professional community and live up to the shared sense of purpose. This is also connects to Gabriel and Lang's concept of the ego-ideal (1995) meaning that individuals are motivated by who they want to become in the eyes of others. From this perspective, When the values communicated through the employer brand aligns with how they wish to see themselves the brand becomes not just an external message, but also a source for personal motivation.

Finally, the deliberate construction of the employer brand centered on symbolic values can also be explained by the Swedish Armed Forces' mission. The symbolic focus supports Hatch and Schultz' (2001) argument about aligning vision, culture and image. The Swedish Armed Forces' mission emphasizes ideas such as credibility, collective responsibility, readiness and growth. By emphasizing symbolic values such as societal contribution and group belonging in the employer brand, they create a coherence between what it aims to be, what employees experience, and how they want to be perceived externally. Emphasizing these values therefore not only becomes a branding choice, but a way to ensure consistency between what the organization does, what it stands for, and how it is presented to the external audience.

Together, these factors can provide an explanation as to why the symbolic values are so important in the construction of the Swedish Armed Forces' employer brand. The symbolic values represent the organizations most distinctive resources in a labour market where their material competitiveness is limited. The symbolic values of the employer brand also targets interactive motivation, which helps to attract and retain individuals whose values and ideals align with the organization. Furthermore, it enables alignment between the organization's vision, culture and image. How the brand is later perceived and interpreted will further be explored and discussed in the following section.

5.3 Interpreting and Living the Employer Brand

While the previous section highlights the symbolic values that are associated with the brand, the empirical material also suggests that employees do not merely receive these values passively. Instead, the employees appear to interpret, engage with, and emotionally connect to the employer brand in different ways.

Identifying With the Organization

To understand how the employer brand becomes internalized, it is important to examine how employees draw on its symbolic meanings to create a sense of identity, belonging and purpose.

The employees' descriptions illustrate how the employer brand is perceived primarily through symbolic values that create a strong emotional attachment. In the empirical material, the employees repeatedly describe the Swedish Armed Forces through values connected to meaningfulness, contribution and belonging. They repeatedly talk about "being part of something bigger", contributing to society, and being part of an organization that is perceived as meaningful and beyond just an ordinary job. This emphasizes how the employees interpret the brand through the symbolic and emotional meanings that are attached to the organization. This aligns with Lievens et al. (2005) argument, that symbolic attributes often play a particularly important role in military organizations, and where excitement, meaning and societal contribution may become more attractive than just functional benefits in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces. These symbolic interpretations form the basis for how the employees begin to identify with the Swedish Armed Forces.

Given that the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces is built around symbolic values, these values become identity resources that the employees draw upon to understand themselves and their place within the organization. The employees can draw on the organization's narrative of contribution, belonging and collective purpose to make sense of their own role in the organization. In this sense, the employer brand functions as a source for identity that employees can attach themselves to and draw meaning from. Gabriel and Lang

(1995) provides a description of “consumers as identity seekers” who use a brand to construct meaning about who they are, drawing on what they call “truths, half-truths, and wish-fulfilling fiction”. When viewed from this perspective, it might become understandable why employees embrace elements from the employer brand such as teamwork, a civic purpose and belonging, that strengthen their social identity. This identity-forming process becomes even stronger when employees begin to position themselves in relation to the organization.

The employees not only seem to value the symbolic elements, but also internalize them as part of their self-understanding. The findings suggest that the employees do not only experience the work as meaningful, but also begin to position themselves in relation to the organization. The employer brand thereby becomes connected to the employees’ self-understanding. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Karin, who described the Swedish Armed Forces as “part of my moral compass”, suggesting that the organization’s values have become integrated into how she understands herself as a person, not only as an employee. The interviewees describe their work as not only a part of their job role, but as participating in something that is bigger than themselves. This aligns with Albert et al.’s (2000) argument that individuals may internalize organizational identity as part of their own self-definition. Values such as societal purpose and collective responsibility thus become integrated into how employees understand their role and place within the organization.

The Swedish Armed Forces provide a rich set of identity markers that reinforces this internalization. The organization offers a wide range of symbols and narratives that employees can attach meaning to such as rituals, shared challenges, shared language, and a clear societal mission. These symbols provide what Whetten and Godfrey (1998) describe as socially available identity markers that the employees can attach to in order to construct a sense of who they are. Through these shared practices and narratives, the employees gain access to a stable and recognizable identity position. The organization offers a coherent story about purpose, responsibility, and contribution, which employees can integrate into their own self-understanding. In a context where identity is understood as an ongoing and fluid process, rather than fixed, where individuals continuously navigate multiple roles, expectations, and self-understandings in their everyday lives (Brown, 2022; Sveningsson et al., 2021), organizations that offer a clear sense of purpose, belonging and collective meaning may become particularly attractive identity sources. From this perspective, the Swedish Armed

Forces offers what Gabriel and Lang (1995) would call an attractive identity source for the “identity-seeking consumer”, providing a clear role, a sense of belonging and a purpose that employees can anchor themselves to. This internalization process helps explain why the Swedish Armed Forces, according to us, can be understood as an identity-rich organization.

External geopolitical developments can further strengthen employees’ identification with the organization. In times of uncertainty or crisis, such as what the interviewees explain about the current geopolitical situation, individuals may be even more likely to seek organizations such as the Swedish Armed Forces that can offer job stability and a clear purpose. This then strengthens the appeal of the Swedish Armed Forces’ employer brand. The interviewees described how the increasing geopolitical uncertainty of today, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has strengthened both the external interest in the organization, and also the employees’ own perceptions of meaningfulness and societal contribution. This can be connected to Sveningsson et al., (2021) idea that identity becomes intensified during times of uncertainty or threat. Thereby, we can argue that these increasing societal changes reinforces the relevance and legitimacy of the Swedish Armed Forces employer brand, and therefore also strengthens the employees identification with the organization’s mission and purpose during uncertain times, such as the current one.

This deepened identification can also be understood through the lens of interactive motivation. Sveningsson and Hallonsten (2025) argue that employees are driven not primarily by external rewards or individual needs, but by the desire to meet the values, ideals and expectations of the group that they identify with. This connects to Haslam and Reicher’s (2006) argument that when individuals internalize a shared social identity rather than merely belonging to a group on a surface level, it creates the foundation for genuine cohesion and effective cooperation. In the context of the Swedish Armed Forces, this suggests that by appealing to interactive motivation through symbolic values such as belonging and collective purpose, the organization has enabled a kind of deep group identification enabling teamwork and mutual support, as shown in the interviewees’ experiences. The purpose of reaching people’s inner selves is to establish what we would like to call a “thick” or powerful relationship. This involves an identification process where the employee is tied to the organization both cognitively and emotionally. Such an attachment is reinforced by interactive motivation, where individuals are driven by the desire to meet the expectations, values and morals of this “defense family” of the Swedish Armed Forces. This aligns with

Albert et al.'s (2000) argument that when individuals internalize organizational identity as part of their self-definition, they gain a sense of connectedness that motivates them to act on behalf of the organization. This deep identification creates strong bonds that maintain loyalty and pride over time, and can explain the phenomenon of why employees choose to stay or return to the Swedish Armed Forces despite having more profitable alternatives elsewhere, since they find the Swedish Armed Forces sense of purpose and belonging as difficult to replace. At the same time, the findings suggest that the employer brand also draws on elements of inner motivation through its strong emphasis on meaningfulness, societal contribution, and purpose. Instrumental motivations such as salary, career opportunities and employment conditions are also present, but appear less central given the organization's structural limitations and inability to fully compete with private sector conditions. The employer brand therefore appears to rely primarily on interactive and inner motivation rather than purely instrumental incentives, as illustrated in Figure 3. In this figure, inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's original, we illustrate the motivational drivers in the context of the Swedish Armed Forces employer branding by placing them somewhere in the triangle. By placing them closer to primarily interactive motivation and further away from instrumental motivation, we illustrate their heavy reliance on the one they are the closest to.

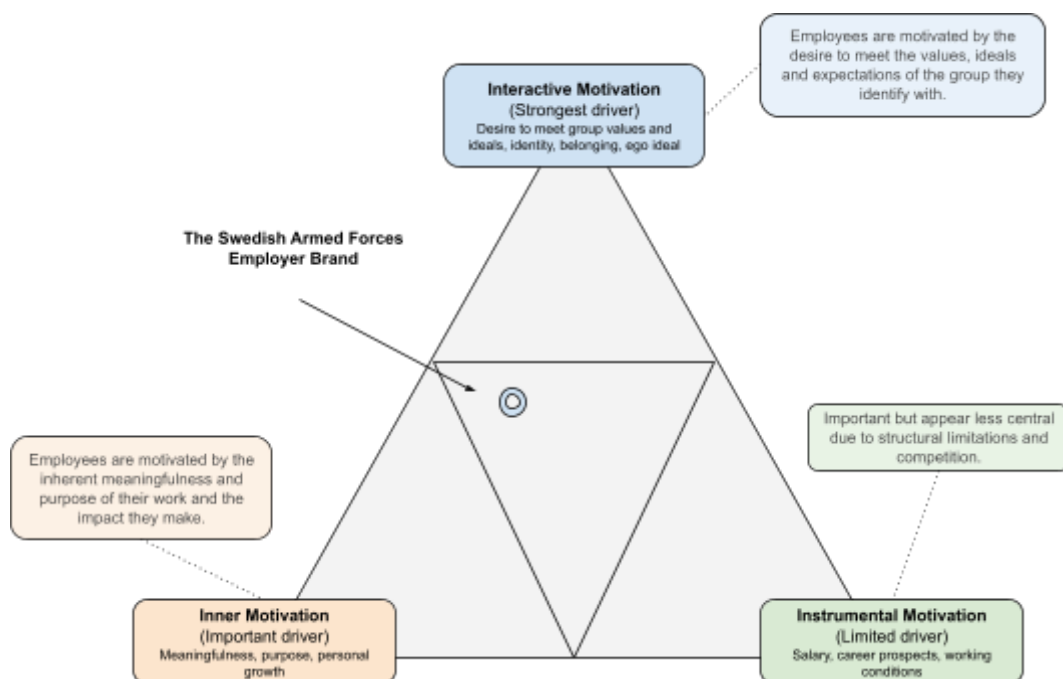


Figure 3: An interpretation of Alvesson & Kärreman's (2019) Motivational Triangle in the context of the Swedish Armed Forces.

Overall, this section illustrates that employees make sense of the employer brand primarily through its symbolic meanings, allowing the employees to view their work as meaningful and connected to a greater purpose. The symbolic values become a way for employees to understand themselves and their own place within the organization. Identity seems to be strengthened through shared practices and a clear mission of the organization, as well as the current geopolitical situation. These factors together create a deep and lasting attachment to the Swedish Armed Forces, where belonging, purpose and group values play an important role in why the employees choose to stay or return to the organization.

Reinforcing Organizational Identification

The empirical material further illustrates that organizational identification appears to be continuously reinforced through everyday interactions, shared experiences, and formal organizational practices.

The organizational identification within the Swedish Armed Forces is not only shaped through attraction to the employer brand, but appears to be strengthened and continuously reinforced through everyday organizational practices and social processes. The employees repeatedly describe how teamwork, collective challenges and shared experiences strengthen their sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the organization. In this sense, organizational identification appears to emerge not only through attraction to the employer brand itself, but through active participation in organizational life. This suggests that shared experiences function as important mechanisms through which employees collectively construct and reinforce the organizational identity. Particularly within the context of the Swedish Armed Forces where employees often work closely together under demanding conditions, collective experiences appear to strengthen both group cohesion and emotional attachment to the organization. This aligns with Haslam and Reicher's (2006) discussion about how social identity and group belonging are reinforced through shared group experiences and collective norms. The findings also connect to Hallonsten and Sveningsson's (2025) argument that identity is continuously reinforced through organizational norms, practices and everyday interactions. In this sense, the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces does not appear to be maintained only through formal communication, but also through the everyday relationships, experiences and organizational culture that the employees themselves participate in and contribute to shaping.

Beyond everyday interactions and shared experiences, the findings also suggest that more formal organizational structures and practices within the Swedish Armed Forces function as important mechanisms for reinforcing the organizational identification. Several organizational practices within the Swedish Armed Forces might function as reinforcing mechanisms that strengthen the employees' identification with the organization. The military service can be understood as an important socialization process through which individuals are gradually introduced to the values, norms and culture of the Swedish Armed Forces. As Maria describes, it functions as "the motorway into the Swedish Armed Forces". This aligns with Sokro's (2012) argument that internal branding efforts are often initiated through the induction process, where the organization actively communicates its core values to new members. In this sense, military service appears to function as an extended and particularly immersive form of induction, through which individuals not only learn practical skills but are gradually socialized into the identity and culture of the organization. Since the military competence is largely produced internally, the military service functions as a structured pathway into the organization and thereby appears to shape how individuals understand both the organization and their role within it. This further aligns with Hallonsten and Sveningsson's (2025) discussion about how organizations actively cultivate identity through formal programs and everyday practices. In this sense, military service may function as a shared and symbolically loaded experience that strengthens collective belonging and organizational attachment. The recruitment selection process, where recruits are "selected on certain premises" and "perform the same tests", appears to create shared experiences that reinforce a sense of belonging and collective identity. The findings further suggest that the extensive security clearance process that is connected to the recruitment process may function as more than just an administrative requirement. We believe that this security clearance process may function as a symbolic rite of passage, through which individuals are "cleared" and become trusted members of the organization. By getting accepted past this extensive background check, the individual is allowed to pass into the organization and become a part of this exclusive collective. Thereby, these types of formal organizational processes within the Swedish Armed Forces do not only regulate entry into the organization, but also appear to strengthen identification, belonging, and attachment to the organizational.

Furthermore the interviewees also describe organizational benefits such as paid educational opportunities and exercise during working hours as important aspects of working within the

Swedish Armed Forces. While these benefits can partly be understood as functional components of the employer offering, the findings also suggest that they carry symbolic meaning by signaling that the organization invests in the employees' wellbeing and long-term development. This connects to Barrow and Mosley's (2005) discussion that these such things may strengthen the psychological contract, which extends beyond the formal employment contract and is strengthened through employees' experiences of recognition, support, and organizational investment. When the employees perceive that the organization genuinely invests in their development and wellbeing, it appears to create a sense of reciprocity where the individuals become more motivated to remain committed and loyal to the organization. In this sense, functional benefits in the Swedish Armed Forces do not only appear important because of their practical value, but also because they strengthen the employees emotional attachment and identification with the organization.

Together, these practices appear to strengthen belonging, loyalty and attachment to the organization. The findings therefore suggest that organizational practices within the Swedish Armed Forces may not only function as practical structures, but also as mechanisms through which the employer brand and organizational identity are continuously reinforced in everyday organizational life. These mechanisms that reinforces the organizational identification are illustrated in Figure 4 that is below.

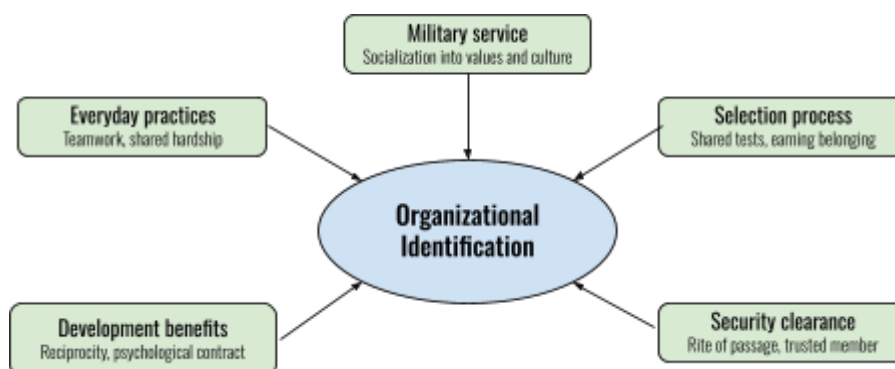


Figure 4. Illustrates how organizational practices and processes continuously reinforce employee identification over time.

Selective Interpretations and Frictions

Although many employees appear to strongly internalize and identify with the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces, the findings also suggest that the employer brand is not

received completely uniformly or without critique. Employees engage with the brand selectively, by embracing certain dimensions while distancing themselves from others.

While many of the employees seem to strongly embrace the symbolic values that are communicated by the Swedish Armed Forces, they also express frustration towards aspects of the organizations such as bureaucracy, hierarchical structure and slow processes. Maria's description of the organization as a "heavy machinery" and her acknowledgement that bureaucracy sometimes makes her doubt staying illustrates that even deeply committed employees maintain a critical distance from certain organizational realities. This indicates that the employees do not consume the employer brand entirely passively and as one coherent organizational narrative. Instead, they appear to selectively embrace certain dimensions of it while also distancing themselves from other dimensions. This aligns with Gabriel & Lang's (1995) argument that consumers do not only receive and reproduce the message of a brand exactly how it is communicated, but instead they reinterpret and reshape them based on their own lived experiences and interpretations. We therefore believe that, inspired by Gabriel & Lang (1995), the findings of the empirical material shows a form of selective consumption of the Swedish Armed Forces' employer brand. The more attractive and identity-enhancing parts of the employer brand such as meaningfulness, societal contribution and belongingness appear to be embraced by the employees, while they distance themselves from less attractive aspects of it such as bureaucracy and administrative complexity.

The empirical material also indicates that similar selective interpretations occur externally as well. Several interviewees describe how parts of the public continue to associate the Swedish Armed Forces primarily with war, weapons and stereotypical military imagery. Despite the organization's attempts to communicate broader narratives concerning societal contribution, meaningfulness and diverse career opportunities, these stereotypes remain to exist to a certain extent. Indicating a gap between the intended image of the organization, and how parts of the external audiences perceive it risks leading to inefficiency in the employer brand. This aligns with Hatch and Schultz's (2001) argument that organizations must align their image, vision and culture in order to achieve a coherent and credible brand. When external audiences hold distorted or partial images, this alignment breaks down. Cushen (2009) similarly highlights that when there is a mismatch between what is communicated and how it is actually perceived, it risks generating cynicism and disengagement rather than attraction. In the case of the Swedish Armed Forces, this suggests that despite active employer branding efforts,

stereotypical associations with war and weapons contribute to creating a gap between the organizational narrative and how some external audiences interpret it, underscoring that closing this gap requires sustained and targeted communication efforts. However, it is worth noting that inside the organization, there seems to be no signs of these risks due to misalignment, which complicates the authors argument.

However, these frictions do not seem to undermine the employer brand completely. As the analysis suggested there seems to be a rather strong alignment between how the employer brand is produced and how it is consumed. We believe that the deep sense of meaningfulness can help explain why the employer brand remains committed despite the frictions identified. May et al. (2004) identify meaningfulness as the strongest condition for employees to fully invest themselves in work, suggesting that when meaningfulness is genuinely experienced, it can outweigh other sources of dissatisfaction. This could offer a partial explanation for why employees in the Swedish Armed Forces express strong attachment to the organization even while maintaining critical distance from aspects such as bureaucracy and slow processes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that there is a selective consumption of the employer brand and thus it is not internalized as a single, coherent narrative. Instead, the employees and external audiences engage with the brand selectively, emphasizing the parts that align with their own values and experiences while reinterpreting or criticizing others. It highlights the employer brand as a negotiated and dynamic identity process that is shaped by both the organizational messaging and the individual meaning-making process.

5.4 Chapter Summary

To summarize, the discussion illustrates how employer branding within the Swedish Armed Forces appears to be shaped both by external changes and by employees' internal meaning-making processes. Societal shifts have created a recruitment environment where familiarity with the Swedish Armed Forces can no longer be taken for granted. At the same time, changing generational attitudes towards work and employment suggest that attracting employees alone is no longer sufficient, as retention has become increasingly challenging. Together, these factors make the employer brand more important and more complex.

The Swedish Armed Forces focuses on symbolic values such as meaningfulness, societal contribution, and belonging. Since they can not compete with salaries, the symbolic values become a strategic resource. These symbolic values therefore function as a strategic resource that helps the organization attract people by offering purpose and identity rather than material rewards. The values also speak to interactive motivation which helps the organization motivate individuals to apply by using the symbolic values, where individuals are driven by the desire to contribute to something larger and to live up to the ideal of the group that they identify with. In this way, the employer brand works not only as a message about the organization, but as a way to motivate and engage individuals by appealing to their sense of purpose, responsibility and belonging.

These symbolic values are interpreted by the employees and used to make sense of the job and who they are. As many describe being “part of something bigger”, there is reason to argue that the employer brand becomes a source for identity as it becomes a way of understanding themselves and their role within the organization. In this way, the symbolic values articulated in the employer brand moves beyond external communication and starts to function as a source of identity for the employees.

This identification is then also further reinforced through everyday interactions, shared experiences, and formal organizational practices. Teamwork, collective challenges and close collaboration strengthen employees’ sense of belonging, while structured processes such as security clearance and military service function as socialization- and reinforcing mechanisms. These shared experiences, together with organizational benefit that signals investment in the employees development and wellbeing, contribute to a stronger psychological contract and sense of reciprocity. Together, these practices show that organizational identification is actively maintained in daily organizational life, where both informal relationships and formal structures reinforce a strong connection and identification with the organization.

However the process is not uniform or comes without friction. The study reveals that in the case of the Swedish Armed Forces, employees seem to embrace the meaningful parts of the brand while some of them also distance themselves from bureaucracy, hierarchy and slow processes. External stereotypes and limited public knowledge about the organization also influence how the external public perceives them. These dynamics illustrate how the employer brand is not simply received as intended, but is selectively consumed, negotiated

and met with criticism, showing that identification is shaped by conditions both within and around the organization.

6. Conclusion

This concluding chapter summarizes the main empirical findings of the study, presents the theoretical and practical implications, discusses the study's limitations, and offers recommendations for future research. The purpose of this thesis has been to examine how the Swedish Armed Forces constructs and communicates its employer brand, and how the employees interpret and experience it in practice.

6.1 Empirical Findings

This study demonstrates that the employer brand of the Swedish Armed Forces has become increasingly important due to a generational knowledge gap created by the pause of mandatory military service, persistent external stereotypes, and shifting generational attitudes towards employment and loyalty. Together, these conditions create a recruitment environment where familiarity with the organization can no longer be taken for granted, and where attracting and retaining competence requires active and sustained employer branding efforts. As a response to these challenges, the Swedish Armed Forces should, and are strategically using their employer branding to communicate a more nuanced and attractive image of the organization.

The study further shows that the Swedish Armed Forces constructs its employer brand primarily around symbolic values such as meaningfulness, societal contribution, and belonging. As a public sector organization with limited ability to compete on salary, these symbolic values become a strategic resource through which the organization seeks to differentiate itself in a competitive labour market. This is reflected in the organization's slogan "you make a difference", which connects individual work to a broader societal purpose. At the same time, functional benefits such as development opportunities, internal mobility, generous vacation time and training during working hours complete the symbolic emphasis and appear to be genuinely valued by employees in their everyday lives. However, these functional benefits appear to complement rather than dominate the employer brand. Since the Swedish Armed Forces operates within the structural constraints of the public sector, particularly regarding salaries and recruitment flexibility, symbolic values become especially important strategic resources for differentiation in a competitive labour market.

Another central finding concerns how the employer brand is interpreted and experienced by employees and external audiences. The study shows that individuals do not passively receive the employer brand, but instead actively interpret, negotiate, and selectively internalize different parts of it. Many employees describe their work as deeply meaningful and connected to something larger than themselves, and the symbolic values communicated through the employer brand appear to function as identity resources that employees draw upon to understand themselves and their place within the organization. In this sense, the employer brand becomes not only a recruitment message but a source of identity, providing employees with a stable sense of purpose, belonging and collective meaning that they integrate into their own self-understanding. Organizational identification appears to be continuously reinforced through everyday practices, shared experiences, and formal processes such as military service and security clearance. The current geopolitical situation further intensifies employees' sense of purpose and the perceived relevance of the organization's mission.

While many employees strongly identify with the organization's symbolic values, the findings also reveal tensions and frictions that complicate the picture. Employees express critical distance from aspects such as bureaucracy, hierarchical structures, and slow processes, while external audiences continue to hold partial or stereotypical images of the organization despite active communication efforts. This suggests that employer branding is something that is continuously shaped through the interaction between organizational communication and individual interpretation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that employer branding in the Swedish Armed Forces is best understood not as a fixed message that is transmitted from organization to employee, but as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process that is shaped by communication, everyday practices, shared experiences, and the individual meaning-making of employees and external audiences.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

With this study, we contribute to employer branding, identity and motivational literature in two main ways.

- **Employer branding in the context of a public and security-driven context**

Much of the existing employer branding literature is grounded in private sector assumptions, where organizations have considerable flexibility to shape their offering. This study thereby extends that literature by examining employer branding in a public sector context, where symbolic values function as strategic resources when material competitiveness is structurally constrained. Therefore, this study extends the theory on employer branding by demonstrating how the symbolic focus can compensate for limited economic competitiveness. The findings therefore nuance existing employer branding research, which is mostly dominated by private-sector studies assumptions of organizational flexibility, through demonstrating that symbolic employer branding can be both a strategic response to structural limitations and an effective mechanism for fostering organizational identification.

- **Using symbolic values to activate interactive motivation and identity**

Our study further deepens the understanding of why symbolic values are efficient in the employer branding. This study shows that emphasizing symbolic values is not just a branding choice. By appealing to meaning, belonging, and societal contribution, the organization seeks to reach employees' interactive motivational drivers and foster identification and loyalty. Symbolic values function as mechanisms for activating the interactive motivation and support identity formation. This explains why symbolic values can be so important in employer branding.

- **Extending Gabriel & Lang's consumer theory into an organizational context**

The second contribution concerns the application of Gabriel and Lang's (1995) consumer theory to an organizational context. The theory was originally developed to explain how the market consumers interpret and reshape brand messages, however in this study we have chosen to apply it to the context of employer branding. This research shows how employees and external audiences actively interpret, reshape and selectively internalize parts of the brand. This supports and extends Gabriel and Lang's (1995) argument about the "unmanageable consumer", who alter rather than simply receive what is produced. The findings show that the employees act as selective consumers of meaning, embracing some elements while reinterpreting or distancing themselves from others. This illustrates how

employees reinterpret and appropriate organizational messages in similar ways to the market consumers.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for the Swedish Armed Forces and for public sector organizations facing comparable challenges.

First, the study suggests that employer branding should not be understood solely as an external recruitment strategy, but also as something that is shaped through employees' everyday experiences within the organization. Internal practices, socialization processes and everyday organizational life play an important role in maintaining a credible and resonant employer brand. Organizations should therefore ensure consistency between their communicated values and how the employees' everyday life work experiences are, as inconsistencies risks undermining trust and weakening identification with the organization.

Second, the study highlights the strategic importance of symbolic values in organizations that can not fully compete on salary or material incentives. Meaningfulness, societal contribution and belonging emerge as powerful motivational drivers, particularly when they resonate with employees' own values and sense of identity. However, symbolic values alone are insufficient, meaning that functional benefits that support employee wellbeing and long-term development appear to complement and sustain the symbolic emphasis over time.

Lastly, the findings demonstrate that early and sustained engagement with potential candidates is particularly valuable. Investments in pre-employment activities such as school visits and regional outreach functions as long-term relationship-building efforts. Building familiarity and correcting misconceptions early on appears especially important for reaching groups with limited prior exposure to the organization.

6.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The study focuses specifically on the Swedish Armed Forces, the findings are context-dependent and can not

necessarily be generalized to other organizations or sectors. The empirical material is based on eleven interviews with employees in roles connected to employer branding, which means that the perspectives of other employee groups such as soldiers, officers or recently recruited personnel are not directly represented. Including a broader range of perspectives could have provided a more complete picture of how the employer brand is experienced across the organization.

Furthermore, as the study is grounded in an interpretivist research perspective, the analysis is shaped by our own subjective interpretations of the empirical material. Other researchers may therefore have interpreted the data differently or emphasized other themes, or drawn different conclusions from the same material.

Finally, the study captures employees' experiences and interpretations at a particular point in time, meaning that perceptions of the employer brand may change over time and across contexts. The study was conducted within a limited timeframe, which also has restricted the scope and depth of the empirical investigation

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study points to several directions for future research.

Since this study extends Gabriel and Lang's (1995) consumer theory into an organizational context, we suggest that future research could further explore how employees act as selective consumers of the employer brand across different types of organizations and sectors. This would help to develop a more generalizable framework for understanding how employer branding messages are interpreted and negotiated in practice.

The study also highlights how generational shifts in employment expectations, career patterns and loyalty norms appear to make retention an increasingly urgent strategic concern. Future research examining how generational differences shape the interpretation and uptake of the employer brand, and how organizations adapt their employer branding strategies in response, would therefore be valuable.

Finally, the findings raise interesting questions about identity-rich organizations more broadly. Comparative studies examining how employees in similarly mission-driven public organizations, such as the police force or healthcare, selectively identify with their employer brand could help develop a deeper understanding of the conditions under which symbolic employer branding is most effective, and where its limitations lie.

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Appendix

This appendix provides a list of some examples of prompts that have been used for generative AI:

- Is there another way of expressing xxx?
- Do you have a suggestion for another word than xxx?
- How can I formulate this sentence differently?
- How can I translate this from Swedish to English?
- What is xxx in English?
- Here are some ideas that I have, how could I structure them to make sense?
- Does the point come across in this sentence?
- Give me feedback on this paragraph.