

THE IMAGE OF THE POLISH ARMED FORCES AS A GUARANTOR OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE OPINION OF GENERATION Z

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Abstract: *Public Relations are undergoing constant transformation. These changes are undoubtedly driven by the rapid pace of technological development and the evolving media landscape - with the Internet and social media becoming key elements in recent years. The Polish Armed Forces are an organization that must pay particular attention to its image. The Polish military currently faces significant challenges, such as increasing the number of soldiers, rebuilding personnel reserves, and being actively involved in defending the border against asymmetric threats. The dynamic development of modern forms of communication and information exchange forces all organizations and institutions - especially the Polish Armed Forces - to carefully select appropriate techniques and tools for shaping their image. The purpose of this article is to identify and evaluate the key factors influencing the military's image according to Generation Z. It is worth emphasizing that Public Relations activities and their personalization are closely linked to generational typologies. The survey was conducted in March 2025, while the survey questionnaire contained 6 questions. 126 people participated in the survey. In terms of expectations, the youngest generations are the most demanding, as they navigate the online world with ease and often set new digital trends.*

Keywords: image, image creation, Generation Z

1. Introduction

The security environment of Poland has been significantly influenced by the ongoing decomposition of the international order in recent years. The newly emerging security landscape is characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability, with a continuously increasing number of threats. Among these are activities conducted below the threshold of war, commonly referred to as hybrid threats, which have a direct impact on a nation's information environment. Poland has become a target of hybrid attacks, particularly through the use of irregular migration as a tool along its eastern border with Belarus.

Amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, Poland has experienced an intensification of cyberattacks and disinformation operations. These actions primarily involve the dissemination of fake news and the use of deepfake technologies. The internet has become the primary arena for information exchange, thereby creating a fertile ground for manipulation and disinformation campaigns. Consequently, the demands placed on strategic communication activities are growing [1].

It is therefore imperative to enhance the state's resilience to such threats through the implementation of a robust information policy and the cultivation of a positive

image of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland.

2. Literature review

The challenge of defining public relations has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, complicated by the broad array of its tools and the dynamic nature of their evolution [2]. The multitude and diversity of definitions that have emerged underscore the continuous development of this academic field [3]. It is estimated that approximately 2,000 distinct definitions of the term exist.

2.1. The Concept and Essence of Public Relations

Public relations refer to “contacts or relationships with the general public and stakeholders.” The term encompasses the modes of interaction, attitudes, and behaviours among individuals, governments, and organizations. While early efforts to shape public opinion date back to organized societies, the rise of democratic systems significantly elevated the importance of this concept [4, 5]. Public relations are often defined as a marketing tool aimed at shaping a positive image of an organization within its environment. These efforts focus on creating, expanding, and solidifying public trust [6, 7]. The term is also understood as a management function responsible for establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an institution and its stakeholders [8, 9]. Public relations is thus regarded as both an art and a science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding, founded on complete and credible information.

2.2. Techniques for Shaping the Image of an Organization

A wide array of tools can be employed to create a positive, beneficial, and desirable image of an organization [10]. In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in the importance of modern methods of communication, largely due to the declining effectiveness of

traditional instruments. The analysis of public relations tools and techniques has made it possible to identify current trends in organizational image-building practices.

Contemporary changes in media and communication methods are occurring at an increasingly rapid pace. Traditional media must now coexist and cooperate with “new” media. A defining characteristic of today’s media landscape is the omnipresent phenomenon of convergence - communication channels are increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Due to their inherent nature, the internet and social media play a crucial role in reaching target audiences.

Marketers and communication professionals tasked with shaping an organization’s image must continuously innovate and surprise their audiences to maintain engagement. The changes that have taken place - and continue to evolve - in this area are further catalyzed by generational differences, particularly evident in the labour market and in the ways different age groups perceive various media channels. An in-depth analysis of these factors is essential for developing an effective organizational or corporate image strategy.

2.3. Characteristics of Generation Z

In the field of social sciences, an ongoing debate concerns the typology of generations. Some scholars argue that it is life stages - rather than generational affiliation - that define individuals and their behaviour. However, in the literature on the subject, as well as in the practice of management sciences, generational classification is widely used. A generation is understood as a group of individuals born and living during the same period who share similar experiences.

An analysis of academic publications and the work of Human Resources practitioners reveal various generational classifications, particularly with differing boundary years for Generations Z and Alpha. One

commonly cited classification is as follows [11]:

- **Baby Boomers:** born between 1945–1965;
- **Generation X:** born between 1960–1980;
- **Generation Y (Millennials):** born between 1980–2000;
- **Generation Z (Digital Natives):** born between 1995–2010;
- **Generation Alpha (Google Kids):** born from 2010 onward.

Young people from Generation Z are enthusiastic users of mobile applications, which are often linked to particular brands or organizations. Regardless of the exact cut-off dates used, it is evident that younger generations differ significantly from their parents and grandparents in how they perceive and consume information. For Generation Z, the internet constitutes the primary and unquestioned source of information. They engage with all major social media platforms, with particular emphasis on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

These generations have been immersed in modern technologies from an early age. As such, the greatest challenge for public relations professionals is to capture their attention through innovative, unconventional approaches and compelling content. Generation Z tends to look to influencers - opinion leaders - for guidance in shaping their behaviours, preferences, and choices.

3. Research Methodology

The research objective was pursued through a methodological approach encompassing both theoretical and empirical dimensions. The theoretical component involved an analysis of existing practices in

organizational image management. The empirical part focused on conducting research aimed at identifying and assessing the key factors that influence Generation Z's perception of the military's image.

The primary source used in the preparation of this article was the available literature on organizational image management. A survey was conducted in April 2025 among a sample of 126 respondents aged 19-24, representing Generation Z. Given the multifaceted nature of the research topic, the study concentrated on selected aspects of image management.

Furthermore, this study adopts a utilitarian perspective, as it demonstrates the necessity of deliberate image management for the armed forces in light of the dynamic changes occurring in the macro-environment.

4. Results and discussion

The research material presented was selected based on responses provided by members of Generation Z in questionnaire surveys. The primary aim of the study was to identify the factors influencing the image of the military in Poland. The research method employed was the analysis of primary data, collected through a structured questionnaire. Respondents were asked whether they are interested in the activities undertaken by the military. According to the results, a clear majority of respondents (57%) expressed interest in military-related activities. In contrast, 25% of respondents reported that they are not interested or are rather uninterested in the actions undertaken by the armed forces (see Figure 1).

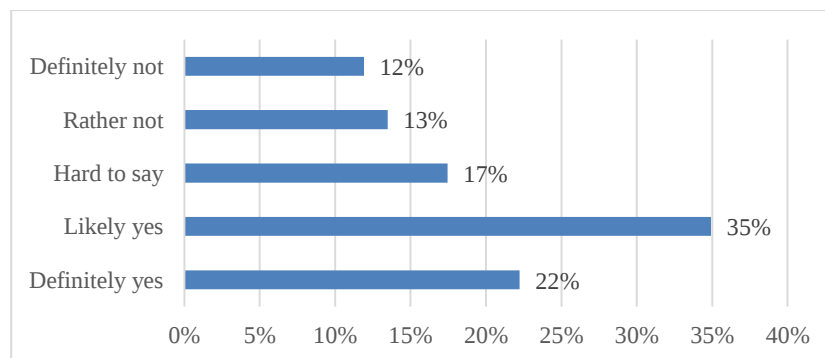


Figure 1: Are you interested in military activities?

Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.

In order to identify the main sources of knowledge and information about the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, respondents were asked the following question: “Where do you obtain your knowledge and information about the Polish Armed Forces?” The primary sources indicated (see Figure 2) were websites (48%) and social media platforms (21%). Respondents also cited family and friends as sources of information (11%). It is noteworthy that the least frequently selected responses included school-based education (6%), traditional media such as

television, radio, and print press (6%), meetings with soldiers (4%), and books (3%). The findings clearly demonstrate that the internet and social media play a key role in shaping public awareness of the Polish Armed Forces. This underscores the need to further develop and professionalize the military’s presence in these digital communication channels. Traditional sources of information - such as schools, legacy media, and books - play a marginal role in disseminating knowledge about the armed forces.

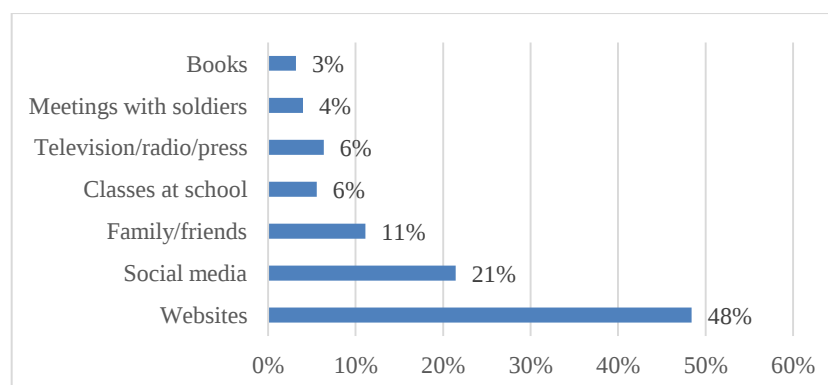


Figure 2: Where do you get information about the Polish Armed Forces?

Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.

In the case of the Polish Armed Forces, it is important to consider the individual branches of service. Therefore, an attempt was made to identify which branches, in the opinion of respondents, are promoted the most effectively. The distribution of responses is presented in Figure 3. The Land Forces were identified as the most prominently represented in the media (55%

of responses), followed by the Territorial Defence Forces (25%).

The reasons for this distribution may be attributed to the fact that the Land Forces constitute the largest branch of the Polish Armed Forces, and as such, their activities are most frequently covered in the media. Furthermore, the Land Forces are currently the primary focus of modernization efforts. On the other hand, the Territorial Defence

Forces, being the newest component of the military, required intensified promotional

and image-building efforts to attract potential recruits.

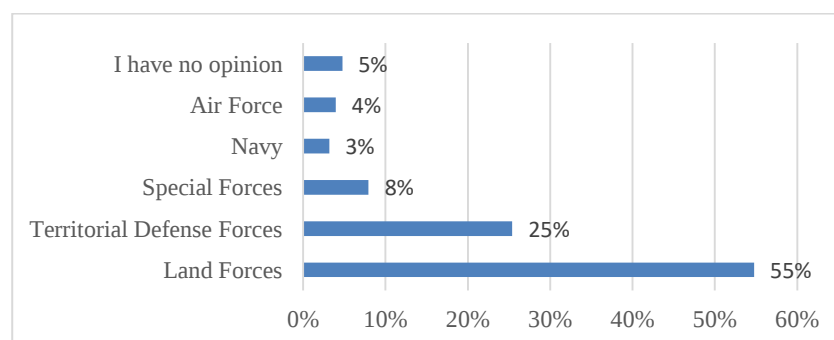


Figure 3: Which branch of the Armed Forces do you think is currently most widely publicized in the media?

Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.

The issue of national security and defence remains a key component of global discussions on geopolitical transformation. Understanding public sentiment regarding defence matters is therefore essential. A clear majority of respondents (59%) indicated that they strongly appreciate or rather appreciate the actions undertaken by the military, as shown in Figure 4.

This positive attitude toward the Polish Armed Forces may be attributed to a variety

of initiatives undertaken by the military, including its involvement in crisis response operations. In recent years, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland have played an active role in combating the Covid-19 pandemic, securing the eastern border in response to migration pressure (used as a tool of hybrid warfare by the Belarusian side), and participating in flood prevention and disaster relief efforts.

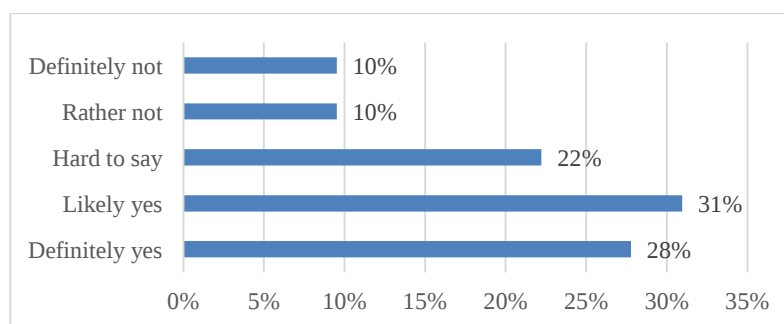


Figure 4: Is military service appreciated by society?

Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.

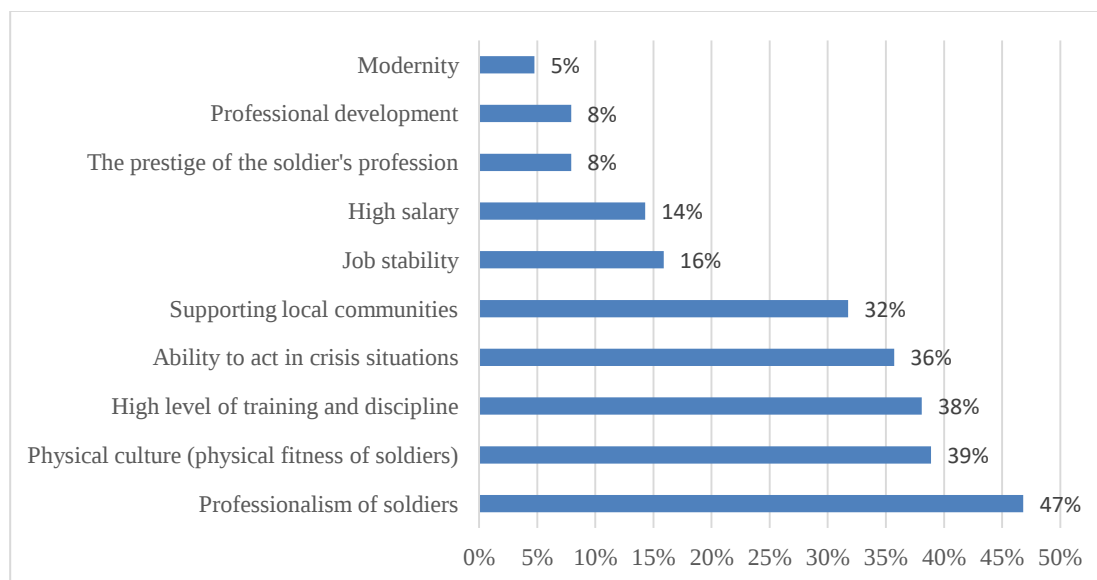
According to respondents, the key factor influencing the image of the military as a guarantor of national security is the level of soldiers' training (47%). The second most frequently mentioned factor was physical fitness (39%), followed by a high level of discipline and structured training (38%). Respondents also indicated that the ability to respond effectively during crises (36%),

support for local communities (32%), and stable employment opportunities (16%) contribute positively to the image of the armed forces, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Respondents clearly recognize that a strong military - built on a foundation of highly trained soldiers equipped with state-of-the-art technology - is essential to ensuring national security. This reflects a widespread

societal expectation regarding the professionalism of the armed forces. Physical and psychological attributes such as physical fitness and crisis-response capabilities are perceived as crucial for

shaping a positive image of the military. These findings highlight the public's emphasis on combat readiness and operational flexibility as defining qualities of a credible and respected defence force.



*Figure 5: What elements positively influence the image of the army?
Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.*

Another question addressed the factors perceived to negatively influence the image of the military (see Figure 6). According to the survey results, the most significant factor contributing to a negative perception of the armed forces is outdated equipment (44%), followed by the cost of maintaining the military (33%) and inappropriate behaviour by soldiers in both public and private life (30%). Other frequently cited factors included a lack of modernity (29%), separation from family (25%), and unethical conduct among military personnel (21%).

It is important to note that outdated military equipment is currently being actively

replaced with new armaments and modern technologies. Young respondents appear to be aware of the importance of aligning military equipment with NATO standards. Poland is undertaking extensive modernization efforts to ensure that its military assets meet the demands of contemporary warfare. The armed forces are implementing advanced solutions acquired from allied militaries, as well as adopting innovations inspired by best practices from the civilian sector.

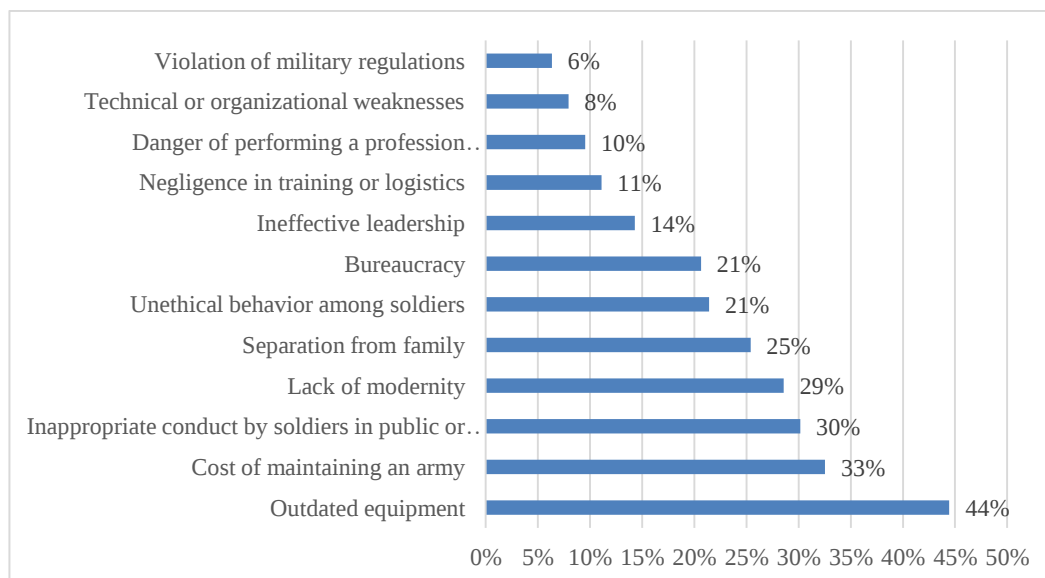


Figure 6: What elements negatively impact the image of the army?

Source: own study on the basis of the collected empirical material.

Given the factors that negatively affect the image of the armed forces, it is essential to implement corrective measures aimed at mitigating their impact. Key actions should include organizing public engagement events enhanced by demonstrations of military equipment, conducting a professional and coordinated promotional campaign, and increasing media interest in the ongoing modernization and professionalization of the armed forces.

5. Conclusions

The image of the armed forces should be regarded as one of the organization's most critical assets. Currently, the primary role in shaping this image is achieved through communication on social media platforms centred round the official website. Building an appropriate military image is a crucial element in promoting patriotic values, civic duties, and pro-social behaviours to enhance the nation's defence capabilities.

According to the conducted research, the most significant positive factors influencing the military's image include the level of soldier training, physical fitness, and high standards of discipline and training. Additionally, the study reveals that the most critical negative factors affecting the military's perception are outdated equipment, the cost of maintaining the armed forces, and improper behaviour by soldiers in public and private life.

Furthermore, it was determined that the primary source of information regarding the military is official websites, leading to the conclusion that this area should be specifically prioritized for further development in the context of military image management. Therefore, effective image management requires continuous adaptation to new conditions and a prompt, efficient response to changes.

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