UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

MASTER'S THESIS

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF BRANDING IN A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION: THE CASE OF SAN DIEGO COMIC CON

Ljubljana, July 2023   KRIS ČUČEK MERŠOL

AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

The undersigned Kris Čuček Meršol, a student at the University of Ljubljana, School of Economics and Business (hereafter: SEB LU), author of this written final work of studies with the title An analysis of the role of branding in a non-profit organization: the case of San Diego comic con, prepared under supervision of Maja Konečnik Ruzzier, PhD

D E C L A R E

1. this written final work of studies to be based on the results of my own research;

2. the printed form of this written final work of studies to be identical to its electronic form;

3. the text of this written final work of studies to be language-edited and technically in adherence with the SEB LU's Technical Guidelines for Written Works, which means that I cited and / or quoted works and opinions of other authors in this written final work of studies in accordance with the SEB LU's Technical Guidelines for Written Works;

4. to be aware of the fact that plagiarism (in written or graphical form) is a criminal offence and can be prosecuted in accordance with the Criminal Code of the Republic of Slovenia;

5. to be aware of the consequences a proven plagiarism charge based on the this written final work could have for my status at the SEB LU in accordance with the relevant SEB LU Rules;

6. to have obtained all the necessary permits to use the data and works of other authors which are (in written or graphical form) referred to in this written final work of studies and to have clearly marked them;

7. to have acted in accordance with ethical principles during the preparation of this written final work of studies and to have, where necessary, obtained permission of the Ethics Committee;

8. my consent to use the electronic form of this written final work of studies for the detection of content similarity with other written works, using similarity detection software that is connected with the SEB LU Study Information System;

9. to transfer to the University of Ljubljana free of charge, non-exclusively, geographically and time-wise unlimited the right of saving this written final work of studies in the electronic form, the right of its reproduction, as well as the right of making this written final work of studies available to the public on the World Wide Web via the Repository of the University of Ljubljana;

10. my consent to publication of my personal data that are included in this written final work of studies and in this declaration, when this written final work of studies is published.

11. that I have verified the authenticity of the information derived from the records using artificial intelligence tools.

Ljubljana, _____   Author's signature: _____

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF APPENDICES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC – American Broadcasting Company
AMC – American Movie Classics
APE – Alternative Press Expo
BLM – Bottomline Marketing
CAGR – Compound Annual Growth Rate
CBBE – Customer-Based Brand Equity
CBS – Columbia Broadcasting System
CCXP – Comic-Con Experience
CEO – Chief Executive Officer
CFO – Chief Financial Officer
COO – Chief Operating Officer
DC – Detective Comics
EXPO – Exposition
FX – FOX Extended
HBO Max – Home Box Office Max
HRM – Human Resource Management
ICNPO – International Classification of Non-Profit Organizations
IGN – Imagine Games Network
IRS – Internal Revenue Service
NBC – National Broadcasting Company
NPO – Non-Profit Organization
RFID – Radio Frequency Identification
ROI – Return on Investment
SCI-FI – Science-Fiction
SDCC – San Diego Comic-Con
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations
WWF – World Wildlife Fund

INTRODUCTION

The main difference between non-profit and for-profit organizations, which both serve the community, is in the fact that the non-profit organizations focus on a social mission purpose, whereas the for-profit organizations offer products or services to generate revenue. The word management was in the past merely related to businesses that generated profits and, in the then mindsets, could somehow not be connected to non-profit organizations. Today, we know that non-profit organizations also need to know how to use management skills and plan strategies to achieve their mission goals (Drucker, 2011). Non-profit organizations can be described as catalysts that work and change entire systems by cooperating with other stakeholders, using government, other businesses or non-profit organizations, and the public to help them reach their purpose (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008). The non-profit sector is thus much more complex, facing more challenges and operating within a more uncertain economic engine, for which more strategic rigor is required to build a successful non-profit sector organization than it is the case with for-profit corporations (Meehan, 2017).

The competition among non-profit organizations, as well as between non-profit and for-profit sectors, is rising, as well. Clients and donors in the non-profit sector increasingly intensify their demands for an efficient provision of services. In such an environment, many non-profit organizations turn to the for-profit sector's managerial tools (Oster, 1995). According to some theories, possible coexistent models or bilateral relations between non-profit and for-profit sectors instead of competition are implied, especially from a general stakeholder perspective (Abzug & Webb, 1999). Nevertheless, to be successful in accomplishing their goals, non-profit organizations need to appeal to a broader and a more diverse range of stakeholders, gain and maintain trust, broadly engage the community, use a variety of tools to enable the participation of more stakeholders, and fuel the surge of interest in social change work. To overcome such barriers and for the fact that a non-profit organization is predominantly organized as a stand-alone organization, it also needs to embrace social media and other communication tools and thus become more connected with the larger ecosystem of organizations and individuals, for which a powerful branding strategy is necessary, especially to achieve that all stakeholders feel connected with the brand's story (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

A brand can be referred to much more than merely associating with a name, symbol, design, logo, term, or a combination of such visual identity elements with the purpose of identifying a particular product or service and making it distinctive from those offered by the competitors. It can namely also be defined as a collection of perceptions about an organization based on built awareness, prominence, and reputation of the branded product or service (Keller, 2003). The brands should be thoughtfully built, and when reaching a focused idea that sets them apart from others, putting their constituents at the core of their identity and achieving a sense of community around blended values can become breakthrough non-profit brands (Daw & Cone, 2010). Larger non-profit brands are visible

everywhere and can become even more recognized and trusted by the public than some for-profit brands (e.g., WWF – World Wildlife Fund). It is important that non-profit organizations allow their brands to stay true to their values and culture and serve their mission. The essence of brand management, either in the non-profit or for-profit world, is to take branding far beyond the logo (Kylander & Stone, 2012).

Branding, conveying what an organization stands for in sense of its uniqueness, at its essence, involves creating, building, and maintaining a relationship that an organization wants to have with its consumers to gain trust, preference, and loyalty, by, among other helping them to organize their comprehension of products and services and simplifying their decision making, as well providing values to the organization (Keller, 2003). Non-profit branding, a journey that requires many steps, determination, and a will to learn, requires confident and skilled management, a supportive organizational culture, powerful strategies, needs to engage the community, knows how to raise awareness, persuade decision-makers and be innovative and trustworthy to reach out and hold the supporters' hearts and minds (Miller, 2017). Non-profit branding expresses an organization's essence and story, helps it to be recognizable, gain a competitive advantage for donations and volunteers, and to stand out from other non-profit organizations. Consequently, trust among all stakeholders becomes increased. It becomes most powerful when the internal identity of the organization becomes aligned with the external image (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018a).

The concept of the balanced view of a brand, the two-dimensional approach to branding, involving the organizer's and customer's views of the brand is of utmost importance to understand the complexity of the brand and, consequently, for creating the best brand story (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015; Konečnik Ruzzier, 2018). Creating future value upon an effective brand story within the two-dimensional approach is as important for non-profit organizations as it is for business organizations. There are many known brand identity models, among others: Aaker and Joachimsthaler's Brand Leadership Model, de Chernatony's Brand Identity Model, and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. They, however, proved to be somehow static and do not involve co-creating a brand with other stakeholders. In today's highly competitive, dynamic, fast-changing world, with the brand being an evolving entity, a modern and dynamic approach to brand conceptualization is also required. To develop and implement a brand successfully, it is necessary to follow a comprehensive concept - the funnel brand building, emphasizing the significance of the involvement of all key stakeholders in co-creating a brand (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015; Petek & Konečnik Ruzzier, 2013).

The thesis focuses on the case of San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), a non-profit public benefit corporation, which is held every year for four days in July in San Diego. It is organized for charitable purposes and is, in its essence, cordially devoted to creating the general public's awareness of pop culture and for appreciation of comics or similarly related popular art forms (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a). From a small

occasional gathering of a few comic fans in 1970, it developed into the world's best pop culture convention, bringing together comics creators, science fiction authors, producers, film directors, etc. Its guiding factor – the dedication to the comics medium, expanded to a variety of other pop culture genres. As many celebrities, famous artists, and creators attend the event each year, it attracts even larger numbers of visitors, panelists, exhibitors, and volunteers who wish to cooperate (Salkowitz, 2016). SDCC also built a brand equity symbiotic relationship with San Diego. San Diego is, from a tourism perspective with its Zoo, beaches, Sea World, etc., considered a great family vacation destination, to which the annual Comic Con event contributes largely and attracts even more audiences as it positions San Diego as a young and trendy town. By performing experiential marketing and partnering with local restaurants, hotels, and many other venues, where a variety of activities take place, the event every year outgrows the town. As an international event, SDCC has a worldwide known great impact and is one of the few things that San Diego can call as its own (Bottomline Marketing, 2015).

The purpose of the thesis is based on the success factors, as well challenges of SDCC as a non-profit organization and how it managed to stand out from other organizations with its effective non-profit branding strategy and unique story. The aim of the thesis is to emphasize the importance of involving various stakeholders in brand co-creation and how engaging the community and being open to new opportunities contributed to its success, from which other non-profit organizations can learn a lot.

Research objectives were:

- to investigate the main similarities and distinctions between non-profit and for-profit sector organizations
- to research the role of branding in a non-profit sector and how it differs from the for-profit sector and provide insights into the latest innovative branding and marketing approaches
- to research the role of stakeholders' involvement and co-creation of non-profit brand strategies as well as strategies for effective fundraising
- to identify the key factors within a non-profit organization necessary for unique branding and challenges in their implementation
- to research the mutual benefits as well as eventual issues between the local community and the non-profit organization

The thesis comprises two main parts, the theoretical and the practical part, with empirical research included. Following the introduction, the theoretical part consists of analyses gathered in reviews from secondary sources published in academic journals, books, and web page sources. The focus is on non-profit organizations and their challenges, specifically in branding. The theoretical part of the thesis consists of 3 main chapters, subdivided into additional sections. The first chapter provides a thorough definition and description of a non-profit organization with its key characteristics and compares it to the features of a for-profit organization. The following two chapters are dedicated to the

significant role of brand and branding in the non-profit organization. Non-profit branding, namely, expresses the story of an organization, which by conveying the message of the brand, is the main element in brand building and thus presents the key strategy to attract the attention of the audience and to promote the engagement of the community.

In the practical part of the thesis, the process of a non-profit brand strategy co-creation in the case of San Diego Comic Con – SDCC is illustrated. All the characteristics of branding - the invisible and visible elements of the convention, as well as the impact of branding and marketing approaches, have been analyzed and discussed. In addition, the practical part includes the empirical research, in which primary data were collected through a survey questionnaire distributed to different respondents (e.g., fans, attendees, social media users) to research and analyze their reasons for attending the convention, their points of view, suggestions for improvements and the involvement of the community with the aim to gain insights into brand equity. Through an interview conducted with David Glanzer, the Chief Communications and Strategy Officer at SDCC, we gained insights into how SDCC, a non-profit organization, managed to become a massive brand, especially compared to similar conventions elsewhere in the world, and what we can learn about branding from SDCC was obtained. The results, provided in tables, are summarized in the discussion. The thesis is concluded with final thoughts and suggestions.

1 A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

1.1 Definition of a non-profit organization

A non-profit organization or a non-business entity can be defined as an organization with goals different from those to generate profit. It is driven by its dedication to a given cause. Its mission is thus to provide a public benefit and to further a social cause (Worth, 2021). A non-profit organization can be an enterprise, corporation, foundation, partnership, or unincorporated association and includes public charities, legal aid societies, labor unions, volunteer service organizations, etc. Such an entity is organized under state law and is exempt from taxation if organized for charitable, educational, scientific, public safety, cruelty prevention, and similar causes (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Most non-profit organizations are either community-serving (e.g., aid programs, education, health services, etc.) or member-serving (e.g., trade unions). Charitable organizations differ from those as they are meant to benefit a broader public interest and not only the interest of their members or narrow groups in general. As regards financing non-profit organizations, the public usually makes donations, which are, in most cases, tax-deductible. The revenue is after operating expenses used for public interest and to further advance the aim of the organization (Market Business News, n.d.). Non-profit organizations can make a profit, but it must be used to support the purpose of the organization. Non-profit organizations share the following features: they are voluntary, non-profit, self-governing, separate from the government, and organized (Tury, n.d.). There are three theories explaining the role of non-profit organizations: the public goods theory indicating that non-profit organizations

provide services that are not offered by the government; according to the contract-failure theory, which is focused on the private sector, some services cannot be trusted if provided by for-profit organizations; and the third, the subsidy theory, arguing that the government is the one that determines what non-profit organizations offer by subsidies, such as grants, tax breaks and similarly (Andreasen & Kotler, 2014).

1.1.1 Brief history of non-profit organizations in the United States of America

Already in early history, volunteers have formed groups to promote social or cultural causes and to help people in need. The charity was also seen as a religious duty, as people in need relied on their community for help. Former President of the United States of America, Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790), was one of the first who advocated for educational groups and mutual aid, as he believed that educational groups could help people experiencing poverty by teaching skills to learn how to be self-supporting. One of the important movements was abolition, the movement fighting for the end of slavery. Throughout time many national associations grew to address social issues (Tury, n.d.). The rapid growth of non-profit organizations from different sources can be seen in the 19th Century in the United States of America. Highly demanded education was served by non-profit colleges, and social reformism inspired an increase in social service non-profit organizations. The line between the for-profit and non-profit sectors was not distinct, as both sectors shared territory. Furthermore, the non-profit sector was influenced by the for-profit sector until it started showing the diversity and concentrated activities with public character (Oster, 1995). Most of the revenue for non-profit organizations was, until the 1930s, provided by foundations and wealthy individuals. Many programs were provided for the elderly, dependent children, and the unemployed. In the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" legislation supported diverse community projects, whereas Reagan's administration moved funding responsibility to local and state governments, which caused more considerable fundraising efforts (Tury, n.d.). Today, massive changes occur in the non-profit sector, as in some non-profit organizations also growing commercialization (e.g., museums generating incomes from their stores, etc.) (Andreasen & Kotler, 2014).

According to the European and, therefore also, Slovenian legal system, a non-profit organization is a goal-oriented, social, open, dynamic, and composed system. Its goal is to satisfy the needs of various interest groups with products and services. The profit generated must not be distributed among the members but should be used for expansion, growth, and improvement of the quality of services and products. Whereas the American definition of a non-profit organization is even more precise concerning non-profit marketing as non-profit organizations are allowed to make a profit, yet they must dedicate it to financing future services or divide it between individuals not involved in the operation of the organization (Šiftar, 2002). Each country in the EU reflects its own social, economic, and political history in its non-profit organizations, which present civil society interests with a specific regulation in EU jurisdiction. The NPOs are widespread across the EU and strive to engage in cross-border activities (Müller & Fernandes, 2021).

1.1.2 Ties to the philanthropy

The non-profit sector is often referred to as the philanthropic sector, of which key roles are service, advocacy, cultural role, civic and vanguard role, offering opportunities for innovation (Worth, 2021). According to Payton and Moody (2008), multiplicity is the concept of philanthropy, voluntary action for the public good. It includes voluntary giving and voluntary service and a voluntary association, an organized activity that enables voluntary service and giving. However, along with philanthropy activities, the boundaries between the non-profit organizations and other sectors became blurred as, for example, some social enterprises are non-profit organizations that generate profit but use it in two ways (e.g., Rubicon Bakery in San Francisco employs and trains the disabled and homeless individuals to make desserts and afterward funnels the profit into similar programs under the same, the Rubicon umbrella company). Philanthropy in different forms is essential in our lives. Global attention is, for example, captured by natural disasters, hurricanes, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, etc. Thus, it is a necessary tool in mutual attempts required to solve public problems and deserves greater attention. Everyone is somehow involved in philanthropy, either by helping others or being helped. The authors emphasize the philanthropic philosophy, which supports the theory that "the world can be made better by rightly directed human effort" (Payton & Moody, 2008).

1.2 Classification of non-profit organizations

ICNPO (International Classification of Non-Profit Organizations) divides NPOs (Non-profit organizations) according to their field of activity into 12 main groups, further subdivided into 24 subgroups: 1000 – Culture and recreation, 2000 – Education and research, 3000 – Health, 4000 – Social services, 5000 – Environment, 6000 – Development and housing, 7000 – Law, advocacy, and politics, 8000 – Philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion, 9000 – International activities, 10000 – Religion, 11000 – Business, professional associations, and unions, 12000 – Not elsewhere classified (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). There are three main types of NPOs in the EU: association – focused on shared interests; corporation; and foundation – focused on philanthropy and private contribution to the public good (Müller & Fernandes, 2021). Common types of NPOs in the USA are public charities, foundations, social advocacy groups, and trade organizations. According to the classification of the non-profit organizations in the USA that are exempt from federal income tax, there are many types, among which the most common are referred to as charitable 501(c)(3) organizations, which must be exclusively organized for purposes such as charitable, educational, scientific, religious, testing for public safety, literary and for preventing cruelty to children and animals (International Revenue Service, n.d.). Other types are under the federal law classified as follows: 501(c)(4) Civic Leagues, Social Welfare and Local Associations of Employees; 501(c)(5) Labor, Agricultural and Horticultural; 501 (c)(6) Business Leagues, Chambers of Commerce, Real Estate Boards, etc.; 501(c)(7) Social and Recreational Clubs; 501(c)(8) Fraternal Beneficiary Societies; 501(c)(9) Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Associations;

501(c)(10) Domestic Fraternal Societies; 501(c)(11) Teachers' Retirement Fund Associations; 501(c)(12) Veterans Organizations. Among some of the globally most well-known and active non-profit organizations are The Red Cross, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations), Amnesty International, World-Wide Fund for Nature, etc. (International Revenue Service, n.d.).

The Comic-Con International: San Diego, which is more thoroughly analyzed in the practical part of the thesis, in 1970 became categorized as a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit organization meant to create awareness and appreciation for comics and similar popular art forms (Salkowitz, 2016).

1.3   Challenges of non-profit organizations and comparison with for-profit organizations

The main difference between a non-profit and a for-profit organization is that the goal or purpose of the for-profit organization is to generate profit and serve its customers by selling them a product or service (Worth, 2021). The profit earned enables income to the business owner, who may also pay investors and shareholders from the profit (Heaslip, 2021). On the contrary, the non-profit organization focuses on a social mission purpose and is dedicated to promoting its cause, which is beneficial to the public. However, it must, similarly as the for-profit organization, use management skills and plan strategies to achieve its goals, and its revenue must exceed its expenses to be viable. Its profits are used to serve society (Drucker, 2011).

Either organization thus depends on its goals. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Successful operations depend on providing funds. A non-profit organization can seek donations either from various stakeholders like corporations, foundations, or individuals, who all expect a "social return" on the capital, whereas a for-profit organization can obtain funds from private investors and must give dividends to its shareholders. Consequently, a return-on-income ROI (Return on Investment) is expected (Heaslip, 2021). Thus, as far as funding is concerned, a non-profit organization seeks sources from corporate sponsorships, individuals or crowdfunding, government grants, and private donations, whereas a for-profit organization relies on obtaining sources from investors (local, national, or global), bank loans, business owners and sales generation. While a non-profit organization is tax-exempt for providing services as a public good, a for-profit organization must pay applicable taxes (Upcounsel, n.d.).

As resources in the non-profit sector are usually quite limited, the decisions about which activity should be encouraged and which may be curtailed can be critical. According to MacMillan Product Matrix, three criteria should be considered: program attractiveness, competitive position, and alternative coverage. If all three criteria are estimated high, the advice is to compete powerfully. If comparing the for-profit and non-profit sectors, one would wish to abandon the product lines in case of the strong position of an organization

but low alternative coverage and attractiveness. Yet, such programs often indicate the core of non-profit organizations (Oster, 1995).

The sectors also differ regarding ownership structure, organizational culture, and management. A non-profit organization is usually led by a board of directors, committee members, or trustees who do not own the organization financially. However, since the goal in this sector is not monetary, and the organization strives that the goals and the purposes are fulfilled, the topics discussed by the board include environmental concerns, social climate challenges, policies, fundraising, community concerns, projects, and organizational performance (Leblanc, 2020). The difference between the sectors is also that the board, as concerns the non-profit organization, always acts as a group, whereas in a for-profit organization, which can be a large corporation or a privately held business, the leadership responsibilities are usually allocated to a few individuals with financial interests. In for-profit organizations, leaders are interested in financial success and often receive bonuses or incentives like profit sharing. They are primarily concerned with increasing the revenue and the organization's profits. Similarly, as regards the organization culture, a non-profit organization is more community-oriented, whereas a for-profit one for being driven by financial gain, instead focuses on key performance indicators (Upcounsel, n.d.). For-profit organizations are more common where fees can be charged and are at a competitive disadvantage compared to privately owned non-profit organizations, which raise funds to supplement such fees. For-profit organizations usually also need to spend more resources to create trust in a consumer (Oster, 1995).

As mentioned above, there are differences also concerning the roles of managers in either sector, as non-profit leaders usually end up in these positions not because they would be great managers but for being experts on issues, for excelling at specific functions, or for being simply strongly committed to a particular cause. They are in this position to pursue the mission of a non-profit organization, to try to change the world, for which they also have a moral imperative to commit to effective management practices. According to Green and Hauser (2012), such management is divided into three components: managing the work or getting things done, managing the people by using practices to make sure to have the right people, and managing yourself - applying the same rigor to yourself as in managing the others. Such practices, along with internal branding, openness, fairness, communication, transparency, direct discussions, retention strategies, motivation, providing positive feedback, etc., lead to a high-performing organization, which can achieve outstanding results also over the long haul and as the authors point out managing effectively is about getting results (Green & Hauser, 2012).

Some operational strategies prove to be efficient for both sectors. Operating a non-profit organization as a for-profit business can enable reaching revenue goals and avoiding unnecessary expenditures. A non-profit organization may, in order to accomplish its mission and follow its vision use the following tools: tie fundraising and meeting budget to its effective operation goals, speak and perform in a business style when approaching

donors, make sure to maintain expenditures within a determined budget and spend as little as possible, run the organization as a startup, generate revenue through corporations along with giving back to the community, match expenses and benefits, make the mission itself profitable and thus ensure its long-term sustainability, make investments into needs of members, use data for making decisions and utilize win-win partnerships, which can among other lead to saving costs (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018a).

As concerns the audience, for-profit organizations target specific audiences as their goal is to create a base of consumers who, by purchasing their goods or services, generate revenue, whereas since a non-profit organization is not delivering a product or service directly, it needs to address a wider audience to reach broader public, volunteers, donors, etc. (Upcounsel, n.d.).

Today's global and intensive world has grown increasingly complex for both sectors, therefore, also as regards non-profit organizations. Clients intensify their demands for efficient provision of products and services. Donors have become more specific regarding their decisions of where to donate to and for which reasons and require the professional provision of services and goods. Rules, standards, and taxes are changing. In such an environment, many non-profit organizations turn to the for-profit sector's managerial tools. However, there are distinctions between the two sectors, and not all the tools, among them: supply and demand, opportunity cost, understanding HRM (Human Resource Management), managerial control, strategies, pricing, marketing, dealing with volunteers, etc., can be equally applicable. They should therefore adapt accordingly (Oster, 1995).

One of the challenges that non-profit organizations also face is competition. Among the possible solutions for non-profit organizations in this regard is their - more or less - independent pursuit of a cooperative spirit with other non-profit organizations or similar partners (Oster, 1995). By cooperating, they can empower themselves and retain the essential characteristics of their non-profit organization (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). To achieve more impact, non-profit organizations should see businesses as potential and powerful partners, build non-profit networks, adapt to the changing environment, create meaningful experiences for individual supporters, and share leadership (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008).

The so-called cause-related marketing is one of the forms of business-nonprofit partnerships (e.g., Movember). It is an arrangement according to which a corporation contributes to the objectives of a non-profit organization to increase its sales. Types of such alliances may be divided into the following: corporate or joint issue promotion, sales-related fundraising, and licensing (Andreasen & Kotler, 2014).

Since a non-profit organization is facing more challenges, is organized as a stand-alone organization, and must address wider audiences, it needs a powerful branding strategy to achieve that all its stakeholders feel connected with its brand's story, the story, which

communicates the values of the organization, inspires emotionally, and brings the activities of an organization alive (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

2 COMPLEX NATURE OF A BRAND

2.1 Definition of a brand

The term "branding" has been around for centuries as a means for producers to distinguish their goods from others. The word "brand," deriving from the Old Norse word "brandr," literally means "to burn," as the brands were used as means with which livestock owners marked their animals to depict ownership (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Traditional branding, found on early Chinese porcelain and ancient Greek and Roman pottery jars, evolved during the medieval period into watermarks and branding with artists' signatures; when during the Industrial Revolution, along with the development of marketing techniques and advertising, a new, modern category concerning branding emerged (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

Branding has, in recent decades, experienced flourishing and consequently developed into one of the most significant topics in the field of marketing studies (Petek & Konečnik Ruzzier, 2013). It is thus, at its most fundamental level, driven by the need to distinguish one thing from another, whereas, on a more organizational or abstract level, branding by communicating messages promotes the identity and values of a unique culture (Holland, 2006).

The evolution of the definitions of brands, which each reflect a vision of a particular moment, is also described by Kapferer (2012). The analysis provides the following milestones: brands that originated as marks on cattle in the Wild West to ensure not to be stolen and to be differentiated from one ranch to another; later, a brand was not only a proof of origin but indicated upper quality; during the period when cognitive psychology became dominant in marketing, a brand building meant linking a name to a consumer and was significantly influenced by TV commercials. At the time, one brand was linked only to one product. The concept of brands as a set of mental associations followed. Soon marketing circles were deeply shaken by the rise of trade brands. An emphasis was set on consumer loyalty. New times called for new brand strategy management (Kapferer, 2012).

Branding matured into a high-profile business in the late 1980s. Large conglomerates began to see branding as a business opportunity and brands as valuable financial assets. According to Olins (2014), a powerful and effective brand is all about authenticity; it should be clearly and recognizably authentic, whereas branding should not be seen only as an important tool in business communication but as a manifestation of the human condition and should reflect a sense of belonging. Successful branding also requires strong and committed leadership. He is also convinced that the more the world globalizes, the more it

inspires individuality, for which also creativity in branding will flourish even more (Olins, 2014).

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is defined as "a name, symbol, design, term, sign, or a similar feature, or a combination of them, which identifies goods or services of one seller or a group as distinct from those of a competitor" (Keller, 2003). Although new times with new demands required new brand strategy management and the nature of brands was changing during evolving and dynamic nature of markets, many researchers and authors in their literature still adhered to the traditional definition of a brand and referred to only one perspective (Keller, 2013).

De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace (2011) define a brand by pointing out that one should not confuse successful brands with unsuccessful ones, as the world is full of products and services with brand names. Still, not all of them are successful, and a successful brand has a name, symbol, or design that identifies an organization's product and has a sustainable competitive advantage. In this light, they are convinced that the genuine brand should provide added brand values, which are based not only on the brand's perceptions in relation to others but also on customers' perceptions of the company and their belief about its integrity and reputation. Therefore, the company must invest as much as possible to ensure that its product meets the needs of the customers, as well as having an image to match their emotional requirements (de Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace, 2011).

De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) proposed that a brand is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that equals the functional and emotional values of a company with the performance and psychosocial needs of consumers. The authors identified twelve main themes that could categorize the broad range of various definitions of the brand: i.e., brand as a legal instrument, logo, company, shorthand, risk reducer, identity system, as an image in consumers' minds, value system, personality, relationship, adding value and evolving entity. They came to the following essential conclusions: that it is necessary to understand how the client interprets the brand, that all employees in a company need to work together to ensure that the promises made for the brand are consistent with consumers' experiences, that brands should be regarded as value systems with a consistent brand message and that the values should be developed as the core of the brand and must be bound together by a vision, which gives them meaning, impetus and direction (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998).

While a traditional view equates the term "brand" with the visual part and emphasizes visual elements as a differentiating device, on the contrary, according to a modern view, a brand is defined as a complex entity, which requires an approach that is more comprehensive towards its maintenance and development (Konečnik Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2013). According to the modern approach to the conceptualization of the brand, its complexity is also seen in its branding principles that have been transferred from merely

for-product brands as was the case according to a traditional approach, also to other brand categories such as services, destinations, and organizations (Konečnik Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2013). Speaking of brands today, we do not merely associate them with visual elements. Branding is essentially an experience, a strategy, and much more than design elements (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015; Konečnik Ruzzier, 2018).

2.2   The multifaceted nature of the brand

According to research made, brands are multifaceted concepts. It occurs that some, when talking about brands, overlook the concept's richness. Therefore, the so-called "Brand Iceberg" is a valuable tool that helps managers understand and appreciate the brand's nature (de Chernatony, 2012). The iceberg consists of the visible part (above the water). It includes logo, name, and marketing communication, whereas under the water is the unseen part, which encompasses the core competencies, the organizational culture, committed staff, the positioning strategy, and customer service personality. The integrated roles of both diverse domains can ensure the brand is a holistic entity (de Chernatony, 2012).

Brands as complex entities can be thus interpreted from an internal perspective, within which the managers emphasize the use of resources in order to achieve the response from the customers, or from an external perspective, within which the customers interpret the brands in order to enhance their personal experience, as well in a way that combines the process from internal to external approaches and therefore emphasizes the dynamic nature of the brand as it evolves in order to meet the transforming environmental situations (Konečnik Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2013).

To reach that a brand becomes a unique experience with a powerful message; there should therefore be a balanced, two-dimensional approach to branding – including and combining both: internal (entrepreneur's) and external (customer's) perspectives of a brand. In other words, thus, two perspectives towards the same brand. Such an approach enables various stakeholders to actively participate in the process of branding, which is a dynamic process of continuous interaction among them (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). It is important to analyze the observations of potential customers, yet they cannot serve as the only basis for establishing long-term management and marketing strategies of the brand, which must primarily express the views of managers, employees, as well marketers (Konečnik, 2006).

2.2.1   The internal perspective of the brand

The internal view includes the internal stakeholders' view of the brand and is defined by the concept of identity. The statement made by Kapferer (1998) that we must know who we are before knowing how we are perceived helps to understand the branding's essence (Kapferer, 1998). The key to success is the way a brand is perceived by its customers. It is significant that the brand is well perceived in the eyes of target customers; if they perceive it as a positive and unique image, they will recommend it to their families and friends. A brand symbolizes a long-term engagement, a commitment to a unique set of values

embedded in a product or service. Behind such brands, there are very precise managerial and clear marketing strategies, which are planned by internal stakeholders. It is, therefore, crucial for them to follow the steps or phases of the branding funnel until the brand is recognized as a unique experience in the eyes of the customers (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). Every successful brand identity is based on the brand's story, which derives from and expresses the uniqueness of the brand identity and is enriched with the visual identity (Konečnik, 2006).

2.2.2 The external perspective of the brand

The external view includes the evaluation of the brand in the eyes of external stakeholders. It can be represented by the concept of brand equity. Since the external perspective includes the evaluation of the brand in the eyes of consumers, it provides answers to the question "How do others see me?" or "How is the brand perceived by consumers?" (Konečnik, 2006). According to Keller (1993), the evaluation of the brand in the eyes of external stakeholders may be explained by the customer's knowledge of the brand, which is influenced by brand awareness and image. Whereas, according to Aaker (1996b), there are five elements, of which the fifth element includes market indicators and not directly the assets of the brand in the eyes of the customer. The other four elements include awareness, image (association), perceived quality, and loyalty (Konečnik, 2006). Although the two evaluations, at first sight, seem different, they are quite similar, apart from the element of quality and loyalty, which is not present in Keller's evaluation. However, quality is included in one of his subcategories of brand image, whereas loyalty is indicated as a possible consequence of a positive evaluation (Konečnik, 2006).

2.3 Review of brand development models

Scientific and empirical literature offers many brand development models involving various brand identity elements, some of which appear more frequently and are common in most models. Among them are mission and vision, personality, values, and key competencies (Petek & Konečnik Ruzzier, 2013). With increased recognition of the significance of brands, models of components of brands also gained more attention to increasing managers' comprehension of brands as such models simplify and divide complex issues into smaller categories or levels. Many mental models of the elements constituting a brand were devised. The so-called "atomic model" integrated tangible and intangible elements, as well as the relationships among them. It conceptualized brands in terms of the following elements: functional capability, symbolic features, service, distinctive name, ownership, shorthand notation, legal protection, risk reducer, and strategic direction. Different expert opinions led to a revised and more dynamic "double vortex" brand model, with particles spinning each time they enter new environments. It proved to be more useful as it incorporated additional elements and indicated the interrelated nature of variables (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997).

De Chernatony's model (2002), adapting Kapferer's Brand identity prism, points out that more emphasis should be put on brand identity than on brand image; it includes eight interrelated elements: vision, which involves the wished position and goals, essence and value of the brand, organizational structure, which can function as an important motivation factor, goals of the brand, working place analysis, the essence of the brand, internal implementation, complete brand image, and brand evaluation, which connects all the before-mentioned elements (de Chernatony, 2002).

Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1996a) is outlined as a set of the following brand liabilities and assets: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, proprietary assets, and brand loyalty, which all provide value to various types of brands. The purpose of the system is to use different brand elements, which can help differentiate a brand identity, as Aaker believed that they have an impact on purchase decisions and pointed out that a brand without a loyal customer base is very vulnerable (Aaker, 1996a). Aaker and Joachimsthaler's Brand Leadership Model (2000) begins with a strategic analysis of competition, customers, and self-analysis and afterward focuses on the development of brand identity, which consists of its essence, which must also remain after the brand enters new markets and of the extended brand concept, organized into a brand as a product, an organization, a person, and as a symbol. This model thus uses three consecutive steps, of which the most important one represents searching for the brand identity's key characteristics, at which we must rely on ourselves. Based on collected information, the essential characteristics are defined, and in the last step, the brand identity is presented to potential customers and implemented (Konečnik, 2006).

With his statement that we must know who we are before knowing how we are perceived, Kapferer (1998) explains the essence of branding and points out that despite a simple question, the answer can be quite a challenge and should be comprehended as very important and mutual to all internal stakeholders (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism from 1986 describes a brand through its characteristics and interrelation. The hexagonal prism's six elements: physique, personality, relationship, culture, reflection, and self-image, are grouped into more significant categories: externalization and internalization, picture of the sender, and picture of the receiver. It was meant to help create a branding strategy aligned with the brand's mission and monitor its development, as the elements can change over time (Kapferer, 2008).

Keller (2013) developed Keller's Brand Equity Model, a concept indicating that to build a strong brand, one must shape the perception of the customers by building positive experiences around the brand. The model is in the form of a pyramid and consists of four levels, representing four fundamental questions: 1) brand identity – Who are you?; 2) brand meaning – What are you?; 3) brand responses – What do I think or feel about you?; and 4) brand resonance on the top of the pyramid – How much of a connection would I like to have with you? The levels break down into the following categories: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement (Keller, 2013).

Compared to the abovementioned models, which proved to be somehow static, especially if implemented in today's dynamic business environment, Ruzzier & Ruzzier (2015) provide a new and more contemporary approach to developing startup brands. With a proposed balanced or two-dimensional approach to branding, which enables different stakeholders to actively cooperate in the branding process, the branding funnel proves to be a valuable model, showing entrepreneurs how to proceed and evolve through the funnel's phases until the brand, which the authors see as a developing and dynamic entity, is perceived as a unique experience in the eyes of customers. It is a very comprehensive conceptualization, as a vast significance is stressed on all key stakeholders who live, define, and implement the brand. The entrepreneurs are advised to follow the following four phases of the process, the constituents of a loop in the funnel: 1) Investigate, 2) Develop, 3) Implement, and 4) Validate and Evaluate. If the loop is sliced from the entrepreneur's view, the following building blocks of the loop's structure can be seen. Building block zero is represented by vision, as the whole process of brand building starts with the vision. Vision as the starting point of everything is followed by Context building blocks: industry, competitors, customers, and "myself." Within the second – development – phase, the entrepreneurs need to find the optimal elements to form their unique story with attractive and unique visual elements – the development building blocks. Both phases (investigating and developing) are meant to show entrepreneurs how to invite the target audience to validate their ideas. The implementation building blocks: internal branding and communication channels are meant to spread the idea of the brand, whereas the last - validation and evaluation building block results in brand equity. It is significant to as well take into consideration that the branding funnel journey is a never-ending process (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

2.4   Brand equity perspective

Brand equity describes the brand's value, which is determined by the consumers' perceptions and experiences with the brand (Kapferer, 2012). Brand equity, among others, depends on associations, which are made by the consumer. It can be viewed from three main perspectives: a financial for measuring its value, a brand extension for leveraging brand awareness, and a consumer-based perspective, denoting the consumers' attitude strength towards a particular product associated with the brand (Net Management and Business Administration, n.d.). Aaker defined brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, slogan, and symbol. The assets add to or subtract from the value which is provided by a producer, a product, or a service to a company and/or to that company's consumers (Aaker, 1991).

Keller presented a brand equity model, also known as CBBE (Customer-Based Brand Equity) Model, from the perspective of an individual consumer. It is defined as "the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand" (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Accordingly, a brand has positive or negative customer-based brand equity, depending on the customer's favorable reaction to an

element of the brand's marketing mix compared to when the same element is attributed to a fictitiously named product (Chernev, 2015). In this way, brand knowledge is conceptualized according to an associative network model regarding brand awareness and brand image. Brand equity occurs when the customer is familiar with the brand and shows some strong brand associations in his memory. The model is in the form of a pyramid and moves upwards by answering four questions on individual levels: Who are you (brand identity) - indicating how customers look at the brand and distinguish it from the others; What are you (brand meaning) - the features of the brand, value for money, etc.: What about you - (brand response) - indicating the feelings for the brand - positive, disappointing; Relationship with the brand - e.g., the customers would not consider buying anything else (Keller, 1993).

While CBBE focuses on emotions, Aaker's Brand Equity Model focuses on brand recognition and sees brand equity as a combination of brand awareness, associations, proprietary assets, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, which all add value to the brand. The components are measurable to see where improvements are needed (Aaker, 1996b).

Entrepreneurs should know how to step into their consumers' shoes, as understanding how they perceive and understand their brand is of utmost significance. It is, therefore, very important that a brand provides a powerful message to its customers through its story. One of the critical elements is the clarity of the message. It should be clearly defined that the essence of the story is the customer and not the brand. Such positioning of the customer in the centerpiece not only indicates politeness but also means efficient business. After answering who the target consumer is, one should ask oneself what the consumer wants or wishes. The journey of researching and discovering whether the goal will be accomplished follows. It is important to know that throughout such a journey, the consumers need a guide whom they trust, who has a plan, and who is told how the brand can change their lives for the better, as well (Miller, 2017). The feedback obtained from the perspective of the consumers on how they understand the brand is an essential element in brand building. They should be considered brand co-creators (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

3 NON-PROFIT BRANDING

3.1 Definition of non-profit branding

A brand is the most important asset to a non-profit organization; it is its core as it helps to deliver the organization's message and explains its essence. An effective non-profit brand integrates many aspects and elements together to express its identity and develop its message. When branding a non-profit organization, its brand must express the organization's vision and mission, also having in mind how the donors and volunteers would relate to the created concept. The donors should feel resonated with the brand, and the volunteers should believe in the organization's mission and cause. Reaching these goals can lead to a successful branding strategy (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018b). Non-

profit branding is thus the key strategy to attract consumer attention and promote community engagement. Consumers choose those brands that they relate to or resonate with them. Consumers may be attracted to brands if they find them provide the following dimensions: intensity and activity (Keller, 2012). In the non-profit sector, the latter dimension is even more significant, as the element of behavioral support is expected to encourage others to become involved in the organization's cause, in volunteering, donating, or similarly. It is, therefore, crucial in developing brand relationships to communicate key brand concepts or the purposes of the brand to which the target audiences can relate (Mirzaei, Webster & Siuki, 2021).

3.2   Processes of strategic branding in non-profit organizations

Non-profit organizations today operate in an environment that has become not only uncertain but also interconnected. Therefore, strategic planning can help leaders of non-profit organizations to act strategically and realize that activities like strategic thinking, acting, and learning are the most significant and not strategic planning per se. Strategic planning - a way of thinking, acting, and learning - has become a standard practice for most non-profit organizations for many reasons. Many non-profit organizations today must undertake it under the law; many see it as an efficient, professional practice. It is, above all, perceived as an effective aid in planning strategically, as well as a significant component of change management. A lot of challenges, such as acquiring resources, reduced demands, increased uncertainty about the future, more stakeholders, need to collaborate with other organizations, pressures to restructure, and similarly namely require immediate and strategic solutions (Bryson & Alston, 2011).

One way in which non-profit organizations respond to various issues, for example, when something cannot be achieved by an organization acting alone, is by pursuing collaboration. In order to be successful, collaborative strategic planning requires effective communication; the importance of leadership should not be underestimated, a governance structure should be created to reach a successful collaborative effort in the long run, and the relationship should be nurtured. The ten cyclic steps of collaborative strategic planning include: negotiating an agreement, identifying organizational mandates, clarifying mission and values, assessing internal and external environments, identifying strategic issues that an organization is facing, formulating strategies to manage the issues, reviewing them and adopting a strategic plan, establishing an adequate organizational vision, developing an effective implementation process and reassessing the strategic planning process (Bryson & Alston, 2011).

The non-profit sector is joined by many new organizations each year, which vastly increases competition among them. One way that organizations respond to this issue is by adopting commercial branding methods. However, while it is argued by some that brand orientation can help raise and strengthen awareness across target audiences, build loyalty, and develop trust among stakeholder communities, as well as facilitate the donor choice,

some expressed concern over adopting the methods characteristic for the for-profit sector can contribute to over-commercialization in a non-profit sector. They believed the non-profit sector would consequently lose its unique nature or fail to develop its identity as a values-based organization (Stride & Lee, 2010).

It is a fact that in the non-profit sector, effective brand management is more complex than only satisfying the needs of donors. One of the major differences, compared to a for-profit sector, is that the non-profit sector depends upon values, which are the key reason for the organization's existence. Values lie in the heart of every charity and are important to the sector, as well as to the broader society (Stride & Lee, 2010).

Even though the primary goal of the non-profit sector is to create positive changes in individuals and in society, the ultimate test is conceptualized through the achievement of the activity that contains values (Drucker, 2011). Such a values-based approach can be reflected in organizational behavior by advocating a participative way of working and emphasizing values all the time. The value system, therefore, supports and leads the organization's operations, to which the values are integral. The values are, of course, also crucial in a for-profit sector but are more flexible. Significant factors in effective branding strategies are seen in the tendency toward cultural inclusiveness and reciprocal respect for individuals, as well as towards organizational values, which are inseparably linked to trust (Stride & Lee, 2010).

3.3   Branding as a key element of a successful non-profit organization

Since non-profit organizations aim predominantly to accomplish missions with charitable causes, branding is usually not considered as a priority to invest in. However, if a non-profit brand is strong, it can help to strategically further the goals of a non-profit organization and is, therefore, a key element of a successful non-profit organization. Non-profit branding helps the organization to be distinct compared to other similar non-profit organizations, to become memorable, to increase awareness, trust, and loyalty, to help raise funds, as well to increase engagement. Therefore, a bigger picture should be considered in the mind of a non-profit organization (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018b).

A non-profit organization should review its mission, vision, and goals when learning about its audience and determining what makes it unique. It is the uniqueness that finally connects and unites all the stakeholders involved. Consistency in keeping the organization's message is the key to branding, and the communication tools should be cohesive. The most recognizable visible element of the brand is its logo, which should be designed to create an association with the brand; it should be the brand's centerpiece and, as such, should be memorable and clearly express the brand's story. Storytelling is the key and the most valuable tool as it can make an impression, evoke emotions, create trust, and build firm relationships with the audience. It is very important how the values of the non-profit organization are expressed (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018b).

It is necessary for a non-profit organization to show commitment and passion for reaching its goals set, as the audience, supporters, donors, and all stakeholders would become even more attracted to it and would feel good in contributing to fulfilling the aims, for which the non-profit organization cares deeply about. The donors must get feedback that their investment is aligned with the brand's value (Forbes Nonprofit Council, 2018b).

According to Keller (2009), the branded offerings of a non-profit organization can serve various roles. They can reflect the values and mission of the organization, incorporate a promise to stakeholders and audiences and reflect a unique social offering. Brands thus imply the value propositions intrinsic in doing business, have equity, and are, in fact, shorthand for their organizations. Non-profit organizations realized that their brands could generate revenue by themselves. They are usually also very trustworthy, as audiences are less suspicious of their motives, organizations' missions have higher social values, they operate with one brand for all their activities, and since they deal with very emotional issues (e.g., famine, endangered species, etc.), they can dominate and manage extensive media coverage, which compensates for promotional and limited budgets (Keller, 2009).

Among the main difficulties that branding for non-profit organizations faces are budget limitations, brands may be too general and consequently seem inconsistent, more stakeholders need to be addressed, as well competition may arise even though it is a non-profit sector. Another issue is that many non-profit organizations have similar brands that are like others. Therefore, a brand needs to be distinctive and brand building should offer a different type of service, have a distinct media voice, evoke a sense of tradition, and stimulate emotions. Furthermore, Keller suggests that the focus should be on sufficient salience of the brand, clear image, ethics, and clear and transparent communication, as well as an internal and external communication plan; a brand champion should be appointed, and monitoring the brand program should be established (Andreasen & Kotler, 2014).

3.4   Step-by-step development of a breakthrough non-profit branding

Brand strategy is a plan which involves a unique set of tools with the aim to convey the identity of the brand either for non-profit or for-profit organizations. However, non-profit organizations should especially pay attention to some aspects of branding, as they, among others, need to reach wider audiences. Brands should express the core values of an organization, create expectations, and deliver promises to their audiences in a clear and understandable way to gain brand loyalty. Although many non-profit organizations have a limited perspective of branding as a trademark, logo, or name as an aid in fundraising, branding is about identifying what the organization stands for (Daw & Cone, 2010).

The organization's value proposition should be communicated efficiently and should motivate the audiences to spread the word about the brand. For strong competition in the market, non-profit organizations should be differentiated. The non-profit brand managers should first identify their organization's core values and then proceed with effective

management and create a set of propositions across all their branding communications. The clarity in the values proposition would help to facilitate a transfer from an internal focus on brand management to external stakeholder groups (Stride & Lee, 2010)

The next step is the task of the branding team to ensure that the brand remains effective as the brand story evolves because the brand is never static, and branding brings many intangible benefits (Holland, 2006). Building a brand should always be collaborative. Whereas, in a for-profit sector, the desired synergy between the organization and the brand values is achieved if brands are controlled with systems, which are proactively carried out by brand managers, in a non-profit sector, a consultative approach is required (Keller, 1998).

The motivational force of intention, the mission, is at the heart of all successful non-profit organizations, binding individuals with a mutual desire to change the world for the better (Holland, 2006). It is most significant that a non-profit brand articulates its mission in a focused way, and only if all the stakeholders work towards a shared vision will it create excellent returns. It is also significant for a non-profit brand to know how to unite groups of people with different preferences, perceptions, and priorities toward shared values, hopes, commitments, and aspirations (Daw & Cone, 2010).

A breakthrough non-profit brand can make the organization more inspiring and attractive and therefore draws people to be part of its cause, as it as such motivates them. Since it stands for something that its stakeholders believe in, the non-profit organization should showcase its mission and vision in action and constantly deliver its promises. In this way, it will attract volunteers and like-minded donors, be an inspiration for action and consequently create a foundation for long-term success. It is essential for a non-profit brand also to be innovative and to foster visionary ideas, as its branding is also an investment into the future (Daw & Cone, 2010).

3.5   Involvements of various stakeholders in co-creating a brand strategy in a non-profit context

Although the stakeholders within a particular non-profit organization share common values, are passionate about its cause, and wish to help change the world, non-profit organizations also need fundraising, donors, volunteers, etc. It is quite difficult to generalize about the characteristics and perspectives of stakeholders in the non-profit sector as it includes a diversity of entities. A non-profit stakeholder may be an individual or a group that has an interest in being part of a non-profit organization. The non-profit stakeholders may namely include communities or individuals, governments, groups, or others, who are affected by or affect a specific non-profit organization and reflect several various interests. However, they all have in common to pursue a non-profit organization's mission and influence its success. The distinctions compared to a for-profit sector regarding stakeholders include that non-profit organizations do not distribute profit to their

stakeholders; they exist without definite accountability and ownership and do not coerce participation (Frumkin, 2005).

The stakeholders in non-profit organizations may be divided into internal, who are directly involved, function within an organization, and provide resources and manpower that an organization needs to fulfill its goals and mission, and external, who interact or collaborate with the organization, in which they do not work directly and depend on its success. The most common internal stakeholders are managers, employees, and volunteers. In contrast, the main groups of external stakeholders include local community groups, government entities, collaborative organizations, representatives of the media, and clients. Besides both groups, there may also be the so-called interface stakeholders, whose functions resemble those of internal and external groups of stakeholders. Such a group may be the board of directors, for example. Non-profit organizations thus do not have a narrow group of investors or owners but many stakeholders who are to varying degrees interested in the non-profit organization's success (Puyvelde, Caers, Bois & Jegers, 2011).

All non-profit organizations are obligated toward their stakeholders to pursue their mission effectively, operate ethically, and communicate transparently. Furthermore, stakeholders, such as volunteers, need to know that their contribution is valued. Therefore, a motivational factor is very important, as well. Financial information should be publicly available. All stakeholders should be well informed, and their perspectives should be considered in decision-making. On the other hand, the obligations of stakeholders towards a non-profit organization vary based on the nature of the characteristics of the stakeholder group, yet they all have in common that they should be ethical in decision-making. The internal stakeholder groups should, among others, communicate with the organizations' leaders to provide improvement opportunities. The boards of directors are responsible for ensuring funds, establishing a direction for the organization, and protecting it by providing accountability and legal and ethical guidelines. The volunteers are obliged to follow through with their commitment. As involving the perspectives of various stakeholders in decision-making is a time-consuming, resource-intensive process, such a system should be established that engages all the stakeholders and assesses their needs. Involving external stakeholders in activities, for example, requires a frequent and updated flow of information. The more inclusive and transparent the organization, the more credibility and trustworthiness are built with its stakeholders (Dicke, Heffner & Ratliff, 2016).

The key stakeholders in non-profit organizations are employees, donors, the board, volunteers, beneficiaries, funders, partners, members, and the media. One of the significant issues that non-profit organizations face is how to recruit and retain the right talents, as poor employee management can mean poor customer service and low morale instead of motivated staff that feel and live the brand and, as such, represent the non-profit organization as brand ambassadors. To achieve a positive work atmosphere and satisfied employees, it is necessary to build a culture of trust, encourage independent initiatives, be transparent, take on the feedback, invest in employees, listen to them, and co-create goals

and it is crucial to share the "big picture" with them as it will make them feel connected and more engaged with the mission. Connections and trust should be established with the donors, as well. They should feel to be a part of the mission, should be thanked appropriately, and should be shown in the organization's story how significant their impact was on the cause. The board of directors plays a crucial role as they provide governance insights, manage finances, help set strategic directions and help to fundraise. For effective management, the right expectations should be set, transparency is urgent, and performance should be measured and evaluated as well. The beneficiaries may be direct - those who use the services created, or indirect, those who indirectly benefit (e.g., local community). Beneficiaries have the right to access the relevant information, ensure meaningful participation, and, if needed, be given consultations on projects. Funders are entities that help provide the needed resources (Raviraj, 2022).

An environment of openness, accountability, and transparency should be created for them. They should report progress regularly, whereas the key to a successful partnership between the non-profit organization and the founders is to provide them with a sincere commitment to engaging in a productive relationship. A key step in creating a fruitful and successful non-profit organization is in forming strong partnerships. Effective partnerships contribute to greater credibility and broaden opportunities, for which developing and maintaining such relationships is necessary. A clear strategy, strong system, and effective communication should be established between the partners. A base of loyal supporters may be built with the help of membership programs, which can enable a source of predictable income and help with planning, public speaking, and fundraising, for which the members should be treated as a community and offered benefits. Regarding media, a PR-friendly website should be created by the non-profit organization, which should reach out to media organizations, as in such a way, good relationships can be built, and the organization's story with its brand's message would reach even larger audiences. One of the most valuable resources is volunteers, who can help the non-profit organization save money, increase engagement with the community, provide better support to beneficiaries, be in the role of brand ambassadors, and make the needed expertise available (Raviraj, 2022).

According to Mitchell & Clark (2021), in examining the decision to volunteer in a particular non-profit organization, as well as the choice of a non-profit organization with whom to volunteer, four dominant patterns of behavior for volunteer choice were identified: automatic decision-making due to a charity-specific trigger and involving an emotional connection to the organization's cause, decision to volunteer because of brand knowledge stored in subconscious, decision making for being simply asked or for the brand's role itself that enables cut through at the moment of decision-making. Such segmentation mapping enables easier volunteer recruitment within building brand awareness frames through a variety of touchpoints and identifying the visibility and effectiveness of marketing methods (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). It is the valuable role of volunteers to be the backbone of non-profit organizations with their contributions to

delivering vital programs and spreading the word about the organization's mission. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate expectations to volunteers, make their work enjoyable and valuable, be thankful, treat them with respect, and publicly recognize the most active volunteers. Variously involved stakeholders are essential in a non-profit organization, as they support the movement in different ways, for which successful non-profit organizations should nurture great relationships among all of them (Raviraj, 2022).

3.5.1   Differences and similarities between non-profit and for-profit marketing

Both for-profit and non-profit sectors use marketing to raise money but with different goals or purposes. For-profit organizations use marketing to sell their products or services and to generate revenues, whereas non-profit organizations use it to fund their mission. Different goals lead to two different approaches (Drucker, 2011). The approaches and methods of non-profit marketing, encouraging consumers to give, are about appealing to ethics or emotions. Whereas in a for-profit sector, the marketing approach is to attract potential consumers to the target market to let them know about the product or service and is as well focused on developing new markets. The consumer pays for the product, and the for-profit organization keeps the money, while in the non-profit sector, the consumer gives money to the organization in exchange for contributing to a particular cause or mission (Phan, 2016).

Since non-profit environments include social marketing, enterprise, and the charitable sector, marketing is thus predominantly used to build awareness, further social causes, and gain financial support. Consequently, specific marketing communications are also required. Compared to marketing in a for-profit sector, targeting the audience in a non-profit sector is usually more difficult, as it, among others, requires addressing a broader audience to reach attention. Therefore, organizing a campaign that would drive behavior in all targeted audiences may be necessary. Moreover, the price is not clearly defined, and there is no control over it. The involvement of audiences can be more extreme as they either engage with the charity cause or are strongly against it (Claessens, 2018).

As regards marketing methods, there are certain similarities between the sectors. They both conduct a market analysis to identify potential sponsors or donors by using similar forms of media, such as TV or radio commercials and the press media. Work in public relations must be professional in both sectors, as in both cases, the visibility of the organization must be built, and the image and reputation of the organization need to be established (Phan, 2016).

According to Kotler and Levy (1969), the key principles of effective marketing management in both sectors are a generic product definition, a target group definition, differentiated marketing, customer behavior analysis, seeking differential advantages, multiple marketing tools, an integrated marketing planning, a continuous marketing feedback and marketing audit (Kotler & Levy, 1969).

Confronted with market pressures, non-profit organizations must adopt some business-like techniques which are used in a for-profit sector; among them, the need to obtain funds in order to fulfill their goals and mission and the competition for funding prevail. However, it seems that instead of a marketing concept advocating for understanding the customer, an "organization-centered" marketing mindset prevails in a non-profit sector, for which the adoption of a market-oriented approach and use of marketing tools is necessary (Dolničar & Lazarevski, 2009).

The effectiveness of non-profit marketing depends on confident and skilled professionals and on a supportive organizational culture to achieve successful results, as there are planned strategies required, and communications should be perceived as a valued function. Since there is neither a target nor a public to be addressed, communications should have groups of people determined in mind. Content can be delivered across many channels to create a more consistent experience for the community. Non-profit marketing is a form of community as marketing, communications, fundraising, and information technology can all be integrated into community building. It is also important to evoke emotions, for which personal methods, social media, and similar marketing forms are welcome. Non-profit marketing, as regards managing profiles on social media sites or engaging supporters in conversations, is more time-consuming but more effective at building a community and can be implemented on a low budget (Leroux Miller, 2021).

Successful non-profit marketing can help primarily with fundraising. The non-profit communications with the so-called content marketing strategy for non-profit organizations mean to create and share valuable content that draws, inspires, engages, and motivates the organization's supporters and influencers to help it achieve its mission, for which they must be put in the center of the communications strategy, and it is necessary to build strong relationships with them. The essence of content marketing is also to reach the goals by attracting and not interrupting people with communications. The content marketing strategy becomes effective if the wants and needs of supporters and influencers are understood and when the communications evoke the personality and promise the non-profit organization wants to be known for. The shift from traditional non-profit communications to non-profit content marketing can also be seen in shifting emphasis from specific communications channels like websites or newsletters on the people who use the content through these channels (e.g., a photo of a donor on the website, entitled how he contributed to changes). The goal is to become a favorite organization. It is important that the communication is clear, the data provided are relevant, the design is attractive, the format is suitable, the website is optimized and easy to navigate, that sufficient information is given, and the texts are not too long or too often, the story should be genuine and offering one but the deep message (Leroux Miller, 2021).

3.5.2   Differences between non-profit and for-profit marketing regarding stakeholders

Specific marketing communications are required as regards interaction among all stakeholders involved. The difference between a for-profit sector, which mainly focuses on target shareholders and market consumers, is in the fact that non-profit organizations are concerned with a broader group of stakeholders. The stakeholders involved are the following interested parties: consumers, employees, volunteers, supply chain partners, and other non-profit or charity partners. In the for-profit sector, its stakeholders, except shareholders, do not have much influence on how the profits are distributed. The revenue in this sector is namely distributed from consumers to shareholders, who are rewarded with a share of the earned profit. On the contrary, in the non-profit sector, there are usually no profits, as those who help with funds do not require a provision in return. The non-profit organizations thus rely on stakeholders to provide funds to support them. Since a broader group of stakeholders is involved, non-profit organizations should try to adapt their marketing strategies (Claessens, 2018).

The conditions under which non-profit organizations operate today also depend on the development of new social media. Stakeholders have free access to relevant information about an organization, which can shape an active involvement and contribution to branding efforts. Therefore, it is necessary that the organizations operate transparently and accessibly, especially in non-profit contexts that draw stakeholders' voluntary involvement and interest. Managing non-profit brands thus requires acknowledging the involvement of various stakeholders in processes related to the development of a brand, as they can strongly influence the co-creating process of a brand strategy. Among the most significant conditions for a successful brand strategy is establishing strong relationships between a non-profit organization and its stakeholders, both internal and external, which must be transparent and show reciprocal commitment. For example, volunteers can expect more commitment if they receive high-value levels from brand-related experience. Non-profit brand strategy co-creation should be considered as a dynamic and continuous process involving multiple stakeholders, open to proposals from multiple contexts and their influences, and address new distinctiveness affecting the management of non-profit organizations. Value management should be approached in a different manner, as well. Regular mutual performance and value reevaluation should occur (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2018).

4   INTERNATIONAL NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON – SDCC

4.1   Brief description and a short history

San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), today officially known as Comic-Con International: San Diego, is a Californian non-profit public benefit corporation. It is an international comic

convention, with its headquarters in San Diego, California, and is organized for charitable purposes and dedicated to creating awareness and appreciation not only for comics but also for all related popular art forms to wider audiences. SDCC also supports other conventions, exhibitions, museums, public presentations, and similar activities which recognize and celebrate the historical as well as present offering of comics to culture and art and has, over the years, become the centerpiece for the world of comic conventions (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a).

The idea of organizing a gathering of enthusiasts of science fiction and like-minded fans dates to the 1930s, when smaller advertised events took place: e. g. in Philadelphia in 1936 (Philcon) and in Leeds, UK, in 1937. The first WorldCon was held in New York City in 1939 and attracted about 200 visitors. After the Second World War, the convention reached Los Angeles and Toronto and, in 1957, crossed the Atlantic, where it was held in the following years held in London several times. Their next venture to Europe, specifically Heidelberg in Germany, was in 1970. Above all, similar conventions were organized in Australia, Japan (Comiket, founded by Japanese manga fans), and the Netherlands (Jones, 2015).

SDCC was first held on March 21, 1970, at the time known as San Diego's Golden State Comic Con, as a one-day event and was attended by about 100 people. It was a small convention of artists, writers, and enthusiasts of comic books and science fiction. In the early conventions, the emphasis was mainly on bonding over shared fandom and exhibiting rare comic books. Today, SDCC has grown into one of the most popular conventions in the world and is held every July for four days, attended by over 135.000 attendees. It is globally recognized as the top, premiere, flagship event, and unique convention that gathers fans who celebrate comic-related art forms and includes different forms of fandom like sci-fi movies or board games (Elliot, 2018).

From its beginning, it has already been organized as a convention that includes all constituents and elements of popular culture. One of the first milestones in its pop culture history was when in 1976, the head of marketing at Lucasfilm introduced early scenes of the (at the time not yet released) movie Star Wars at the convention and was giving away posters, which are today very sought-after collectibles. At the time, the convention was the only place to attract attention (Wilke, n.d.).

In 1970, a group of teenagers in San Diego, who wished to find a way to meet other fans, met Sheldon (Shel) Dorf, who already had some experience with planning conventions in Detroit, from where he came from and had an idea to organize something similar in San Diego. He also knew Jack Kirby, the known co-creator of X-Men and the Fantastic Four characters in comics, who later drew the original convention committee as characters in one of his comics. Their meeting at Kirby's house in Irvine led to the first convention, which was held in the basement of San Diego's US Grant Hotel and was attended by 100 people, among them also the legendary sci-fi author Ray Bradbury. A group of teen comic

fans, among them a 17 years old Roger Freedman, who is a physics professor today, Mike Towry, aged 14, who now runs his own San Diego Comic Fest convention, Richard Alf, a comic book store owner, who died in 2012, Bob Sourk, 12 years old Barry Alfonso, who became a songwriter and Dan Stewart, Alf's store loyal customer, at the time, had no idea of how a big project - inventing Comic-Con, they were starting and were part of. The convention was run by comic book enthusiasts Shel Dorf, Richard Alf, and publisher Ken Krueger. Another member of the committee was also at the time an aspiring and today a professional cartoonist, Scott Shaw. They remember that only one woman came to the first Mini-Con gathering. It was Jackie Estrada, who has been attending every convention and is today working for SDCC, as well as running the annual Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards (Mayer, 2019). A few months later, they organized another Comic Con with the funds they raised from their first convention. In 1972 the convention was named West Coast Comic-Con and was held at the El Cortez Hotel for the first time. In Figure 1, we can see the convention from 1973, when it was officially named San Diego Comic-Con and was in 1995 renamed to Comic-Con International: San Diego to show how big it had grown.

Figure 1: Beginnings of the comic convention in San Diego

Source: Gramuglia (2017).

At the same time, its logo was changed, as well. Since 1987, SDCC has also become host to Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards. It also expanded to two smaller "sister" conventions: WonderCon in 1987, which in 2012 moved from San Francisco to Anaheim, and APE (Alternative Press Expo) in 1994 in San Jose. Until 1991, when the convention was held at the San Diego Convention and Performing Arts Building for the first time, it took place at different hotels. SDCC also holds an annual Comics Arts Conference since 1992 and an annual Comic-Con International Independent Film Festival since 2000 (Chafin, 2017).

4.2 Organizational structure and fundraising

At the helm of San Diego Comic-Con from 1986, when elected as the president and ran uncontested for the position all the following years, was John Rogers, the convention's president, COO (Chief Operating Officer), and CFO (Chief Financial Officer), who passed away in 2018. His vision was the true force behind the convention's curtain. He contributed to increasing recognition and acceptance of popular art culture and led the convention through all the challenges and changes with calmness yet with strength. His savvy in financing has kept the non-profit organization through many difficulties and tough economic times, and he managed to establish a powerful business foundation (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.b).

Since 2019, the president of Comic-Con International has been Robin Donlan. The founder and International CEO (Chief Executive Officer) is Tony Kim. Part of the hierarchy is Fae Desmond, the executive director, who, in the 1970s, started as a volunteer. The company of about 447 full or part-time employees and volunteers is led and organized by a panel of thirteen board members (Zoominfo, n.d.).

The board consists of the vice president of development, directors of finance, programming, exhibits, chief technology officer, talent relations staff manager, accounting manager, and line manager (Crunchbase, n.d.). The board is elected by the members, who are given this status by attending meetings and joining committees that work on the conventions (Cieply & Barnes, 2015).

Robin Donlan credited thousands of people who volunteer at the convention each year and said that success would not be possible without the community that the convention has built and described it as a "huge group effort" (Weisberg, 2019).

There are only a few dozens of paid employees besides the organization's board which, along with organizing the event each year and seeking new business opportunities and partnerships, a determined period also deals with renewal of the contract grappling with the main issues of whether the convention will be able to stay in San Diego or not. They also deal with competition and other challenges as, for example, the legal battle that began in 2014 and ended in 2017 over the term "comic con," which is their trademark when the convention in Salt Lake wanted to use it as part of its name (Cieply & Barnes, 2015).

SDCC, according to the data from San Diego Workforce Partnership, also requires all the 500 regular member staff of the Convention Center for six days (four days of convention and two days for preparations and wrapping up) at eight hours per day, which brings around 320,000 USD wages into the local economy. Among the position types are electricians, engineers, bus drivers, event security guards, etc. In addition, they hire extra staff to work at the panels or the off-site areas (San Diego Workforce Partnership, 2014)

From the beginning of the convention, its founders in their organization included not only comic books but also other aspects of popular art such as science fiction literature and movies (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a). Over the years, the convention has also been home to the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, an equivalent to "Oscars" in the field of comic books. Will Eisner is known as the father of modern graphic novels. The "Eisners" are presented each year at a gala event held at the time of the convention in a nearby hotel. Another annual event is the Will Eisner Spirit of Comics Retailer Awards, at which fans nominate the most popular worldwide comic bookstores. Comics Arts Conference is also held at the time of the convention. Since 2000, the Comic-Con International Independent Film Festival has also taken place to highlight the best in filmmaking (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.c).

Regarding funding and sources, since SDCC is a non-profit organization for educational purposes, donations to it are tax deductible. According to IRS (Internal Revenue Service), the total revenue for the fiscal year ending in December 2020 was 3,969,856 USD, with total functional expenses of more than 11 million USD and a net income - of more than 7,5 USD million. It can be seen from the data that contributions amounted to 936,743 USD, which represents 23.6 %. Other notable sources of revenue are program services which amount to 24.7%, whereas other revenue is not provided. Among notable expenses are funds for salaries and wages, which amount to 4,203,331 USD (ProPublica, n.d.). Hollywood Foreign Press Association and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences support public facilities and make grants, for example. However, preserving tax-exempt status is almost entirely realized internally inside the convention, which is, above all, centered on panel discussions designed to fulfill the SDCC mission of raising awareness and creating an appreciation for comics and related popular arts. Artists are given a free trade show space, whereas small publishers are given a discount. The major studios do not pay anything for access, as they attract fans by bringing celebrities to San Diego. However, the studios bear the expenses of celebrities. David Glanzer, the Chief Communications and Strategy Officer, in an interview for New York Times in 2015, commented that since they are a non-profit organization and everything is invested into other events, the revenue is seen primarily as insurance, as in case something bad happened and they could not hold the event anymore, the funds would be used to pay the employees, meet all their commitments and to try to seed the return of the convention (Cieply & Barnes, 2015).

5   SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON AS A BRAND ACCORDING TO BRANDING FUNNEL ELEMENTS

SDCC is in this chapter presented in its role as a brand and analyzed according to branding funnel elements, which are summarized in the Branding Funnel, attached in Appendix 5. The analyses were made based on the data gathered in reviews from secondary sources and information obtained from the interview conducted with David Glanzer, the Chief

Communications and Strategy Officer at SDCC. Consequently, the branding funnel was built.

5.1 Mission and vision

According to its mission, SDCC, as a non-profit public benefit corporation, is organized for charitable purposes and dedicated to creating public awareness and appreciation for comics, as well as related popular art forms. It is dedicated to unifying people who like to be a part of a closely-knit community (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a).

Its vision includes the aims like to thrive as a world-class attraction, to serve as a pop culture focal point, to increase the community's economic strength, and through its practices and offerings be a sustainable model for environmentally friendly community service (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a).

5.2 Context building blocks

5.2.1 Analysis of the industry

One of the things that comic fandom brought along from sci-fi fandom when it, in the 1960s, emerged as a special media-oriented community was the convention. Throughout the years, comics and other fan conventions became increasingly prominent as the interest in such genres and sub-cultural audiences increased, as well. The rapid expansion of such conventions led to issues concerning authenticity and legitimacy. Some perceptions also indicate that there are two kinds of comic conventions - some being predominantly "corporate events" and others created by fans and having "a heart." Growing visibility can also be seen in various media, either in major newspapers, entertainment magazines, TV series, or web pages. The convention seems like a stage, advancing specific projects, whereas the organizers and convention act as an active intermediary between creators, vendors, companies, and attendees (Woo, Johnson, Beaty & Campbell, 2020).

In 2021, the size of the comic book global market was 14,69 billion USD and is projected to grow to 21,37 billion USD by 2029 at a CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 4.8% during the period 2021-2029. There was a high increase of 12% in 2021 compared to the average growth in the period 2017-2019 (Fortune Business Insight, n.d.). The comic book industry was impacted mainly by the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in flowing activities among the global population in an online form. The increasing popularity of comic events played a key role in influencing the enthusiasm for comic books and related pop arts among people. The popularity of comic brands is becoming increasingly attractive also because of cartoons and superhero movies, which fuel the market growth. Digital technology, as well, is playing an important role in increasing the consumption of comic content, as users across the globe can, through it, more easily reach their favorite comics and related art forms. The dominant market share in this industry is held by Asia Pacific, especially with its anime industry, which is popular

among domestic and international customers. Also, according to data, the European market, especially Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, shows significant growth. A robust presence in the global market is seen in North America. Especially cooperation and partnerships with entertainment-related companies and leading distributors represent the key strategies that fuel the growth of this industry (Fortune Business Insight, n.d.).

Throughout the years, comic conventions and similar events have become mainstream and have been each year growing more successfully. According to Salkowitz (2016), comic conventions became an industry that contributes billions of dollars and thus made a substantial economic impact in the host cities. There are many comic conventions held worldwide, either as small gatherings or large international affairs. Such conventions are an excellent opportunity for people to share their interests, enjoy meeting their favorite creators, get sneak peeks, purchase exclusive items, meet celebrities, receive autographs, and attend panels. On the other hand, these events also provide an excellent opportunity for the local hospitality industry. The hotels are usually overbooked, restaurants and other venues full, all cater to large fan bases and consequently contribute to generating substantial revenues. The success of SDCC, especially in the early 2000s, paved the way for other worldwide conventions and consequently created an industry with a significant economic impact in organizing cities (Salkowitz, 2016). A closer look at its beginnings is required to understand the meteoric rise of comic conventions. The first conventions (in San Diego in 1970 and New York City in 1964) were, at the beginning small gatherings at which like-minded enthusiasts and collectors shared their views. The emphasis was on exhibiting special editions and rare comic books. Over the years, the events have changed considerably, becoming more inclusive of different genres and also involving Hollywood celebrities and the movie industry. One of the significant milestones was the rise of cosplaying, the art of role-playing, as fans were thrilled to show up at the events dressed in their favorite characters. Cosplaying (the word Cosplay was coined in 1984 in Japan) itself created many small business opportunities. SDCC is the largest convention in the US, and New York Comic Con is the largest on the East Coast. Comiket has been a world-known convention in Tokyo since 1975, focusing on manga, the Japanese comic genre (University of Central Florida, n.d.). Comic-Con International is in the industry of hospitality, performing arts theaters, and membership organizations (Zoominfo, n.d.). The impact on the economy is vast. Conventions have become commercialized to a large extent. They also present a significant economic expansion as regards local tourism industries. There are numerous opportunities for the hospitality industry as large comic conventions draw large numbers of fans and attendees worldwide (University of Central Florida, n.d.).

SDCC has, throughout the years, become one of the biggest meccas for artists, attendees, celebrities, fans, and studios drawing around 135.000 visitors with purchased badges each year. It represents an excellent opportunity to increase awareness, spread messages, and directly reach a target audience and is, among others, also a launching ground for announcements and special releases. Its influence may reach not only target but also

mainstream audiences. It is founded on diversity. Its organization is performance-oriented and contributes to the hospitality industry by facilitating the growth of the economy. Being a non-profit organization, it must make wise branding strategies to reach a broad audience. It is a significant marketing opportunity for studios and artists. One of its attractive opportunities is in its marketing platforms for attendees, as well as establishing cooperation and partnerships with other businesses of the comic and related art forms industry. Its being held exclusively in San Diego can be a limitation; however, on the other hand, as there are many exclusivities tied to the convention, its exclusive location may be one of them, as well. A possible threat may be represented by new entrants in the market and competitors with new, innovative-oriented programs. Only the most unique and memorable events in the increasingly intensive and competitive market can namely create a significant impact, win attention, and further attract audiences (Prange, 2019).

5.2.2   Analysis of the customers

SDCC, each year apart from two years during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was held in an online form, hosts 135.000 confirmed ticket holders (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a). There are some of the most extraordinary panels, Hollywood studios, and celebrities at the convention, as well as installations and the so-called activations throughout the premises' vicinity, drawing even larger numbers of fans to meet with creators at the pop culture event, the event, which seems as a close-knit community, a place for people excited to attend as if entering a large gift shop (Molnar, 2022).

On the other hand, the growth and popularity of comic conventions present certain impediments regarding the engagement of attendees. Among them are the complicated ticket lottery system and consequently a questionable chance to be able to purchase badges to attend, highly expensive and overpriced hotel prices at the time of the event, questionable hotel and other accommodation bookings, long lines, and confusion over credentials to attend certain events. The schedule of other events accompanying the convention is not logistically prepared for which some off-site events draw attention. A customer-centric approach is, therefore, more than necessary (Cohen, 2017).

Based on the analysis of the secondary sources, some customer personas are described. Lucas, a 21-year-old, can be described as a trendy geek. He devotes most of his money and time to his passion for gaming and the entertainment industry. He does not read comic books but is a contemporary comic con attendee and engages in mediated comic characters through movies, TV, and video games. His primary motivation for visiting comic conventions is joining other fans, immersing himself in the world of fandom, seeking connections with them, and turning imaginary life into his real life. He dislikes long lines at the convention and would like more choices available for onsite and off-site events. He would prefer that the event would be more than merely a four-day event and that it would be divided into more locations. He sees the prolonged duration of the event as something

that would add more value to money. The effect would also be made as regards the size of lines. Broadening to other locations would also broaden the experiences and make customers like Lucas more likely to return. According to research in the secondary data, one of the main issues exposed is the convention's lottery system for purchasing badges. The ticket experience should be simplified, completely mobile, and available on the app. Many attendees are tech-savvy, for which to avoid long lines and crowds, the attendee experience could be gamified. A survey could also be distributed in the form of an app to measure success (Cohen, 2017).

Theresa from Calimes in California, a loyal and long-time attendee, was, after two years of eagerly waiting for the convention to open its doors again, slightly disappointed as she, while waiting in line in her wheelchair, could not feel the spontaneity of the convention, in her opinion used to have on previous occasions. She finds too many new rules, long waiting lines, and the system of pre-booked e-tickets or wristbands very sad, offering even fewer people a chance to participate in the so-longed-for panels (Knight, 2022). The third customer is Brenden Keller, who has been attending the Comic-Con as a cosplayer for years and sees it as an opportunity to meet other cosplayers; he enjoys being asked for a photo-shooting and suggests that attendees should adequately organize their time prior to attending, and consequently make the most of it (Knight, 2022). The fourth customer is a reporter from New York, Olivia Singh, who attended the convention for the first time and was, as she described, faced with many frustrating circumstances like mosquito bites and extremely high temperatures but is determined to attend again. And although she is accustomed to standing in long queues, she regrets so much time spent in them, as they were tiring and therefore forced her to leave behind so many plans she had. However, after waiting and upon entering the immersive experiences, she was impressed and saw it as a personal highlight (Singh, 2022).

5.2.3   Analysis of the competitors

The successes of comic conventions undoubtedly prompt the development of similar events worldwide, which compete for customer attendance when they become popular. Based on the analysis of secondary sources, SDCC's main competitors are MomoCon, founded in 2004, and Dragon Con, founded in 1987, both in Atlanta, Georgia; ReedPop, founded in 2006, in Norwalk, Connecticut, and New York Comic Con (Owler. n.d.). According to Zoominfo (n.d.), the main competitors are also Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, Dark Horse Comics, and Free Comic Book Day. One of the largest conventions in the European market is Lucca Comics and Games Festival in Italy (Europe Comics, n.d.), whereas, in Asia, the largest convention is in Japan, Comiket, which is held twice a year and attracts 550,000 fans (Tokyo Cheapo, n.d.). Most of the largest comic conventions have a for-profit status; among them is, for example, ReedPop, based on UK company Reed Exhibitions, which owns among almost 40 conventions around the world, also London Comic Con, New York Comic Con, and Emerald City Comic Con, located in Seattle (Hanna, 2019).

One of the latest big players in fandom and a serious competitor is Brazil's CCXP (Comic-Con Experience), held in Sao Paulo and drawing 280,000 attendees, which was first launched in 2014. Among the key features that can be exposed is that they are fan-friendly, they showcase some exclusive superhero scenes and trailers, their free-fiber optic internet provides excellent Wi-Fi service, and while SDCC does not allow live-streaming panels, it is not the case at CCXP, which provides live-streaming for outsiders. With some exclusive releases, such as the pre-taped message from Matt Reeves, director of Batman, they expanded internationally with their events. However, they do not see themselves as a competitor to SDCC and would instead like to cooperate (Gonzales, 2019). One of the competitors, Dragon Con, is a large multimedia and popular culture convention founded in 1987 in Atlanta, Georgia and held annually on Labor Day weekend. From its beginning, it has already focused on comics, literature, art, film, music, gaming, science-fiction, and fantasy. Its milestone was when in 2000, the organizers added a parade to their convention, extended their location, and invited celebrities. One of its hallmarks was the ability to get fans close to celebrities and their favorite actors (Dragon Con, n.d.). Both conventions, Dragon Con and SDCC, are massive gatherings for fans, but if they have to be compared, Dragon Con has a greater cosplay scene and pays a lot of attention to music and parties, whereas SDCC offers more exclusives, collectibles, and toys, is a place for all the news and significant announcements and hosts large companies and the brightest stars, as it is among other closely connected to Hollywood studios. Regarding artists, both conventions are overwhelming, with artists, cartoonists, and designers all available to chat with attendees or give autographs, either in booths or panels (Ohanesian, 2011).

5.3   Brand identity

Part of brand identity, consisting of the brand's invisible key elements (features, benefits, value, culture, relationships, community, and price), must be reasonably related to the visible part of the brand (name, logo, slogan, and domain) to coherently present the brand's identity and point out its nature, uniqueness, competitive position, as well future development (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). As such, it presents a unique foundation to comprehend the brand, as is also the case in SDCC through its story.

5.3.1   Invisible part

5.3.1.1 Features and benefits

It is necessary to take into consideration the brand's message and the key milestones of SDCC throughout its history to determine the features that characterize the brand and the benefits that imply the value of the brand in the eyes of the customers, as they both together provide the image and reasons for the convention's uniqueness (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). From a small gathering with humble beginnings, SDCC incredibly rose to one of the largest conventions and non-profit entertainment events in the world. With its mission and message denoting to be a non-profit public benefit organization dedicated to

charitable purposes and organized to create and contribute to the general public's awareness of comics and similar art forms, it has, throughout its history, proven that it stands firmly behind its most important guiding factor, expressed in its love for the comics medium (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.a). There is a nostalgically emotional factor as regards comic books, which first emerged in 1930 and eventually started to feature unique content, superheroes, which soon sought a bigger picture and became part of the movie industry, and as such comic books became a vital part of the culture (National Museum of American History, n.d.). The year 2022 was, for example, among others, devoted to the 100th birthday of Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts* creator. Nostalgia each year represents one of the major parts of the convention (Lowry, 2022).

The convention has a unique way of unifying people, among their fans, fantasy, and science fiction authors, comics creators, etc., who feel to be a part of a closely-knit community in a space, which seems as if built especially for them that they share interests for comic books, science fiction, movies, meet celebrities, present themselves in homemade costumes for cosplaying, attend panels and enjoy in previews, special editions, meetings with other fans or in merchandise that is available exclusively at the convention. Regardless of its enormous success, the convention remained true to its values, remained non-profit, and reserved eventual excess revenue earned for the future. The earned funds are used as operating funds for each following year's event or for organizing smaller conventions as their sister shows in Northern California and Anaheim. The salaries of the employees are modest, as well. People apply and wait in lines to work as volunteers at the event (McDonald, 2016). Among other things, the Comic-Con organizers supported the idea that during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the convention center was used as a shelter for the homeless community (Weisberg, 2020).

With their simplicity, charitable note, the ability to develop and each year to try to offer even more to their loyal attendees, like among others was the opening of the Comic-Con Museum, with their unconditional love for comic books and related popular art forms, the organizers although also focusing on examining new and innovative ways to attract and address wider audiences, remain loyal to show their care for their customers with their simplicity, surprise factors in the form of special guests and by delivering unforgettable and unique memories to all generations. The relationship between the organizers and attendees thus remains strong (Pinchefsky, 2012).

5.3.1.2 Values and culture

If the focus of SDCC at its beginnings was devoted primarily to comic books, it evolved to a culture of fans who wish to be present among others when big Hollywood studios announce footage from upcoming movies, in a place where they can meet celebrities, where all art forms have a significant place and where comic books, movies, toys, TV shows, and fantasy literature naturally coexist (Brown, 2019).

The main values and core beliefs of SDCC, as well as its newly opened Museum, are equity, access, and inclusion. The non-profit organization is focused on world-class events, educational programming, arts promotion, and community collaboration (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.d).

David Glanzer, the Chief Communications and Strategy Officer at Comic-Con International: San Diego, pointed out that as concerns the values and culture, the most significant key to success is in their finding out that they must produce and create an event, that they themselves would want to attend. Therefore, they try to reach people who have the same interest and wish to learn and explore the event's unique offerings and stress that the purpose of SDCC is not to make money but as an educational organization to promote comics and popular art. The organizers are proud that they started as a small event and remained local at the beginning as far as advertising efforts are concerned. They, above all listen attentively to their attendees and their wishes, rely heavily on volunteers, and pay attention to their remarks about the areas that need improvement. David Glanzer remarks that the comic convention is like "a massive plane with a very small cockpit," as there is only a small cadre of office workers, yet a large cadre of volunteers, whom they treat well and try not to overwork them, as they wish to leave a positive impact on them. The volunteers attend the convention and enjoy the show for free. With positive feelings and memories, they prove to be great brand ambassadors (Pinchefsky, 2012). The organizers emphasize especially the following core beliefs. They wish to provide everything as accessible, intellectually, physically, and financially. They treat their diverse audiences fairly, as they embrace diversity and actively seek to provide opportunities for engagement to everyone (Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.d).

The uniqueness of the SDCC can be seen above all in its exclusivity. An important factor is its non-profit status, as the convention is "profiting" from the intangible idea of exclusivity. The experience is valued in different ways: in hard-to-find or limited editions of comic books, exclusive merchandise, etc. It is a thin line between the immateriality of influence or impact and the materiality of experience (Hanna, 2019).

Thus, the core value of SDCC can be seen in its uniqueness by offering its attendees, employees, and volunteers unique memories. SDCC, moreover, proves to be a trustworthy brand that cares and listens to its attendees' wishes, which corresponds to its goal to be committed to its customers and other stakeholders involved. In this way, the values underlie the aims of the brand (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). Based on modesty, simplicity, honesty, equity, and inclusion, SDCC proves to have a rich culture. It namely treats all its stakeholders with sincerity and honesty and strives to reach that they identify themselves with the brand. The relationships among all the parties are, therefore, sincere and transparent. Furthermore, SDCC puts all efforts into becoming a sustainable model for environmentally-sound community service. Its values, such as accountability, trustworthiness, and openness, clearly present the convention's culture, as does its uniqueness in prioritizing its customers and other stakeholders involved and for being a

non-profit organization to provide a public benefit above all. One of its recent activities was "Feeding San Diego," a rescue organization to help end hunger, in which students were invited to design their hero character. The winning submission would see its hero brought to life by a cosplayer (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.d). There is also an onsite blood drive organized during the event to reach 600 people to donate blood during the convention (Lane, 2021). The convention also serves as a venue for "connecting fans with charities throughout the verse." In 2022, one of them was "One Love Fund," founded and 100% volunteer run by California Browncoats to support projects and people who value human rights, creativity, and human progress (California Browncoats, n.d.).

With the increase and spread of comic conventions or similar festivals in recent years, such events also became a medium for promoting tourism, endorsing local development, as well improving the image of the cities they are held in. Consequently, culture festivalization also increased as a phenomenon as it not only reached out to audiences offering them a variety of cultural creativity, but also brought along a significant socioeconomic impact into and out of the local destination. Moreover, with the increased variety of multimedia projects, new forms of alternative cultures started to emerge and attracted even larger audiences (Tonga Uriarte, Antognozzi & Catoni, 2019).

Furthermore, the location of the event is exclusive to San Diego as well as the time - each year in July for four days. It is limited to only one event per year, and the convention and the whole city can accommodate only a certain limited number of attendees and visitors. Thus, an important factor contributing to exclusivity is the convention's accessibility, either for the time of the event or because only a small percentage of people will get the opportunity to purchase the badges through a strict lottery system (Hanna, 2019).

5.3.1.3 Personality, relationship, and communities

Regarding the human characteristics associated with the brand to describe the personality of the brand, the convention's main character can be seen in its uniqueness, which makes it different from other popular art conventions. Whereas, on the one hand, the convention is the gateway to popular art, serves as one of the biggest pop culture focal points meant for all generations, offers creativity, and provides surprises, it is, on the other hand, modest, simple, and has a keep-it-low-key-philosophy, as it does not want to particularly expose itself. One of its most significant features is its responsiveness and willingness to listen to other stakeholders, which has a positive impact. Consequently, the relationships among all parties become even stronger (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a).

One of the major partners is represented by the presence of Hollywood Studios, which relies on the convention as a major marketing platform and gains increased media attention (Cieply & Barnes, 2015). It is moreover exclusive to the event that the attendees curate and capture their own experience by choosing from over 2000 hours of the program offered,

which includes almost 1000 panels and 1000 exhibitors, 500 screenings, off-site events, etc. (Hanna, 2019).

Various companies often approach the organizers by proposing establishing associations and partnerships with Comic-Con. They examine the proposals attentively but, in most cases, must decline them. Although they are open to new opportunities, it is not common for the organizers to seek them out. One of the latest partnerships was with Lionsgate, who approached them with their idea and with whom the Comic-Con launched the Comic-Con HQ network, a network which keeps the organizes in the loop and provides feedback on their mission of raising awareness and bringing popular art and comics to larger audiences (Salkowitz, 2016). In 2022, also Apple TV + partnered with SDCC for the first time with a large spotlight on its series Mythic Quest, Invasion, and Severance, among others, and for the latter, created a Severance installation at the nearby Hard Rock Hotel in San Diego, where attendees got "severed" as they immersed themselves in the fictional world (d'Alessandro, 2022).

Since SDCC, as a non-profit organization, must address wider audiences and is also genuinely committed to receiving their feedback, it is present in traditional, new forms of media, and online forums, which all together form an even larger SDCC community. Among them is the very popular SDCC Unofficial blog, which provides in-depth coverage of many aspects of the convention, tips, news, etc. (SDCC Unofficial Blog!, n.d.a).

Among some strategies that the SDCC organizers hold to are that they make sure to keep an organic connection to their fan base, allow them to engage with the brand, as well let potential brands know that if they have something of interest, their enthusiasm should be shared with the fans. They are aware of their fans being very brand loyal, which they always have in mind when approached by potential sponsors, as they need to have a connection to the event. They also find it exciting that although SDCC is conservative regarding whom they allow to be sponsors, an increase in the number of brands, as well in diversity, can be seen as the combination of elements that remain the same each year together with new bring more attendees year after year, as well (The Power of External Marketing, 2018).

When San Diego Comic-Con was founded, it represented a special place where fans, collectors, and professionals could gather and enjoy their common passion for comics and popular culture. Since then, it has become an exclusive space, attracting thousands of attendees, artists, directors, etc., each summer. Moreover, the interest and attention of various media industries, Hollywood, corporations, and similarly considerably increased as they see the convention's exclusivity as a great means for the global spread of promotion, branding, and marketing. It developed into a massive opportunity for media entities and brand building. The industry presence at the convention undoubtedly shapes ideas and brings to the growing networking, connecting, and building relationships between fans, the media industry, convention's partners, and other stakeholders who all contribute to co-

creating the brand of the exclusive and long-running comic convention (Hanna, 2019). On its webpage, SDCC expresses its thanks to its sponsors: ABC (American Broadcasting Company), Prime Video, AMC (American Movie Classics), Comixology, Cozi tv, Crunchyroll, DC (Detective Comics), Disney, Duolingo, FOX, FX (FOX Extended), Harperalley, HBO Max (Home Box Office Max), Hulu, Marvel Studios, NBC (National Broadcasting Company), PureLife, MechaBuilders and Warner Bros (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.e).

SDCC, as a unique and big-scale festival with San Diego as its mainstay for more than fifty years, shows its strong connection with its communities. The high level of satisfaction with the convention's experience appears as a collective activity. The significance of SDCC is demonstrated in its non-profit nature, its balancing artistic, cultural, and commercial characters, building connections with the community, increasing awareness, being inclusive, and as such, with its success able to address its core communities' expectations, which among other results in an extensive cultural tourism impact (Tonga Uriarte, Antognozzi & Catoni, 2019).

The organization of the largest annual premier convention SDCC is undoubtedly committed to a large extent to San Diego. Comic-Con was established in San Diego 53 years ago and recently also opened the Comic-Con Museum in the city's historic urban cultural Balboa Park. However, because of its popularity and all the masses are drawn to the event besides the 135,000 registered attendees, it is evident that the capacity is becoming increasingly insufficient each year. According to David Glanzer, Comic-Con's Chief Communications and Strategy Officer, in an interview from 2016, Comic-Con "stopped issuing press releases for attendance at the events as conventions count attendees any number of different ways and if they counted in the way that other events count, their visitors would amount to 320,000." The organizers, born in San Diego, who would like the convention to remain in the city more than anything, see the growth of attendance as their biggest challenge (Salkowitz, 2016).

The new San Diego Mayor, Todd Gloria, heartily welcomed the convention's return after the pandemic as "an iconic event, where fans and stars convene to share their love of comics, video games, movies, and pop culture, as the definition of big city energy, drawing thousands of visitors from all over the world, and helping to fund services in the city, like parks and libraries, street repair, etc." (City of San Diego, 2021). San Diego namely benefits largely during the time the convention is being held. The hotels are fully booked, restaurants are occupied, the tourism flourishes. Unfortunately, the recent plans for the expansion project of the convention center have failed. The location of the convention is, according to the contract, confirmed until at least through 2024, but there are some speculations that afterward, it might move to Los Angeles, which would make it closer for celebrities to attend or to the city of even bigger showbiz glitz, Las Vegas (Finch, n.d.).

The organizers' main wish has always been to provide a place where fans could come together and enjoy things they love and share their common passion for comics and related art forms. They wished to provide a place where attendees could learn about pop culture and where everyone would feel included. Their focus is thus on the community to members of which the organizers wish to offer unforgettable memories. Fans from different parts from all around the world each year attend the event and connect immediately as soon as they step through the entrance with the magic spell offered by Comic-Con (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a). Once, brand communities were seen merely as a way of communication between a particular brand and its target audience. Today, along with branding developing into brand-building relationships, communities are seen as an essential part of brand identity and a key source of feedback with which an organization can further develop (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

Since there are so many worlds crossing their paths at the SDCC: e.g., Hollywood celebrities, cosplaying community, fans, space provided for industry networking or discussing the future of comics, etc., consequently also many various communities have been formed (Jenkins, 2012). The convention itself, although on the one hand dedicated to increased awareness of comic books and related art and culture and on the other to attract big movie studios and TV shows, is above all meant to unite thousands of people from different backgrounds from all over the globe. Some of them are fans of Star Wars, others prefer Marvel and DC, and some are interested in vintage comic books and similarly. Still, they stick together when they meet, and the convention functions as a big, close-knit community (Ohanesian, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the in-person event was canceled, the local cosplay community filled the streets with photos, flowers, and artwork in the form of a shrine to show their passion and respect for SDCC (Lane, 2021).

At SDCC, fans of all generations are welcome. According to David Glanzer, the target audience has been the Snapchat generation. A lot of family-friendly panels and activities meant to entertain the younger ones are there, as well (Irshad, 2022). Having a cross-generation appeal, SDCC also has many online fan-based communities. Among the most popular ones is the San Diego Unofficial Blog, which aims to provide the most in-depth information, news, tips, and other important aspects of the convention (SDCC Unofficial Blog!, n.d.b). With almost 1000 followers, there is also a Community Page for fans on Facebook (Comic-Con Fan Page, n.d.). There is probably one of the most significant communities, the community that each year exists for those four days of the convention, a community of individuals from disparate backgrounds, of different ethnicities from all over the world who make friends while standing in lines and sticking together and bonding, all with the same wish - to attend the long-anticipated event (Ohanesian, 2013).

5.3.2   Visible part

The brand's visual identity, consisting of a name, symbol or logo, slogan, and domain, can be built based on the identified invisible elements of the brand. Both parts – the invisible,

which conveys the brand on the inside, and the visible part of the brand, which reveals the brand on the outside - are equally significant to reach the brand's success (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

5.3.2.1 Name

The first San Diego comic con (short for comic convention), the idea for which was brought up by Sheldon Dorf, who, prior to realizing it with like-minded fans, worked at a Detroit fan convention and who proposed that the convention should also be open to other fandoms and should not be limited only to comic books, was held in downtown San Diego, at the US Grant Hotel in 1970. Its purpose was to attract interest in such conventions, and the event, which was at first held for only one day, was called San Diego's Golden State Comic Mini-Con. Due to its success, there was, in the same year, another three days long event organized and called San Diego Golden State Comic-Con, as an extended version of Mini-Con. Until 1973, when the convention was officially renamed the San Diego Comic-Con, it was named San Diego West Coast Comic Convention (Amezcua, 2022). In 1995, the name to show the growing universal appeal was changed to Comic-Con International: San Diego and it still holds today (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.f). San Diego Comic-Con was also in a long-term legal dispute over the rights to its trademark, the name "comic-con," as the Salt Lake City Comic Con used the term for its pop culture gathering. The jury in 2017 decided in favor of San Diego Comic-Con, which used the Comic-Con trademarks connected with their conventions for so many years (Weisberg, 2017).

5.3.2.2 Logo

There was no specific logo since the founding of the convention, as only text and the number of the year were used. In 1970 Shel Dorf designed a logo that consisted of the words San Diego's Golden State Comic Con and stressed the core elements of the event, as seen in Figure 2. In 1972, the term Golden State was changed to West Coast. In 1980, John Pound, an underground cartoonist, designed a comix-feeling logo. It was used till 1982, when artist Rick Geary proposed a toucan as a logo. He never meant it to be a toucan but was at the time merely attracted to drawing animals, especially birds, dressed as humans. Nevertheless, the toucan became the hallmark of the convention for the following decade (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.f).

The Comic-Con International logo, as it is known today, was designed in 1995 by veterans in the comic industry, Richard Bruning and Josh Beatman. The logo, shown in Figure 3, consisting of an illustration representing an eye with a yellow sign COMIC along sideways and sign CON above the image of an illustrated eye, is today one of the most recognized logos. Yellow color brings about a feeling of happiness. The other words in the logo are San Diego and International. It is unique and simple and arouses curiosity, especially about the illustrated big eye, which portrays an unknown comic book character. The "eye" may

refer to visual arts, to the letter "I," indicating internationality, or simply indicating to be "eye-catching" (Bruning, n.d.).

However, the image of the toucan still appeared periodically on different occasions. It was, for example, on the occasion of the convention's 40th anniversary on the cover of the Souvenir book together with the Expo Boy, which was the official mascot of the comics industry trade show, Comic Book Expo (the convention's sister event), held from 1984 till 2001, when over the years Rick Geary created a new image of Expo Boy that went along the original logo for each Expo's programming theme (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.f).

Figure 2: The 1972 Comic-Con logo

Source: Comic-Con International: San Diego (n.d.f).

Figure 3: Comic-Con International: San Diego logo

Source: Bruning (n.d.).

5.3.2.3 Slogan

There is no slogan of the convention, but it can be interpreted from the SDCC values, mission, and storytelling itself or, as put by David Glanzer in the interview, held for the purpose of this Master's thesis (Appendix 2): "Celebrating the Popular arts" is Comic-Con's slogan as concerning the logo, SDCC organizers always honor and bring light to the history of comics and related popular art, and the logo represents a look toward the future of comics and the popular arts.

5.3.3 Brand story

The key success factor of comic con is in its storytelling, as it connects with its audiences through stories of compelling and engaging narratives, extraordinary characters, superheroes, etc., which results in treasured memories. A story in which visual elements and words are combined perfectly, as the organizers of SDCC manage to achieve during their convention, attracts and holds the attention and evokes emotions (Messina, 2018). According to David Glanzer, SDCC does not have an official brand story. However, although the story may not be directly expressed, it is implied through and integrated within the atmosphere created at the convention from different stakeholders' perspectives, already from the time of their purchasing badges and excitedly looking forward to attending the event onwards, which altogether contribute to the unique story of the SDCC, which attracts masses of pop culture attendees by offering them unique experiences, collectibles, games, sneak peeks, freebies, meeting celebrities and allows them to interact with the brand as shown in Figure 4. It is not only the event but also the cultural impact and historical context that altogether bring the uniqueness of the convention (Hanna, 2019).

Figure 4: Exhibit Hall at SDCC

Source: Geek stuff (n.d.).

5.4   Brand implementation

5.4.1   Internal branding

It is of utmost importance in each organization that the leadership, corporate governance, management, or board of directors lead a transparent system within the organization, is accountable and open to all stakeholders involved, takes care of their employees and volunteers, and educate them about the corporate ethics and good practices in order to enable them to identify with the brand, as they consequently represent the brand also outside the organization as brand ambassadors. It can only be achieved with sincere commitment and understanding of the organization's values, culture, and mission, for which internal branding, including spreading knowledge inside the organization, having open communication, and motivating employees and volunteers with various activities to make them embrace the values and become brand co-creators is of utmost importance (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). Unfortunately, no direct information was provided about internal branding strategy within SDCC, neither in secondary sources nor from the interview held with David Glanzer under the explanation that answering to it could lead to proprietary practices, for which he was not comfortable answering. However, it may be presumed from the excellently organized event each year and from the lines of people registering to be volunteers that SDCC's internal branding is functioning very well. From an experience of a volunteer described in Popverse, an online news platform, we learn that there is no training or similar orientation explaining how to be a good volunteer, yet they all contribute to the friendly spirit at SDCC, knowing that their job is above all to help attendees to have an incredible experience (McDermott, 2022).

A significant part of the stakeholders who co-create the brand extensively is namely the SDCC volunteers, as also the organizers admit that they represent the backbone of the convention. Each year the so-called Volunteer Interest List, which is very competitive and is based on "first come- first served," is open online to potential candidates, whereas those who have already volunteered at past events are invited back, however only if they were graded well. Moreover, if they did a particularly good job, they are invited to participate in a more detailed capacity and must register as returning volunteers. The assignments like line handler, book and bag distributor, or door monitor are given at the check-in at the event; the volunteers are given volunteer badges and T-shirts and can choose on which day they wish to volunteer. A volunteer supervisor is also responsible for all assignments running smoothly and the volunteers are graded. Volunteers' shift is about four hours long; however, the badge allows admittance for the rest of the day. It means that volunteers are people who love SDCC and want to be part of it, for which SDCC needs them. It is a great opportunity for them to be involved with the inner workings of SDCC (SDCC Unofficial Blog!, n.d.b). Each year, SDCC employs thousands of volunteers. There is, as mentioned above, no training for volunteers, it is just that friendly spirit they share, and that is the way they are (McDermott, 2022).

During pandemics, SDCC organized a Super Volunteer Challenge and thanked them sincerely and posted the names of Super Volunteers on their webpage, volunteers who have stepped out and made a difference in their communities in a variety of ways. SDCC is supported by a large supply industry, vendors, and sponsors willing to get involved, as well as by comics, books, games, or associated merchandise publishers. Some autographs or photo opportunities are charged for a fixed fee. However, such large-scale events would not be possible without the help of volunteers and organizers who need to recruit them. Organizers must plan all the details, make schedules, and manage every single aspect of the logistics (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.g).

5.4.2   Communication

Communication should be understood as a conversation or dialogue that reaches and invites target customers as co-creators, turning them into brand ambassadors. (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

Comic-Con, in addition to traditional media and online platforms, provides a unique opportunity to reach fans, create memorable experiences and offer appealing exclusives and is identified as an exclusive media event, making all the fans exclusive trendsetters and influencers. One of the most important features regarding branding strategies that made the event unique and successful is namely in its achieving to reach an exclusive aura surrounding the convention, which made its status above all other conventions. It was reached by organizers during the event's branding and Hollywood studios, which used its space as a launch pad for its promotions. SDCC also represents an opportunity as an advertising outlet for other marketers to present their brands to a vast pool of consumers. The impact of the comic convention is also provided in academic discourses, essays, etc. (Hanna, 2019).

SDCC communicates in stories. The organizers, although not having a particular official brand's story, believe that storytelling has power and that design is used as storytelling to create fans. Design certainly is a very powerful tool in building a brand. Organizers managed to create an emotional connection with their fans, a place where one can interact with his favorite brands. The brand of SDCC is consistent and familiar, as all the touchpoints the attendees see have the same color, typography, and art direction. SDCC managed to build a world for its attendees to live in (Wong, 2019). In the stories, the attendees should be the heroes, and the brand should be in the role of the guide. The most popular stories can be broken down into a simple framework, consisting of a character, who has a problem, then meets a guide who gives him a plan and calls him to action; they avoid failure and conclude in a success (Miller, 2017). Unique brand marketing strategies should be created in a way to satisfy the needs of attendees and offer them experiences that they would not only enjoy but also feel the need to recommend to their friends, families, etc. (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). Therefore, the projects at the convention have attentively

organized previews to turn the most passionate fans into brand ambassadors, as the underlying aim is to build "word of mouth" for these projects (Lowry, 2022).

Already at the beginning of the event, each attendee is, upon registering at the venue, given a plastic badge holder with an RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) sticker attached to the paper name badge to be scanned at entering halls, with a lanyard of one of the major donors and a giant oversized fan carry bag of different superhero designs and shoulder straps with logos, with a quick guide and other brochures inside, which every attendee proudly carries around and fills with freebies or purchased items, which is a smart marketing move as they literally cannot be overlooked. The organizers managed with many activities like limited signings, special guest appearances, giving away freebies, etc., to offer their attendees memorable experiences (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.h).

The registrants who manage to get badges, attend the event, and become influencers are marked as an exclusive group. The event itself is immersed in the idea of exclusive experiences. Studios release exclusive screenings; badges are obtained exclusively through a ticket lottery system; exclusive merchandise can be bought, exclusive parties are thrown, limited seats are offered for panels, etc. The atmosphere of exclusivity has been cultivated by Hollywood's use of space with celebrities and by SDCC organizers wishing to brand the event (Hanna, 2019).

Word-of-mouth marketing has the largest impact, which can be seen in promoting the event by many influencers, bloggers on SDCC fan sites and forums, etc., reaching wider audiences. SDCC Public Relations also strongly impacts creating awareness among target groups by efficiently cooperating with online and press media and organizing press conferences to introduce celebrities who will attend the event. Advertising is oriented especially toward delivering news and releases. It updates online and through TV, radio, and press media, in which anticipation is increased, with the programming schedule released merely two weeks before the convention (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a).

The convention is covered especially in the press media, like Hollywood Reporter, Variety, daily newspapers New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and the local newspaper San Diego Union-Tribune. Many heard of the convention in popular TV series like CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) show The Big Bang Theory or on talk shows like Entertainment Tonight and Good Morning America, as well as in interviews with celebrities (Hanna, 2019). SDCC was featured on TV shows (e.g., Weeds, Entourage) and reality shows (e.g., MTV's Punk'd, The Real World: San Diego). In 2010, a sci-fi film entitled Paul was filmed with SDCC in focus. In 2011, a documentary entitled Comic-Con: Episode IV - A Fan's Hope was made about the SDCC history (Obias, 2013). SDCC 2022 was also covered by IGN (Imagine Games Network) Livestream, which revealed highlights of the show and provided many announcements, releases, and trailers. At the

bottom of the webpage, registered users were invited to post comments according to the community guidelines (Dinsdale, 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, SDCC virtually took place and searched for the proper digital channels to engage with its fans and decided on a chat and communication platform Discord (Williams, 2021). The platform Comic-Con@Home was another online form that virtually delivered the best of the Comic-Con experience to anyone with an internet connection all around the globe during the pandemic (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.i). SDCC also hosts an annual Portfolio Review dedicated to aspiring comic book artists, which is also an opportunity for publishers searching for new talents. Other smaller events are the official trade show Comic Book Expo, ProCon, an annual event meant for creative professionals within the comic book industry, and Con/Fusion, offering the best in comic books and science fiction. The last day of SDCC is called Kids Day and features films and activities for children of ages 12 and younger, who also have free entrance to the comic convention (Obias, 2013).

Giant wrap-around banners and displays appear in the city. As the start of the convention approaches, a wave of social media activities begins (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.e). Brands can, with the aid of experiential marketing, become strong and attractive and, as such, increase customer value (Verbauskiene & Griesiene, 2014). Besides all the experiences, activities, and exciting panels inside the convention center, there is namely also outdoor advertising in the form of so-called activations, such as interactive experiences, games, photo ops, and a similar carnival of options outside the convention center, in the city itself. It is experiential marketing trying to draw the attention of social-media-savvy crowds. Almost around every corner, something is going on, e.g., arcade games, interactive installations, many cosplayers walking down the streets, Rooftop Cinema Club is screening films or featuring comic book characters and Marvel heroes; for example, fans can sip on special themed drinks or have a themed snack, featuring popular characters in restaurants and bars or can dance in clubs, offering glowing drinks and vintage video games, prizes can be won, and games can be played at the interactive zone, everything to celebrate the annual Comic-Con. The whole city seems caught in the spirit of a large comic convention, and everyone feels a certain kinship towards each other (Los Angeles Times Staff, 2022).

Events in the form of street team marketing are used in shopping areas, city streets, or similar prime spots to engage customers. Some events are created to evoke emotional connections and nostalgic feelings (e.g., TV network Nickelodeon promoted its brand by giving away vintage promotional material featuring Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (The Power of External Marketing, 2018). The recognition of fans' significance, experiential marketing, and immersive theater altogether form an SDCC activation, making it the key site for comprehending interactions between Hollywood and the fandom within the framework of brand cultures. Brands as tools resonate with fans' engagement with branded

experiences and their patience and willingness to wait in lines for hours to participate (Kohnen, 2021).

5.4.3   Channels

The channels through which the brand reaches the target customers must be effective and, if possible, innovatively chosen and combined. They may reach their target segments either directly (e.g., webpages, platforms, etc.) or indirectly by using intermediaries (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). SDCC directly reaches its target segments through SDCC official website, through which SDCC fans, among others, register as members to obtain the opportunity to enter the badge-purchasing lottery system. One of the latest major changes regarding design within communication channels can be seen in the new look of the SDCC website, which includes precise registration instructions, special landing pages for all events, navigation more manageable, and social media icons at the bottom of the page. The SDCC official website namely includes an extension to many social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and Pinterest, through which members share their views, mutually inform each other about SDCC activities, and provide immediate feedback. The website, as such, gives an impression of a big community having so much in common (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.e).

According to David Glanzer, the Chief Communication and Strategy Officer, SDCC's target audience is the Snapchat generation, a global collective of trendsetters making large changes to how people communicate and wishing to make the world a better place, a generation that wishes to engage with brands more than ever. He also noted that SDCC strives to establish an organic connection with its fanbase. SDCC realized that the most effective way to engage a broader audience is not simply broadcasting but to get the audience involved and, thus, fostering a relationship between the audience and the brand (Sheraton, n.d.). Therefore, the direct channel proves to be the most suitable as it directly addresses wider audiences, establishes relationships with close interactions, and allows for immediate feedback (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

5.5   Brand equity

The concept of brand equity helps to give results on how the brand is perceived by consumers and can, in general, be measured with brand awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty. Brand awareness reflects the presence and recognition of a particular brand in the mind of consumers. The brand image reflects the perception of a certain brand, which is based on the mental associations of a consumer. Since the consumer is the evaluator of the quality of a brand, another important brand equity element is the so-called perceived quality, involving intrinsic cues that present the characteristics of a brand, e.g., design, color, etc., as well as the extrinsic cues, e.g., name of the brand, price, etc., a combination of both being generally used by consumers. These quality items are closely linked to image elements. A significant element of brand equity is brand loyalty, at which

it is optimal to combine behavioral and attitudinal perspectives to achieve the loyalty aspect (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015).

According to an article in San Diego State University News (2022), Miro Copic, marketing lecturer and branding expert at the San Diego State University, stated that the convention as a premier event puts San Diego on a global spotlight map by attracting more than 135,000 registered ticketholders from all over the world and among other over 2,500 media members from 30 countries. The impact on the local economy is enormous as it amounts to over 90 million USD in direct attendees' spending and 165 million USD in overall spending. 3,2 million USD are collected from hotel and sales tax revenue. The calculated numbers mean that the average attendee spends around 700 USD in San Diego. During the 4-days long convention, the hotel industry benefits with more than 60,000 hotel nights in the downtown area with 60 hotels and 14,000 hotel rooms. The entire county, with many free accompanying satellite events, also enables its residents without tickets to enjoy and be part of the show (Finch, n.d.). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SDCC, according to its Annual Registration Renewal Fee Report in 2020 alone, lost around 8 million USD as it had to cancel the in-person convention. It had a net worth of 25 million USD at the end of 2019, and since its source of revenue is primarily in tickets and booth sales, such opportunities were suspended for two years (Mateo, 2022). Otherwise, the value of badges is 69 USD per person per day, except for Sunday, when the price is 47 USD, and 50 USD is the price of the ticket for the preview night. There is no admission for children younger than 12 years if accompanied by a paying adult, while US Military and seniors (ages 60 and older) have special 50% discounts. All the tickets are sold each year out in a moment, and the purchase is part of a process that requires registration, creation of a member ID, and entering the lottery system on the day of the badge purchasing announcement. The members are supposed to wait in the so-called online waiting room, from which the system, in a randomized order, sorts out those who can purchase the badges. The returning attendees have a special badge sale date prior to the regular release date and thus an advantage in purchasing (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.i). Brand loyalty can be seen in fans standing for hours in lines for autographs, attending panels, or simply catching a glimpse of a celebrity, and some come dressed as their favorite characters (Wong, 2019).

To better understand the SDCC brand value and brand equity, some insights provided in the review of secondary sources were reviewed and used to prepare the survey questionnaire and the in-depth interview. The results presented after conducting the primary research are more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 6.4, focusing on the empirical research of this Master's thesis, with the aim to analyze and present the SDCC brand equity and compare it with the brand identity.

6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON SDCC AS A BRAND

After assessing the brand identity of SDCC through analysis of secondary sources and interview held, an analysis of brand equity followed. The aim of the primary research, which would help to get overall brand equity, was to obtain a better comprehension of consumers' opinions, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes about SDCC. The research technique prepared and used for this purpose was the survey questionnaire. Whereas the in-depth interview, based on a set of predetermined questions, was held with the convention's organizer to comprehend the SDCC brand building and brand identity more thoroughly than secondary sources. The results of both techniques are presented in the following chapters.

6.1 Qualitative study – Interview with SDCC organizer

After sending interview questions to different stakeholders (organizers, employees, and volunteers), in the reply received from the SDCC Communications and Strategy Department, the representatives expressed their appreciation for considering their organization for the project but explained that they, unfortunately, do not make their volunteers or employees available for interviews and that they saw some of the questions as such that they would require them to divulge some information that may be proprietary in nature or would involve strategy and plans of action. Therefore, an adapted version of the interview questions was sent and is with the replies provided by David Glanzer, the Chief Communications and Strategy Officer at Comic-Con, attached in the Interview transcript in Appendix 2. David Glanzer is a long-time fan of science fiction who attended his first comic con already in 1978. He started volunteering at the convention in 1984 and became an employed part of the team in 1994 (Salkowitz, 2016). David Glanzer described the convention as a gathering of like-minded individuals who celebrate a variety of art forms in a vibrant, safe, and educational setting and pointed out that Comic-Con is noted for being an inclusive organization, giving an opportunity to creators and participants who might otherwise not have been given one. He explained that the organization is governed by a board of directors and a committee. During the pandemic, some employees left the organization, whereas some returned. In the employees and volunteers, they recruit, they look for enthusiasm for comics and popular art.

In terms of assessing answers regarding the opinion of the organizers concerning brand loyalty, perceived quality of the brand, brand awareness, and awareness of the SDCC logo and slogan through the eyes of their customers, the organizers provided the following observations: they find the overall opinion among their customers as very positive, they believe that their customers are aware of the brand for its uniqueness, which the organizers see in their being an inclusive, non-profit, vibrant, and community-based organization. Furthermore, they are confident that their customers are aware of the SDCC logo and recognize it as referring to furthering the shared passion for comics and popular arts also in the future. In terms of the last question, asking them to reveal their brand story and

expecting to learn more about the uniqueness of their brand, they simply noted that it is about "a gathering of like-minded individuals." Intensive research through already conducted interviews in the print media to try to obtain other exclusive and valuable pieces of information, which would fill in the missing data to obtain a more complete picture, was done, as well.

6.2 Quantitative study – Survey of brand equity element among attendees, fans, influencers, volunteers, and SDCC guests

The survey questionnaire with the target population of people from different age groups that are familiar with the SDCC brand and are, therefore, potential attendees, fans, volunteers, members of SDCC communities, and other stakeholders involved in the comic convention field was conducted between mid-October and mid-December 2022. The survey was created on the 1KA web portal and distributed to the target population via forums, social media, and relevant community platforms in electronic form. A pilot questionnaire was tested on 10 people to determine whether the questions were formed in a clear and comprehensive manner and to evaluate how they responded to specific and overall questions. As well the non-probability convenience sampling method was used for the purpose of the analysis.

Based on the theoretical and empirical basis of brand equity, preformed hypotheses, and brand identity analysis, the survey questions were designed to measure respondents' opinions, behavior, and experience (Konečnik & Gartner, 2007). In forming the questions, the focus was on the main components of SDCC as pointed out by brand organizers: tradition, quality, recognizability, image, loyalty, partnering with Hollywood Studios, presenting celebrities, uniqueness, and symbiosis with the city. The questions were created in an open-ended and closed-ended form with the choice of options provided and were written in simple and concise language and in a logical order. The survey questionnaire consists of 5 parts and includes 19 questions. The items were for most questions measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). Besides the introductory part, inquiring about attendance of SDCC; respondents were asked about being familiar with the SDCC brand and their preferences for choosing SDCC in comparison to other similar conventions. It is thus dedicated to measuring the awareness of SDCC as an element of brand equity and providing the main reasons for attending SDCC. The following part of the survey refers to the SDCC brand image. The third part is related to the perceived quality of SDCC, and the fourth is inquiring about the respondents' loyalty to the brand. The last part is related to awareness about general branding and marketing facts related to SDCC, among other SDCC communication styles, marketing approaches, and its being a non-profit organization, whereas other questions provide some suggestions of respondents regarding SDCC branding, logo, and similar. In the final part of the survey, there are four demographic questions included that refer to gender, age, provenience, and level of education of respondents. The survey questionnaire was formed in a way that respondents

who had not (yet) attended SDCC could provide their answers. The sample obtained from those recipients who had not attended SDCC was, however, at a smaller percentage rate compared to those who already attended. The collected data were analyzed with statistical software to compute descriptive statistics and frequency distribution. The survey questionnaire is attached in Appendix 4.

6.3   The aim of the survey and formed hypotheses

The main aim was to gain data about the elements of brand equity regarding SDCC as a brand among potential consumers and, based on the results, to prove that there is no relevant gap between brand identity and brand equity. Further practical implications would be provided to identify any elements of divergence. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formed to prove that brand identity and brand equity match. To find out to what extent brand identity and brand equity match, points of view of organizers of the brand, relevant secondary sources, the official SDCC website, and public interviews were used and compared to answers provided in the survey questionnaire. The main thesis statement was that there is no gap between brand identity and brand equity.

Hypothesis 1: *The awareness of SDCC and its logo is high.*

According to Aaker (1996b), awareness is one of the main components when choosing or being loyal to a certain brand (Aaker, 1996b). For the long tradition of SDCC, its popularity, sold-out badges despite a strict lottery system, and for attendees visiting from all over the world with a high percentage of returnees each year, it is assumed that the awareness of SDCC and its logo, as a recognizable symbol, is high (Hanna, 2019).

Hypothesis 2: *The consumers have a positive image of SDCC for its being unique, non-profit, and exclusive.*

According to Keller (1993), the image of a brand includes associations of consumers connected to a brand and divides them into characteristics, benefits, and opinions (Keller, 1993). SDCC has been present in the comic market for more than 50 years (Elliot, 2018), has a mission as a non-profit public benefit corporation with the charitable purpose of promoting popular art culture (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a), has strong communities and a brand story in which visual elements and contents match perfectly and connect to the audience (Messina, 2018). SDCC includes not only comic books but also other aspects of popular culture, embraces diversity, and, as a non-profit organization, strives for charitable events and invests everything earned into further continuing its culture (Cieply & Barnes, 2015). Besides being known for exclusivity, it is unique for partnering with Hollywood Studios (Hanna, 2019).

Hypothesis 3: *The consumers perceive SDCC as a quality convention.*

The rich offerings of SDCC include its non-profit nature, balancing artistic, cultural, and commercial characters, building connections with the community, increasing awareness, being inclusive, partnering with Hollywood, and as such with its quality and success can address the main expectations of attendees, which altogether among other results in an extensive cultural tourism impact. Word-of-mouth as a marketing approach is proof that the consumers spread positive opinions and show their inclination towards the brand, which they find to be of high quality for panelists, celebrities, and awards, and are consequently willing to pay more for the badges. Also, some exclusive and limited-edition items can be seen only at SDCC (Tonga Uriarte, Antognozzi & Catoni, 2019).

Hypothesis 4: *The consumers are loyal to SDCC and cannot imagine it being held anywhere else than in San Diego.*

According to Aaker (1996b), brand loyalty is one of the key components of brand equity, measured by the satisfaction of the brand's consumers. In Keller's (1993) opinion, loyalty can be seen in repeated consumer behavior. Since SDCC returnees present most attendees and have an opportunity to purchase their badges before regular sale dates, it can be confirmed that they are very loyal to the SDCC brand (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.j).

Because of perceiving SDCC as of high quality, it is assumed that the consumers are very loyal. Moreover, loyalty can also be seen in the symbiosis between the city of San Diego and SDCC, which can be seen in many activations throughout the city. The whole city seems to feel the atmosphere of a large comic convention. Especially the Covid-19 pandemic showed how much the city missed and longed for the event to return to the premises (Los Angeles Times Staff, 2022). Besides the event, it is also for the cultural impact and the city's historical context that altogether bring the symbiosis (Hanna, 2019).

6.4   Analysis of data and results

484 respondents started to complete the survey questionnaire, presented in Appendix 3. Overall, 258 respondents completed the survey, but only 217 completed questionnaires were valid, among them 201 attendees and 16 non-attendees. Since brand equity analysis refers only to attendees, 201 respondents represent the survey's sample. The socio-demographic data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The socio-demographic data of the survey respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18-24	15	7
25-34	55	25
35-44	69	32
45-54	45	21
55 and over	30	14
I prefer not to say	3	1
Gender		
Male	91	42
Female	118	54
Other	4	2
I prefer not to say	4	2
Education		
Less than secondary school	1	0
Secondary/High school	52	24
Bachelor's degree	106	49
Master's degree	38	18
Doctorate degree	13	6
I prefer not to say	7	3
Origin		
North America	188	87
South America	3	1
Europe	26	12

Source: own work.

In the introductory part of the survey, inquiring about reasons for not attending SDCC, most mentioned difficulties with entering the lottery system, and almost half found the badges too expensive. In assessing respondents' brand awareness of the SDCC, the following results were provided. As presented in Table 2, the respondents could quickly recognize SDCC among other conventions; it comes first in their mind when deciding which one to attend (4.61) and are familiar with the brand. Most (4.51) already are or would like to be part of the community. They are slightly less likely to imagine the SDCC logo (4.45), and results on whether the SDCC logo is well designed, were the lowest (3.90).

Table 2: Statements related to SDCC brand awareness

Statements	Average	Standard Deviation
I can recognize SDCC quickly among other comic convention brands.	4.61	0.63
SDCC comes first in my mind when deciding which other convention to attend.	4.61	0.81
I am familiar with SDCC brand.	4.60	0.64
I already am or would like to be part of SDCC community.	4.51	0.72
I can easily imagine SDCC logo in my mind.	4.45	0.82
I think that SDCC logo is well designed.	3.90	0.91
Brand awareness	4.45	

Source: own work.

As shown in Table 3, inquiring about the main reasons for attending, most respondents mainly look forward to attending the panels (19%) and enjoying the mix of media-related themes (17%). The possibility to purchase limited editions (14%), to mingle with other pop culture enthusiasts (14%), and to meet artists (13%) slightly follows, as well as the opportunity to meet Hollywood stars (11%), which is one of SDCC unique features. A minor percentage visits for cosplay (8%), which is not one of SDCC's main features.

Table 3: Respondents' reasons for attending SDCC

Statements	Frequency (%)
To attend the panels.	19
To enjoy the mix of media-related themes.	17
Possibility to purchase limited editions and exclusives.	14
Mingle with other pop culture enthusiasts.	14
To meet artists, exhibitors, cartoonists.	13
Chance to meet Hollywood stars.	11
Cosplaying.	8
Other	3

Source: own work.

The next set of statements was related to the SDCC brand image. As shown in Table 4, many respondents agree that attending SDCC makes them happy (4.66) and that they feel proud (4.52) to attend. They also enjoy accompanying off-site events (4.31), see SDCC as a unique brand compared to other comic convention brands (4.20), and like its brand image (4.11).

Table 4: Statements related to SDCC brand image

Statements	Average	Standard Deviation
Attending SDCC makes me happy.	4.66	0.56
I am proud to attend the SDCC.	4.52	0.71
I like the off-site events accompanying SDCC.	4.31	0.80
SDCC has a unique brand image compared to other comic convention brands.	4.20	0.83
I like the brand image of SDCC.	4.11	0.82
I like SDCC as a company.	3.85	0.86
Brand image	4.28	

Source: own work.

The fourth part of the survey is related to the perceived quality of SDCC. As shown in Table 5, most find SDCC to be of high quality (4.49) and the overall experience as positive (4.36). They see it as unique because of its exclusive offerings, like partnering with Hollywood studios (4.25). They find it better compared to other conventions (4.20). The percentage is lower (3.52) regarding never being disappointed with SDCC offerings.

Table 5: Statements related to perceived quality of SDCC

Statements	Average	Standard Deviation
I believe that SDCC convention is of high quality.	4.49	0.66
My overall experience with SDCC offerings has been positive.	4.36	0.69
SDCC is unique because of its exclusive offerings like partnering with Hollywood studios.	4.25	0.82
SDCC has better offerings compared to other comic conventions.	4.20	0.82
I can expect superior performance from SDCC.	4.14	0.86
I was never disappointed with SDCC offerings.	3.52	1.17
Perceived quality	4.16	

Source: own work.

The fifth set of statements is related to SDCC brand loyalty. As shown in Table 6, most would attend SDCC again, meaning that they are loyal returnees (4.76). They would recommend it to their friends (4.46), and it is their first choice (4.42). They cannot imagine SDCC held elsewhere (4.31) and would attend even if the price of badges increased (4.05).

Table 6: Statements related to SDCC brand loyalty

Statements	Average	Standard Deviation
I would attend SDCC again.	4.76	0.50
I would recommend SDCC to my friends.	4.46	0.66
When thinking of attending a comic convention, SDCC is my first choice.	4.42	0.85
I cannot imagine that SDCC would be held in another town than San Diego.	4.31	1.06
I would still attend SDCC, even if they increase the price of tickets.	4.05	0.84
I consider myself loyal to SDCC brand.	4.00	0.95
Brand loyalty	4.33	

Source: own work.

The results of general facts awareness are shown in Table 7. The majority of respondents is aware (39%) and supports SDCC for being a non-profit organization (41%), is familiar with its partnerships (43%) and finds the communication style successful (45%).

Table 7: Statements related to SDCC general facts awareness

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree /Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I support SDCC for being a non-profit organization even more.	3%	20%	19%	41%	17%
I know that SDCC is a non-profit organization.	4%	22%	18%	39%	17%
I am satisfied with SDCC merchandise.	6%	17%	31%	36%	11%
I think that SDCC communication style is successful.	2%	13%	30%	45%	9%
I think that the SDCC notifications are regular, update and accurate - providing all information one needs.	2%	19%	32%	36%	11%
I am familiar with SDCC partnerships.	1%	8%	12%	35%	43%
I believe that the SDCC badge lottery system is fair.	1%	3%	23%	35%	37%

Source: own work.

In the final part of the survey, inquiring about respondents' eventual preferences of other comic conventions, their suggestions for improvement regarding SDCC branding, their opinion on marketing approaches, about their attending various forums, the answers, as seen in the survey questionnaire in Appendix 3 show that most respondents do not prefer other comic conventions to SDCC (86%). Among other conventions, the minority stated that they would predominantly choose WonderCon in Anaheim. 93% of respondents immediately associate the logo with the convention, and 13% would keep it as it is. If they were to change it, the majority would change its graphic (41%) and colors (28%). Most respondents are confident that exclusivity draws attendees (36%), as well they find the SDCC official web page excellent and very informative (28%). Yet they believe that marketing channels should be more innovative (19%). However, they give credits, besides the official web page, also to the following marketing approaches: freebies, involvement of social media platforms, announcements from guest celebrities, personal invitations, and digital media. Surprisingly, experiential marketing, which is highly praised in the media, received only 24% among respondents. Among social media platforms, SDCC's Unofficial blog seems to have the most followers (76%) and is closely followed by Facebook groups (71%). Toucan is in third place with 41%. Most respondents (33%) also experience it above all as a word-of-mouth referral, for which people attend the convention even more.

6.5 Reliability of measures in the survey questionnaire and hypotheses testing

Within this chapter, the reliability of the brand equity elements was assessed with Cronbach's alpha coefficient, whereas the formed hypotheses were tested with the t-test.

Cronbach's alpha (a measure of internal consistency) was used to test the reliability of brand equity elements. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable, and since all dimensions in Table 8 are above 0.70, we can confirm that all dimensions are reliable. The presented Cronbach's alpha values in Table 8 for all brand equity dimensions denoted are higher than 0.70, for which it was confirmed and concluded that the reliability of brand image is good, whereas the reliability of brand awareness, brand quality, and brand loyalty even have a better score, as they except for brand loyalty dimension with the result of 0.800, are both above 0.800.

Table 8: Cronbach's alpha for brand equity elements

Comic-Con International: San Diego	
Dimensions	**Cronbach's alpha**
Brand quality	0.832
Brand awareness	0.821
Brand loyalty	0.800
Brand image	0.752

Source: own work.

T-tests were made for each formed hypothesis to statistically compare the average values between the obtained sample results and the test sample and to test the results of the survey questionnaire with the aim of seeing if they were significant. A hypothesis is, namely, a possible answer to a research question. Therefore, the t-test is used to quantify how likely a hypothesis is true. T-tests were used to compare the means of two groups for testing a hypothesis based on a difference between sample means. It is a parametric test of difference. For the value for comparison, a fixed value of 3.0 was selected to indicate a relevant average value. The higher the t-test is, the more likely it will be significant. Since it is a sample test with 201 respondents, the degree of freedom used was 200 instead. The Confidence interval of the difference was 95%. The t-tests assumed that the data were independently distributed and had a similar amount of variance. When the p-value is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant.

The t-tests, which all, according to verification results, proved to be statistically significant, are presented in Tables 9-12 and are included in Appendix 4.

Hypothesis 1: *The awareness of SDCC and its logo is high.*

As seen in Table 2, the results measuring respondents' brand awareness of SDCC are above average (4.45). In testing the hypothesis with the t-test (Table 9 in Appendix 4) to statistically compare the average value to the test sample with a fixed value of 3.0, it was assessed that the result was statistically significant (t = 37.150, p = 0.000). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, it can be with 95% confidence confirmed that there is a difference, which indicates that the brand awareness is high, and consequently, Hypothesis 1 can be confirmed.

Hypothesis 2: *The consumers have a positive image of SDCC for its being unique, non-profit, and exclusive.*

As seen in Table 3, the results related to SDCC brand image and associations are above average (4.28). In testing the hypothesis with the t-test (Table 10 in Appendix 4) to statistically compare the average value to the test sample with a fixed value of 3.0, it was assessed that the result was statistically significant (t = 35.052, p = 0.000). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, it can be with 95% confidence confirmed that there is a difference, which indicates that the brand image is high, and consequently, Hypothesis 2 can be confirmed.

Hypothesis 3: *The consumers perceive SDCC as a quality convention.*

As seen in Table 4, the results related to the perceived quality of SDCC are above average (4.16). In testing the hypothesis with the t-test (Table 11 in Appendix 4) to statistically compare the average value to the test sample with a fixed value of 3.0, it was assessed that the result was statistically significant (t = 26.188, p = 0.000). Since the p-value is less than

0.05, it can be with 95% confidence confirmed that there is a difference, which indicates that the perceived quality is high, and consequently, Hypothesis 3 can be confirmed.

Hypothesis 4: *The consumers are loyal to SDCC and cannot imagine it being held anywhere else than in San Diego*

Overall, the mean value of brand loyalty is among the four dimensions (awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) rated as the second highest (4.33), right behind brand awareness is on the top among the four dimensions (4.45). As seen in Table 5, the results related to brand loyalty to SDCC are above average (4.33). In testing the hypothesis with the t-test (Table 12 in Appendix 4) to statistically compare the average value to the test sample with a fixed value of 3.0, it was assessed that the result was statistically significant (t = 32.248, p = 0.000). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, it can be with 95% confidence confirmed that there is a difference, which indicates that brand loyalty is high, and consequently, Hypothesis 4 can be confirmed.

7 BRAND IDENTITY VS. BRAND EQUITY FOR SDCC

7.1 The gap between brand identity and brand equity

Based on the comparison of the brand identity elements, presented in Chapter 5.3 of this thesis, on the insights provided by primary research, secondary sources, and results, presented in Chapter 6.4, the gap between brand identity and brand equity was assessed.

A branding funnel was prepared based on the findings from the research and from the secondary sources and is presented in Appendix 5. It provides a visual and systematic overview of the SDCC brand. SDCC is a well-established non-profit organization with a powerful market presence and has a successful and unique branding approach based on diversity within quite a competitive market. There is, namely, an intense rivalry among existing competitors as the success of SDCC prompted many developments of similar events all over the world. The increasing popularity of comic brands and events played a key role in influencing enthusiasm for comic brands, comic books, and related pop arts, towards which SDCC feels a strong commitment, especially in spreading general awareness and appreciation for comics and related popular arts to wider audiences. The main differentiation factor among the competitors can be seen in the programs they offer. The uniqueness of SDCC is in its perfectly matching combination of nostalgia and exclusivity, simplicity, and opportunity to meet celebrities, everything happening in a friendly and warm atmosphere.

Regarding brand identity, SDCC is based on strong commitment, values, and culture, which are fostered by volunteers, fans, employees, and attendees, everyone involved in the event. The name of the brand is memorable, well-known among fans, and unique. Its most used symbol is its logo, which is easily recognizable by consumers. An integral part of SDCC brand identity is represented by the brand communities, who spread positive

opinions about the convention and thus function as brand ambassadors. Word-of-mouth is also one of the most efficient communication tools. The tendency to volunteer is strongly present, and although there is no specific training, in an environment providing sincerity, respecting diversity, advocating for open communication and equal opportunities, and, above all, offering plenty of fun, training seems unnecessary. Compared especially to profit and corporate events, SDCC, as a non-profit organization and keep-it-low-philosophy, is a convention with a heart, where its employees, fans, attendees, panelists, and volunteers altogether live the brand. In terms of brand implementation, SDCC puts all efforts into maintaining an environment in which all the individuals and stakeholders feel to be a part of the brand, trust it, and are committed to it. In terms of brand equity, as already mentioned before, the consumers value especially the uniqueness of the SDCC as a brand.

The consumers point out and recognize especially the uniqueness of the SDCC as a brand. As one of the most memorable elements of a brand, the name comic con is aligned with its mission and proves to be appealing to its audiences. It encapsulates the full scope of the brand's mission and is widely recognizable. It was assessed that the consumers could recognize the SDCC logo quickly among other comic convention brand logos. With its arousing curiosity, the logo builds a powerful emotional connection with the SDCC. Furthermore, the organizers managed to create a unique, positive, and friendly atmosphere, within which SDCC attendees get a feeling of being part of a close-knit community. SDCC, for its tradition and historic, as well nostalgic value, for being non-profit, and for its simple and intimate atmosphere, attracts wide audiences. Even the giant oversized carry bags everyone receives upon registering at the venue and carrying on his back do not seem flashy, but rather something common to all. The audience is aware of SDCC being a non-profit organization, for which they tend to support it even more (Comic-Con International: San Diego, n.d.a).

The gap may be seen in disapproval by some as regards the badge lottery system, of which the purpose from the side of the organizers was to offer a fair yet exclusive system. Otherwise, exclusivity is well accepted by most fans, leading them to feel to be exclusive also themselves if getting the opportunity to attend and purchase exclusive items and rare limited editions that are available only at the convention. The exclusivity in meeting celebrities from Hollywood is highly appreciated, as well. The encounters are organized in a warm, friendly, and accessible way (Hanna, 2019).

There are, however, remarks observed in social media forums about long lines based on "first come, first served," which some see as a negative and disappointing experience (SDCC Unofficial Blog!, n.d.b). Some suggestions were provided regarding merchandise, as well. In general, as seen from the survey questionnaire, SDCC is perceived as different from competitors, unique, and cannot be imagined to be held elsewhere than in San Diego. The city greatly benefits each year during the event, as the hotels are fully booked, restaurants and other venues occupied, for which the tourism flourishes. Based on the in-

depth interview, the organizers are aware of their unique activities, partnerships, and strong presence of Hollywood, which all together attract wide audiences, yet add a touch of nostalgia, and intimacy, for which their consumers feel connected and get a warm and friendly community felt atmosphere. The organizers are aware that all the relevant stakeholders should be involved and should actively participate in order to achieve such an atmosphere. Attendees feel to be part of a large friendly community where they can share their interests and contribute to a good cause, as SDCC is a non-profit organization. Above all, it is significant that all the stakeholders feel committed and trust the organization as they are all brand co-creators. Through the analysis made, therefore, it can be assessed that the brand identity and brand equity match quite well.

7.2   Practical implications

Based on the findings throughout the analysis, SDCC should continue with its values, which are very appreciated by its attendees and, as seen from forums, also by wider audiences. SDCC should not change its logo, name, or location and should continue with its reputation, legacy, and off-site activations to obtain the feeling that the whole city is involved in the Comic-Con atmosphere and hospitality. Yet, it could improve its design and selection of merchandise, as well as logistics to avoid long queues, which might be solved by extending the period of the event. It should also offer more freebies and exclusive to the convention limited edition opportunities to continue with its tradition of exclusivity, which is, besides nostalgia, its most important attribute. SDCC should continue emphasizing its dedication to charitable causes and pointing out its being a non-profit organization, for which it receives even more support. Additionally, the organizers should pay more attention to communicating the brand more efficiently and emphasize their values and culture to achieve another point of differentiation and uniqueness compared to their competitors, attract new customers, and retain and ensure even larger brand loyalty. A suggestion to consider may be introducing an SDCC card of brand loyalty meant for its most loyal attendees, members of the SDCC community.

CONCLUSION

In investigating the main similarities and distinctions between non-profit and for-profit sector organizations, it was assessed that, in general, today's globally competitive world is complex for both sectors. They both face competition and depend on their goals, for which they need to plan branding strategies and use management skills. The main difference is in their purpose, as the goal of a for-profit organization is to generate profit, whereas a non-profit organization focuses on a social mission purpose.

Researching the role of branding in the non-profit sector, it was assessed that it differs from the for-profit sector. The insights into the latest innovative branding and marketing approaches were more thoroughly provided in the empirical research, based on the case of Comic-Con International: San Diego, a non-profit organization, which succeeded in

becoming a pop culture focal point, each year attended by masses of visitors from all over the world. Being a non-profit organization, it must plan specific branding strategies, especially to address wider audiences. Brands should be considered as multifaceted concepts and complex entities. Brand equity must be perceived as a long-term goal. To achieve that a brand becomes a unique experience with a powerful message, there should be a balanced, two-dimensional approach to branding - combining both internal and external perspectives towards the brand. As such, it enables various stakeholders to actively participate in the process of branding (Ruzzier & Ruzzier, 2015). To successfully develop a brand, it is necessary to identify the key factors within a non-profit organization that are required for unique branding and the main challenges in brand implementation. In continuation to the theoretical part, these factors and challenges based on the case of SDCC as a brand are presented, some practical implications are provided, the mutual benefits and eventual issues between the local community and the non-profit organization are researched, and the significance of stakeholders being actively involved in branding strategies is emphasized. SDCC, as a brand, managed to achieve the connection between the consumer and the brand and even strengthened it through its branding.

The formed hypotheses proved that brand identity and brand equity of SDCC as a brand matched, which consequently showed that the organizers are aware of how to adequately define the identity of the brand, narrate the message of the brand's story and values, involve all relevant stakeholders, emphasize its competitive advantages, and try to differentiate it as much as possible from competing brands. SDCC manages to offer its fans what they want and to follow their wishes. SDCC knows how to adapt to new trends, yet in its essence, remains true to the core of the comic con industry, its values, and its brand.

Despite its phenomenal growth, SDCC is a kind of intimate experience for its attendees, as they feel kinship among themselves, and it is the atmosphere at the convention, as well as in the whole city, that makes San Diego unique. The feeling that has arisen already at the founding of the Comic-Con, to meet and be with people who like the same things and create the things they are passionate about, remained the same throughout all these years (Chafin, 2017). Its history and longevity make it a standout among other conventions. Also, its non-profit status makes the convention unique, indicating that everyone is part of an event that promotes the public good.

At the end of each convention, along with unique memories one keeps when heading back home, an impression and impact are created, a feeling that everyone attending the convention or otherwise participating contributed to the mosaic of wonderful experiences and thus to the brand's story. It is an event that has been throughout all its years since its origin run by its fans. SDCC managed to preserve its loyal fans while attracting many new consumers. The secret of their success is in their striving to be better for their consumers, to be open to new opportunities, and to preserve their non-profit status, values, and their mission to promote comic and popular arts.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Aaker, D. A. (1991). *Managing Brand Equity.* New York: Free Press.
2. Aaker, D. A. (1996a). *Building strong brands.* New York: Free Press.
3. Aaker, D. A. (1996b). Measuring brand equity across products and markets. *California Management Review*, *38*, 102-120.
4. Abzug, R. & Webb, N. J. (1999). Relationships between nonprofit and for-profit organizations: A stakeholder perspective. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *28*(4), 416-431.
5. Amezcua, C. (2022, July 19). *San Diego Comic-Con: A look back at the iconic history.* Retrieved August 24, 2022 from https://www.10news.com/lifestyle/exploring-san-diego/san-diego-comic-con-a-look-back-at-the-iconic-history
6. Andreasen, A. R. & Kotler, P. R. (2014). *Strategic marketing for non-profit organizations*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
7. Bottomline Marketing. (2015, July 7). *Comic-Con and San Diego: A match made in brand equity.* Retrieved June 2, 2022 from https://blmllc.com/comic-con-and-san-diego-a-match-made-in-brand-equity/
8. Brown, T. (2019, July 18). *Comic-Con is not just about comic books anymore. That feels like a loss - and a win.* Retrieved August 21, 2022 from https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-07-18/comic-con-2019-comic-books-fans
9. Bruning, R. (n.d.). *Comic-Con International Logo.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://rbruning.myportfolio.com/comic-con-international-logo
10. Bryson, J. M. & Alston, F. K. (2011). *Creating your strategic plan: A workbook for public and nonprofit organizations* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
11. California Browncoats (n.d.). *San Diego Comic Con 2022.* Retrieved August 22, 2022 from https://www.californiabrowncoats.org/copy-of-wondercon-online-2020-1
12. Chafin, C. (2017, July 19). *San Diego Comic-Con: The untold history*. Retrieved March 5, 2022 from https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/san-diego-comic-con-the-untold-history-194401/
13. Chernev, A. (2015, December 15). *Strategic brand management*. Cerebellum Press.
14. Cieply, M. & Barnes, B. (2015, June 29). *Comic-Con, defending fantasy culture and, now its brand.* Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/29/business/media/comic-con-defending-fantasy-culture-and-now-its-brand.html
15. City of San Diego. (2021, July 22). *Comic-Con International returns to San Diego, expected to bring thousands of visitors to region.* Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.sandiego.gov/mayor/mayor-gloria-state-and-local-leaders-kick-comic-con-2022
16. Claessens, M. (2018, October 28). *Differences between non-profit marketing and for-profit marketing.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://marketing-insider.eu/differences-between-non-profit-marketing-and-for-profit-marketing/

17. Cohen, J. D. (2017, April). *Comic Con attendee retention and growth strategy report.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/ 332406769_Comic-Con_Attendee_Retention_and_Growth_Strategy_Report

18. Comic-Con Fan Page. (n.d.). *Home page.* Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.facebook.com/ComicConFanPage/

19. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.a). *About Comic-Con International.* Retrieved April 1, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/about

20. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.b). *John Rogers.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/frontpage/john-rogers

21. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.c). *Eisner Awards history workforce.* Retrieved August 24, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/awards/history

22. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.d). *Comic-Con Museum – about.* Retrieved August 21, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/museum/about

23. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.e). *Brand new website.* Retrieved August 29, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/brand-new-website

24. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.f). *Friday flashback 006: The history of Comic-Con (and then some!) through logos.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/toucan/friday-flashback-006-history-of-comic-con-and-then-some-through-logos

25. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.g). *Comic-Con @Home 2021 SuperVolunteer Challenge: Volume 1.* Retrieved September 3, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/toucan/comic-conhome-2021-supervolunteer-challenge-volume-1

26. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.h). *019: Badge information and deets.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/toucan/019-badge-information-and-deets

27. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.i). *Comic-Con Member ID.* Retrieved August 19, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/cci/comic-con-member-id

28. Comic-Con International: San Diego. (n.d.j). *Badge Purchase FAQ.* Retrieved August 22, 2022 from https://www.comic-con.org/cci/badge-faq

29. Crunchbase. (n.d.). *Comic-Con International.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/comic-con-international/people

30. Crutchfield, L. R. & Grant, H. M. (2008). *Forces for good: The six practices of high-impact nonprofits.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

31. D'Alessandro, A. (2022, June 30). *Apple TV+ making first big splash at San Diego Comic-Con with six series.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://deadline.com/ 2022/06/apple-tv-comic-con-severance-mythic-quest-foundation-see-1235054965/

32. Daw, J. S. & Cone, C. (2010). *Breakthrough nonprofit branding: Seven principles to power extraordinary results.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

33. de Chernatony, L. (2002). *Blagovna znamka: od vizije do vrednotenja: strateško oblikovanje in vzdrževanje blagovnih znamk.* Ljubljana: GV Založba.

34. de Chernatony, L. (2012). *From brand vision to brand evaluation: The strategic process of growing and strengthening brands* (3rd ed.). Oxon & New York: Routledge.

35. de Chernatony, L. & dall'Olmo Riley, F. (1997). Modeling the components of brand. *European Journal of Marketing*, *32*(11/12), 1074-1090.

36. de Chernatony, L. & dall'Olmo Riley, F. (1998). Defining a "brand": Beyond the literature with experts' interpretations. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *14*(5), 417-443.

37. de Chernatony, L., McDonald, M. & Wallace, E. (2011). *Creating powerful brands* (4th ed.). Oxford & Burlington: Butterworth-Heinemann.

38. Dicke, L. A., Heffner, A. & Ratliff, P. (2016). Stakeholders' perspective in nonprofit organizations. *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy and Governance*, 1-8.

39. Dinsdale, R. (2022, July 25). *San Diego Comic-Con 2022: Everything announced.* Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.ign.com/articles/san-diego-comic-con-2022-everything-announced

40. Dolničar, S. & Lazarevski, K. (2009). Marketing in non-profit organizations: An international perspective. *International Marketing Review*, *26*(3), 275-291.

41. Dragon Con. (n.d.). *About.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://www.dragoncon.org/about/

42. Drucker, P. F. (2011). *Managing the non-profit organization*. New York: Routledge.

43. Eikenberry, A. M. & Kluver, D. J. (2004). The marketization of the nonprofit sector: Civil society at risk? *Public Administration Review*, *64*(2), 132-140.

44. Elliot, M. A. (2018). The globalization of comic-con and the sacralization of popular culture. In A. Beniwal, R. Jain & K. Spacklen (Eds.), *Global Leisure and the Struggle for a Better World* (pp. 221-242). Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan.

45. Europe Comics. (n.d.). *Lucca Comics & Games*. Retrieved September 1, 2022 from https://www.europecomics.com/events_cpt/lucca-comic-games/

46. Finch, S. (n.d.). *How does Comic Con International impact San Diego's bottom line?* Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://business.sdsu.edu/about/news/articles/2022/07/comic-con

47. Forbes Nonprofit Council. (2018a, May 7). *12 effective ways to operate a nonprofit like a for-profit business*. Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2018/03/07/12-effective-ways-to-operate-a-nonprofit-like-a-for-profit-business/?sh=3a009f4934c6

48. Forbes Nonprofit Council. (2018b, August 30). *Nine aspects to consider when branding a nonprofit.* Retrieved April 3, 2022 from https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofit council/2018/08/30/nine-aspects-to-consider-when-branding-a-nonprofit/

49. Fortune Business Insight. (n.d.). *Comic book market size, share & COVID-19 impact analysis, by product type (physical comic, digital comic), by end-user (male and female), and distribution channel (bookstores, comic stores, online stores, and others),*

and Regional Forecast, 2021-2028. Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/comic-book-market-103903

50. Frumkin, P. (2005). *On being nonprofit: A conceptual and policy primer*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press.

51. Geek stuff. (n.d.). *What is a comicon or comic con*. Retrieved December 5, 2022 from https://comic-cons.xyz/what-is-a-comicon-or-comic-con/

52. Gonzales, U. (2019, December 11). *Look out, San Diego: 5 reasons Comic-Con Experience Brazil is the new player in fandom*. Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.thewrap.com/san-diego-comic-con-experience-brazil/

53. Gramuglia, A. (2017). *The rise and history of comic conventions*. Retrieved December 20, 2022 from https://vocal.media/geeks/the-rise-and-history-of-comic-conventions.

54. Green, A. & Hauser, J. (2012). *Managing to change the world: The nonprofit manager's guide to getting results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

55. Hanna, E. (2019). *Only at Comic-Con: Hollywood, fans, and the limits of exclusivity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

56. Heaslip, E. (2021). *Nonprofit vs. not-for-profit vs. for-profit: What's the difference?* Retrieved August 11, 2022 from https://www.uschamber.com/co/start/strategy/nonprofit-vs-not-for-profit-vs-for-profit

57. Holland, D. (2006). *Branding for nonprofits: Developing identity with integrity*. New York: Allworth Press.

58. Internal Revenue Service. (n.d.) *Charitable organizations*. Retrieved August 11, 2022 from https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations

59. Irshad, Z. (2022, July 13). *What exactly is Comic-Con? 12 things to know about the massive San Diego Convention*. Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/guides/story/2022-07-13/what-is-comic-con-san-diego-2022

60. Jenkins, H. (2012). Superpowered Fans: The many worlds of San Diego's Comic-Con. Boom: A *Journal of California*, *2*(2), 22-36.

61. Jones, T. (2015, March 17). *The history of the world science fiction convention (Wondercon)*. Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://www.starburstmagazine.com/features/history-worldcon

62. Kanter, B. & Fine, A. H. (2010). *The networked nonprofit: Connecting with social media to drive change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

63. Kapferer, J.-N. (1998). *Strategic brand management*. London: Kogan Page.

64. Kapferer, J.-N. (2008). *The new strategic brand management: Creating and sustaining brand equity long term* (4th ed.). London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page.

65. Kapferer, J.-N. (2012). *The new strategic brand management: Advanced insights and strategic thinking* (5th ed.). London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page.

66. Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing, 57*(1), 1-22.

67. Keller, K. L. (1998). *Strategic Brand Management*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

68. Keller, K. L. (2003). Understanding brands, branding, and brand equity. *Interactive Marketing, 5*(1), 7-20.

69. Keller, K. L. (2009). Building strong brands in a modern marketing communications environment. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 15*(2-3), 139-155.

70. Keller, K. L. (2012). Understanding the richness of brand relationships: Research dialogue on brands as intentional agents. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *22*(2), 186-190.

71. Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic brand management.* London: Pearson Education.

72. Keller, K. L. & Swaminathan, V. (2019, August 15). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity* (5th ed.). Pearson.

73. Knight, R. (2022, July 30). *This year's Comic-Con was unavoidably different, but SDCC is still SDCC.* Retrieved August 20, 2022 from https://www.polygon.com/23282281/hall-h-scene-report-attendance-access

74. Kohnen, M. E. S. (2021). The experience economy of TV promotion at San Diego Comic Con. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(1), 157-176.

75. Konečnik, M. (2006). Izzivi proučevanja kompleksne narave blagovne znamke s pomočjo uravnoteženega pogleda nanjo. *Organizacija*, *39*(4), 265-272.

76. Konečnik, M. & Gartner, W. C. (2007). Customer-based brand equity for a destination. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *34*(2), 400-421.

77. Konečnik Ruzzier, M. (2018). *Temelji trženja*. Ljubljana: Ekonomska fakulteta.

78. Konečnik Ruzzier, M. & Ruzzier, M. (2013). A modern approach to brand conceptualisation. *Transformations in Business and Economics*, *3*(30), 121-134.

79. Kotler, P. & Levy, S. J. (1969). Broadening the concept of marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, *33*, 10-15.

80. Kylander, N. & Stone, C. (2012). *The role of brand in the nonprofit sector*. Retrieved June 2, 2022 from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_role_of_brand_in_the_nonprofit_ sector

81. Lane, K. (2021, July 19). *Comic lovers assemble! San Diego residents build a Comic-Con shrine.* Retrieved August 20, 2022 from https://www.nbcsandiego.com/ entertainment/the-scene/comic-con/comic-lovers-assemble-san-diego-residents-build-a-comic-con-shrine/2660575/

82. Leblanc, R. (2020). *The handbook of board governance: a comprehensive guide for public, private and not-for-profit board members* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

83. Legal Information Institute (n.d.). *Non-profit organizations*. Retrieved August 10, 2022 from https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/non-profit_organizations.

84. Leroux Miller, K. (2021). *The nonprofit marketing guide: High-impact, low-cost ways to build support for your good cause* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

85. Los Angeles Times Staff. (2022, July 15). *No Badge? No problem. Our out-of-the-box guide to Comic-Con 2022.* Retrieved August 18, 2022 from https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-07-15/san-diego-comic-con-2022-things-to-do-without-a-badge

86. Lowry, B. (2022, July 21). *Comic-Con is back, masks and all, as fantasy streaming projects take center stage.* Retrieved August 24, 2022 from https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/21/entertainment/comic-con-preview/index.html

87. Market Business News. (n.d.). *What is a nonprofit organization? Definition and meaning.* Retrieved August 10, 2022 from https://marketbusinessnews.com/financial-glossary/what-is-a-nonprofit-organization-definition-and-meaning/

88. Mateo, A. (2022, April 18.). *San Diego Comic-Con lost over US$8 million in 2020.* Retrieved August 18, 2022 from https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2022-04-18/san-diego-comic-con-lost-over-usd8-million-in-2020/.184761

89. Mayer, P. (2019, July 19). *San Diego Comic-Con is turning 50: Here's its origin story.* Retrieved March 5, 2022 from https://www.npr.org/2019/07/19/743341846/san-diego-comic-con-is-turning-50-heres-its-origin-story?t=1648994756648&t=1650716488559

90. McDermott, J. (2022, July 18). *Why volunteering at San Diego Comic-Con is the best way to enjoy it.* Retrieved August 20, 2022 from https://www.thepopverse.com/sdcc-san-diego-comic-con-volunteering-volunteer-essay

91. McDonald, J. (2016, July 20). *Comic-Con is pretty profitable, for a non-profit.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/watchdog/sdut-comic-con-non-profit-2016jul20-story.html

92. Meehan, W. F. & Starkey Jonker, K. (2017). *Engine of impact: Essentials of strategic leadership in the nonprofit sector.* Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books.

93. Messina, V. (2018, July 31). *Storytelling is the real superpower behind Comic-Con.* Retrieved August 23, 2022 from https://www.facebook.com/business/m/verticals/entertainment-media/storytelling-is-the-real-superpower-behind-comic-con

94. Miller, D. (2017). *Building a storybrand: Clarify your message so customers will listen.* New York: Harper Collins Leadership.

95. Mirzaei, A., Webster M., C. & Siuki, H. (2021). Exploring brand purpose dimensions for non-profit organizations, *Journal of Brand Management*, *28*(2), 186-198.

96. Mitchell, S. L. & Clark, M. (2021). Rethinking non-profit brands through a volunteer lens: Time for B2V. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *37*(5-6), 464-487.

97. Molnar, P. (2022, July 15.). *Comic Con is back. Here's why it might not be the same as you remember it.* Retrieved August 30, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/story/2022-07-15/comic-con-is-back-heres-why-it-might-not-be-the-same-as-you-remember-it

98. Müller, K. & Fernandes, M. (2021, May). *A statute for European cross-border associations and non-profit organisations: European added value assessment.* European Parliamentary Research Service.

99. National Museum of American History. (n.d.). *Comic Books.* Retrieved August 23, 2022 from https://americanhistory.si.edu/superheroes/comic-books

100. Net Management and Business Administration. (n.d.). *Brand equity.* Retrieved August 12, 2022 from http://www.netmba.com/marketing/brand/equity/

101.   Obias, R. (2013, July 18). *31 facts about San Diego Comic Con.* Retrieved August 23, 2022 from https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/51751/31-facts-about-san-diego-comic-con

102.   Ohanesian, L. (2011, October 27). *Dragon*Con vs. San Diego Comic-Con: Which convention should you attend?* Retrieved August 18, 2022 from https://www.laweekly.com/dragoncon-vs-san-diego-comic-con-which-convention-should-you-attend/

103.   Ohanesian, L. (2013, July 23). *Why San Diego Comic-Con is really about community?* Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/why-san-diego-comic-con-is-really-about-community-6558939

104.   Olins, W. (2014). *Brand new: The shape of brands to come.* London: Thames & Hudson.

105.   Oster, S. M. (1995). *Strategic management for nonprofit organizations: Theory and cases.* New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

106.   Owler. (n.d.). *Comic-Con International competitors or alternatives.* Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.owler.com/company/comic-con/competitors

107.   Payton, R. L. & Moody, M. P. (2008). *Understanding philanthropy.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

108.   Petek, N. & Konečnik Ruzzier, M. (2013). Brand identity development and the role of marketing communications: Brand experts' view. *Managing Global Transitions*, *11*(1), 61-78.

109.   Phan, P. (2016, October 16). *Differences between for-profit and non-profit marketing.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/differences-for-profit-vs-non-profit-marketing-philip-phan?trk=public_profile_article_view

110.   Pinchefsky, C. (2012, February 10). *7 secrets of San Diego Comic-Con's success.* Retrieved August 29, 2022 from https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolpinchefsky/2012/02/10/7-secrets-of-san-diego-comic-cons-success/?sh=578962bb6f61

111.   The Power of External Marketing. (2018, April 30). *Comic-Con marketing ideas proven to make your brand a hero.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://weareelevate.global/comic-con-marketing-ideas-proven-to-make-your-brand-a-hero/

112.   Prange, S. (2019, July 15). *Conventional wisdom: An insight look at comic-con and fan shows from a home entertainment perspective.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://www.mediaplaynews.com/conventional-wisdom/

113.   ProPublica. (n.d.). *San Diego Comic Convention.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/953072188

114.   Puyvelde, V. S., Caers, R., Bois, D. C. & Jegers, M. (2011). The governance of nonprofit organizations: Integrating agency theory with stakeholder and stewardship theories. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *41*(3), 431-451.

115.   Rana, A. R., Rana, Z. F. & Rana, A. H. (2017). Strategic planning role in nonprofit organizations. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning*, *3*(6), 166-170.

116. Raviraj. (2022, April 20). *Key nonprofit stakeholders and how to steward them.* Retrieved August 29, 2022 from https://donorbox.org/nonprofit-blog/nonprofit-stakeholders

117. Ruzzier, M. & Ruzzier, M. (2015). *Startup branding funnel*. Ljubljana: Meritum.

118. Salamon, M. L. & Anheier, H. (1992, December). In search of the non-profit sector II: The problem of classification. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 3*(3), 267 – 309.

119. Salkowitz, R. (2016, July 1). *How San Diego Comic-Con became fandom's super-brand.* Retrieved March 5, 2022 from forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2016/07/01/the-business-of-comic-con-sdccs-david-glanzer-on-branding-and-expanding/?sh=7582dd0f3ffd

120. San Diego Workforce Partnership. (2014, November 3). *Comic-Con impact on the San Diego Convention Center workforce.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://workforce.org/news/comic-con-impact-san-diego-convention-center-workforce/

121. San Diego Comic Con Unofficial Blog! (n.d.a). *Home*. Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://sdccblog.com

122. San Diego Comic Con Unofficial Blog! (n.d.b). *Exclusives*. Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://sdccblog.com/category/exclusive-news/

123. Sheraton, M. (n.d.). *Comic con: 5 tips for brands.* Retrieved May 25, 2023 from https://www.influencerintelligence.com/blog/BJ/comic-con-5-tips-for-brands

124. Singh, O. (2022, August 1). *I went to San Diego Comic-Con for the first time and the experience was marred by vicious mosquitoes and other unexpected issues, but I'd still go again.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://www.insider.com/san-diego-comic-con-sdcc-first-time-attendee-review-2022-7

125. Stride, H. & Lee, S. (2010). No logo? No way. Branding in the non-profit sector. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *23*(1-2), 107-122.

126. Šiftar, V. (2002). *Trženje v neprofitnih organizacijah: primer Ustanove dr. Šiftarjeva fundacija* (diplomsko delo). Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani.

127. Tokyo Cheapo. (n.d.). *Comiket*. Retrieved September 1, 2022 from https://tokyocheapo.com/events/winter-comiket/

128. Tonga Uriarte, Y., Antognozzi, T. & Catoni, M. L. (2019). Investigating tourism impacts of festivals: An exploratory case study of a big scale comic-con. *Event Management*, *23*, 1-36.

129. Tury, K. (n.d.). *Nonprofit Organizations (definition and examples).* Retrieved August 10, 2022 from https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/nonprofit-organizations-definition-and-examples

130. University of Central Florida. (n.d.). *Comic conventions: Their popularity and impact.* Retrieved August 28, 2022 from https://www.ucf.edu/online/hospitality/news/comic-conventions-their-popularity-and-impact/

131. Upcounsel. (n.d.). *Nonprofit organization definition: Everything you need to know.* Retrieved August 11, 2022 from https://www.upcounsel.com/nonprofit-organization

132.   Vallaster, C. & von Wallpach, S. (2018). Brand strategy co-creation in a nonprofit context: A strategy-as-practice-approach. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 47*(5), 1-23.

133.   Verbauskiene, L. & Griesiene, I. (2014). Conceptualization of experience marketing in the sector of hospitality services. *Transformations in Business & Economics, 13*(2B) (32B), 818-832.

134.   Weisberg, L. (2017, December 8). *Comic-Con wins legal fight over rights to its name.* Retrieved August 26, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/ business/tourism/sd-fi-comic-con-jury-20171208-story.html

135.   Weisberg, L. (2019, July 21). *Comic-Con organizers reveal what's behind the curtain.* Retrieved August 27, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/ entertainment/story/2019-07-21/comic-con-organizers-reveal-whats-behind-the-curtain

136.   Weisberg, L. (2020, March 23). *Convention Center may be housing the homeless, but that doesn't mean Comic-Con is a no-go.* Retrieved August 23, 2022 from https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/tourism/story/2020-03-23/convention-center-may-be-housing-the-homeless-but-that-doesnt-mean-comic-con-is-a-no-go

137.   Wilke, M. J. (n.d.). *A brief history of the Comic-Con universe.* Retrieved March 1, 2022 from https://www.waywardnerd.com/brief-history-comic-con

138.   Williams, R. (2021, May 6). *NFTs pose real marketing value that may outlive current mania.* Retrieved August 21, 2022 from https://www.marketingdive.com/ news/nfts-pose-real-marketing-value-that-may-outlive-current-mania/599558/

139.   Wong, R. (2019, July 28). *What Comic-Con teaches us about design and branding?* Retrieved August 21, 2022 from https://uxdesign.cc/what-comic-con-teaches-us-about-design-and-branding-943cb7f293ad

140.   Worth, M. J. (2021) *Nonprofit management: principles and practice* (6th ed.). Sage publication.

141.   Woo, B., Johnson, B., Beaty, B. & Campbell, M. (2020). Theorizing comic-cons. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, *8*(1), 9-31.

142.   Zoominfo. (n.d.). *Comic-Con International.* Retrieved August 25, 2022 from https://www.zoominfo.com/c/comic--con-international/28234375

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Summary of the thesis in the Slovene language

English title: An analysis of the role of branding in a non-profit organization: the case of San Diego comic con

Slovene title: Analiza vloge blagovnih znamk v neprofitnih organizacijah: Primer konvencije San Diego comic con

V magistrski nalogi v teoretičnem delu raziskujem bistvene razlike med delovanji neprofitnih in profitnih organizacij in vlogo blagovnih znamk v okviru le-teh. Obema vrstama organizacij je skupno, da služita skupnosti, imata pa zastavljene različne cilje, do katerih tudi pristopata na različne načine. Zanimivo je, da četudi je tržna naravnanost lastnost profitnih organizacij, tudi neprofitne organizacije za dosego ciljev potrebujejo določeno podjetniško znanje in strategije ter se morajo razvoja blagovnih znamk lotiti sistematično in z marketinškimi prijemi, ki so sicer bolj v domeni profitnih organizacij. Za obe vrsti organizacij so predstavljene tako prednosti kot pomanjkljivosti. Obe vrsti se danes tudi nahajata v vedno bolj konkurenčnem in hitro rastočem ter tako vedno bolj zahtevnem globalnem trgu.

V teoretičnem delu magistrske naloge se osredotočam predvsem na pomen blagovnih znamk v vsakdanjem življenju, ki pomenijo mnogo več kot le prepoznavno ime in logotip. So "srce" nekega podjetja oziroma organizacije. Predstavljam različne metode obravnavanja razvoja blagovnih znamk, kjer se izkaže, da je nedvomno najučinkovitejši in tudi najsodobnejši uravnotežen pogled na blagovno znamko, ki vključuje tako vidik skrbnika oziroma organizatorja ali podjetja kot vidik porabnika. Cilj podjetja oziroma organizacije je, da mora ustrezno opredeliti identiteto blagovne znamke, določiti njene prednosti glede na konkurente, jo poskušati čim bolj diferencirati v primerjavi z drugimi blagovnimi znamkami in predstaviti porabnikom na način, da jo bodo dojeli kot unikatno in zanesljivo, kot blagovno znamko, ki bo celo presegala njihova pričakovanja. Končni cilj uravnoteženega vidika oziroma pogleda na blagovno znamko je, da med identiteto (vidik skrbnika) in premoženjem blagovne znamke (vidik porabnika) naj ne bi prihajalo do večjih razhajanj, oziroma bi bila ta zanemarljive narave. V praksi to pomeni, da bi porabniki blagovno znamko dojemali tako, kot so si to zamislili in želeli predstavniki podjetja oziroma organizacije. Neprofitna blagovna znamka mora za uspešno doseganje ciljev prehoditi pot, ki zahteva veliko korakov, voljo do učenja, prilagajanj, samozavestno vodstvo, zaposlene in prostovoljce, ki "živijo blagovno znamko," podporno organizacijsko okolje, učinkovite strategije, znati nasloviti širše množice in jih pritegniti. Neprofitno "trženje" blagovne znamke izraža bistvo, zgodbo neke organizacije, ji pomaga do prepoznavnosti in pridobivanja konkurenčne prednosti pri donacijah in prostovoljcih, kot tudi izstopanju od drugih neprofitnih organizacij. Posledično se poveča zaupanje med vsemi udeleženimi deležniki, ki s svojimi vlogami, vsak na svoj način doprinesejo najboljše k skupnemu dobremu in uspešnemu v okviru doseganja ciljev. Blagovna znamka

postane najmočnejša, ko se njena notranja identiteta uskladi in poistoveti z zunanjo podobo.

Praktični del magistrske naloge temelji na primeru konvencije Comic-Con International: San Diego, neprofitne organizacije, ki vsako leto v obdobju štirih dni v juliju poteka v San Diegu. Konvencija je organizirana v dobrodelne namene in je v svojem bistvu namenjena ozaveščanju širše javnosti o pomenu pop kulture, stripov, znanstveno fantazijskih filmov in sorodnih umetniških oblik ustvarjanja. Gre za največjo in najbolj obiskano tovrstno konvencijo na svetu, ki se je iz skromnih začetkov zbiranja nekaj deset ljubiteljev stripov leta 1970 razvila v "mainstream" kulturo, v multimedijsko dogajanje, ki pokriva številna področja, kot so film, televizija, knjige, stripovski in filmski junaki slavnih hiš kot na primer Marvel, Fox in podobno, v obsežno mednarodno konvencijo, ki jo vsako leto obišče 135.000 obiskovalcev - kupcev težko pridobljenih vstopnic, hkrati pa s konvencijo živi celo mesto, saj jo dopolnjuje nešteto spremljajočih dogodkov. Poleg samega programa obiskovalce privablja želja po druženju, delitvi skupnih interesov in priložnost za srečanje z zvezdniki iz Hollywooda. Prepoznavnost konvencije je razširjena po vsem svetu. Pri nalogi raziskujem skrivnost uspeha konvencije, način - "trženja" blagovne znamke, neprofitno in dobrodelno noto organizacije, vse, kar je privedlo do tega, da konvencija uživa sloves edinstvene konvencije na svetu, ki je postala blagovna znamka v mestu San Diego, s katerim biva v simbiozi. Za pridobitev ocene premoženja blagovne znamke sem predhodno izvedel analizo identitete blagovne znamke SDCC ter opredelil raziskovalne hipoteze in njih preveritev poskusil dokazati na podlagi kvantitativne raziskave, ki sem jo opravil v obliki spletnega anketnega vprašalnika. V zaključku naloge sledijo analiza rezultatov, razprava o prednostih oziroma pomanjkljivostih organizacije, morebitnih razhajanjih med identiteto in premoženjem blagovne znamke, priporočila oziroma predlogi za izboljšave in zaključne misli.

Appendix 2: Interview transcript

Interview held with David Glanzer, the Chief Communications and Strategy Officer at Comic-Con International: San Diego

1.   Key milestones of SDCC throughout history?

-       There are too numerous to mention individually. Suffice it to say that the organization started as a small gathering of about 300 people and has exploded into a world-wide phenomenon that routinely attracts well over 135,000 people annually. Additionally, the event has been featured in comic books, television shows, feature films and novels.

2.   Main SDCC values and culture?

-       Comic-Con has a mission statement to promote popular art to a wider audience and that is achieved through the various exhibitors we have and nearly 2,000 programs over the course of the convention. Comic-Con is noted for being an inclusive organization giving voice to creators and participants who might not otherwise have been given that opportunity.

3.   Was there ever a slogan of SDCC and what is the message of SDCC logo?

-       "Celebrating the Popular arts" is Comic-Con's slogan. With regard to the logo, we always honor and bring light to the history of comics and related popular art, and the logo represents a look toward the future of comics and the popular arts.

4.   Organizational structure? How many employees? Which are culture building principles within your organization?
-       The organization is governed by a board of directors and committee. The number of employees often varies depending upon the time of year. I might also add that during the pandemic some left the organization while some returned.

5.   What do you look for in the employees and volunteers you recruit?

-       A desire to further our mission as well as enthusiasm for comics and popular art. Obviously, specific department recruiting may require specific skill sets, but enthusiasm and diversity is always strived for.

6.   In what way is the internal branding organized? Activities? Motivation? Optimal working environment and communication in your opinion? Is there a so-called brand ambassador organized?

-       Unfortunately, this question could lead to proprietary practices, so I am not comfortable answering.

7.	Which communication tools and channels do you find the most efficient in delivering the brand?

-	Perhaps the most valuable is word-of-mouth. We utilize a variety of tools, of course, but delivering a superior product and having your stakeholders talk about that is among the best forms of communication.

8.	Your opinion on community as a brand identity element? Advantages and challenges?

-	Community is important. Comic-Con is community-based. From the attendees, the exhibitors, the volunteers, staff, and others we share a common vision even though we come from a diversity of backgrounds. But it's that common vision and diversity that bring about a vibrant community. It's a safe environment that welcomes newcomers as members of the community.

9.	How would you describe your brand's story?

-	I wouldn't say we have an official brand story, but if I were to speculate, I would describe it as a gathering of like-minded individuals who created an event welcoming people who celebrate a variety of art forms in a vibrant, safe, and educational setting. A place where your background, your ethnicity, age, gender, and orientation add to the enrichment of the individual and those who participate.

Appendix 3: Survey questionnaire

I am a student of the Master's degree in marketing at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana. As a part of my Master thesis, I am researching your knowledge and opinion on the SDCC brand. The questionnaire takes about 5 minutes. The questionnaire is strictly anonymous. All answers will be aggregated and only used for academic purposes. Click on the Next page to start completing the questionnaire. Thank you for your cooperation!

Q1 - Have you ever attended SDCC?
#Yes   #No
IF (1) Q1 = [2] (No)

Q2 - Why not?
#Difficulty with badges
#Too expensive
#Timing doesn't suit me
#Didn't get into the lottery system
#Other: _____
IF (2) Q1 = [1] (Yes)

Q3 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can easily imagine SDCC logo in my mind.					
I think that SDCC logo is well designed.					
I can recognize SDCC quickly among other comic convention brands.					
I am familiar with SDCC brand.					
SDCC comes first in my mind when deciding which comic convention to attend.					
I already am or would like to be part of SDCC community.					

Q4 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe that the SDCC convention is of high quality.					
I was never disappointed with SDCC offerings.					
I can expect superior performance from SDCC.					
SDCC has better offerings compared to other comic conventions.					
My overall experience with SDCC offerings has been positive.					
SDCC is unique because of its exclusive offerings like partnering with Hollywood studios.					

Q5 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I think that SDCC communication style is successful.					
I think that SDCC notifications are regular, update and accurate - providing all the information one needs.					

I believe that the SDCC badge lottery system is fair.					
I am satisfied with the SDCC merchandise.					
I am familiar with SDCC partnerships.					
I know that SDCC is a non-profit organization.					
I support SDCC for being a non-profit organization even more.					

Q6 - What do you look forward to most when visiting SDCC?

Multiple answers are possible
- To enjoy the mix of media-related themes
- To meet artists, exhibitors, cartoonists
- To attend the panels
- Cosplaying
- Possibility to purchase limited editions and exclusives
- Chance to meet Hollywood stars
- Mingle with other pop culture enthusiasts
- Other: _____

Q7 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
SDCC has a very unique brand image compared to other comic convention brands.					
I like the brand image of SDCC.					
I like SDCC as a company.					
I am proud to attend the SDCC.					
Attending SDCC makes me happy.					

I like the off-site events accompanying SDCC.					

Q8 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I consider myself loyal to SDCC brand.					
I would still attend SDCC, even if they increase the price of tickets.					
I would recommend SDCC to my friends.					
When thinking of attending a comic convention, SDCC is my first choice.					
I would attend SDCC again.					
I cannot imagine that SDCC would be held in another town than San Diego.					

Q9 - Do you prefer any other comic convention to SDCC?

#Yes   #No
IF (3) Q4 = [1]

Q9A - Which one?
IF (2) Q1 = [1] (Yes)

Q10 - Do you immediately associate the SDCC logo with the convention?
#Yes   #No

IF (2) Q1 = [1] (Yes)

Q11 - If you were to change the logo, what would it be?
    Multiple answers are possible
    - Colors
    - Message
    - Graphic
    - Font
    - Other: _____

Q12 - What do you think about branding SDCC?
    Multiple answers are possible
    - Web page is excellent and informative
    - Exclusivity draws attendees
    - Not enough of it is done
    - Marketing channels should be more innovative

    What would you suggest to its improvement? _____

Q13 - Which marketing approach would you prefer the most?
    Multiple answers are possible
    - Experiential marketing
    - Personal invitations and notifications
    - Press media
    - Digital media
    - Announcement from guest celebrities
    - Official web page
    - Word-of-mouth
    - Involving social media
    - Freebies
    - None
    - Other: _____

Q14 - Do you attend forums or other websites of SDCC? Please, mark which or add others.
    #Toucan
    #SDCC unofficial blog
    #Facebook groups
    # I don't attend any forums
    #Other: _____

Q15 - Please state your age:
    #Under 18
    #18 – 24
    #25 – 34
    #35 – 44

#45 – 54
#55 and over
#I prefer not to say

Q16 - What is your gender?
#Male
#Female
#Other
#I prefer not to say

Q17 - What is the highest level of education you have completed?
#Less than secondary school
#Secondary School/High School
#Bachelor's degree
#Master's degree
#Doctorate degree
I prefer not to say

Q18 - Where are you from?
North America
South America
Africa
Europe
Asia
Australia
I prefer not to say

Appendix 4: Verification results of hypotheses testing

Table 9: Verification results of respondents for brand awareness

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3.0					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Brand Awareness	37.150	200	.000	1.4453	1.3690	1.5215

Source: own work.

Table 10: Verification results of respondents for brand image

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3.0					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Brand Image	35.052	200	.000	1.2753	1.2040	1.3466

Source: own work.

Table 11: Verification results of respondents for perceived quality

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3.0					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Perceived Quality	26.188	200	.000	1.1617	1.0747	1.2486

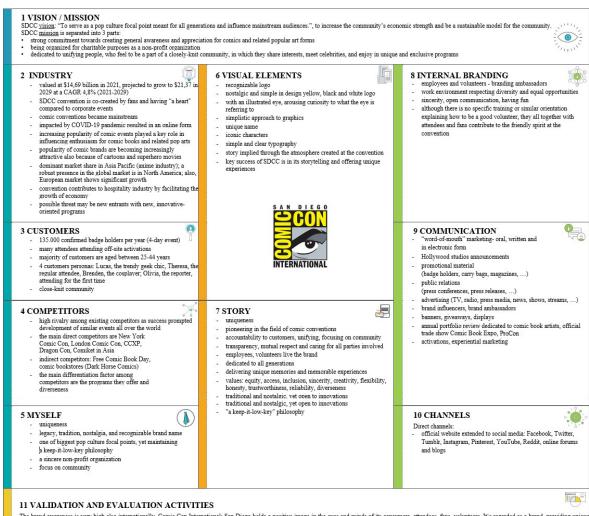*Source: own work.*

Table 12: Verification results of respondents for brand loyalty

	One-Sample Test					
	Test Value = 3.0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Brand Loyalty	32.248	200	.000	1.3333	1.2523	1.4144

Source: own work.

Appendix 5: Branding funnel for Comic-Con International: San Diego

1 VISION / MISSION
SDCC vision: "To serve as a pop culture focal point meant for all generations and influence mainstream audiences.", to increase the community's economic strength and be a sustainable model for the community.
SDCC mission is separated into 3 parts:
- strong commitment towards creating general awareness and appreciation for comics and related popular art forms
- being organized for charitable purposes as a non-profit organization
- dedicated to unifying people, who feel to be a part of a closely-knit community, in which they share interests, meet celebrities, and enjoy in unique and exclusive programs

2 INDUSTRY
- valued at $14,69 billion in 2021, projected to grow to $21,37 in 2029 at a CAGR 4,8% (2021-2029)
- SDCC convention is co-created by fans and having "a heart" compared to corporate events
- comic conventions became mainstream
- impacted by COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an online form
- increasing popularity of comic events played a key role in influencing enthusiasm for comic books and related pop arts
- popularity of comic brands are becoming increasingly attractive also because of cartoons and superhero movies
- dominant market share in Asia Pacific (anime industry); a robust presence in the global market is in North America; also, European market shows significant growth
- convention contributes to hospitality industry by facilitating the growth of economy
- possible threat may be new entrants with new, innovative-oriented programs

3 CUSTOMERS
- 135.000 confirmed badge holders per year (4-day event)
- many attendees attending off-site activations
- majority of customers are aged between 25-44 years
- 4 customers personas: Lucas, the trendy geek chic, Theresa, the regular attendee, Brenden, the cosplayer; Olivia, the reporter, attending for the first time
- close-knit community

4 COMPETITORS
- high rivalry among existing competitors as success prompted development of similar events all over the world
- the main direct competitors are New York Comic Con, London Comic Con, CCXP, Dragon Con, Comiket in Asia
- indirect competitors: Free Comic Book Day, comic bookstores (Dark Horse Comics)
- the main differentiation factor among competitors are the programs they offer and diverseness

5 MYSELF
- uniqueness
- legacy, tradition, nostalgia, and recognizable brand name
- one of biggest pop culture focal points, yet maintaining a keep-it-low-key philosophy
- a sincere non-profit organization
- focus on community

6 VISUAL ELEMENTS
- recognizable logo
- nostalgic and simple in design yellow, black and white logo
- with an illustrated eye, arousing curiosity to what the eye is referring to
- simplistic approach to graphics
- unique name
- iconic characters
- simple and clear typography
- story implied through the atmosphere created at the convention
- key success of SDCC is in its storytelling and offering unique experiences

7 STORY
- uniqueness
- pioneering in the field of comic conventions
- accountability to customers, unifying, focusing on community
- transparency, mutual respect and caring for all parties involved
- employees, volunteers live the brand
- dedicated to all generations
- delivering unique memories and memorable experiences
- values: equity, access, inclusion, sincerity, creativity, flexibility, honesty, trustworthiness, reliability, diverseness
- traditional and nostalgic. yet open to innovations
- traditional and nostalgic, yet open to innovations
- "a keep-it-low-key" philosophy

8 INTERNAL BRANDING
- employees and volunteers - branding ambassadors
- work environment respecting diversity and equal opportunities
- sincerity, open communication, having fun
- although there is no specific training or similar orientation explaining how to be a good volunteer, they all together with attendees and fans contribute to the friendly spirit at the convention

9 COMMUNICATION
- "word-of-mouth" marketing- oral, written and in electronic form
- Hollywood studios announcements
- promotional material (badge holders, carry bags, magazines, …)
- public relations (press conferences, press releases, …)
- advertising (TV, radio, press media, news, shows, streams, …)
- brand influencers, brand ambassadors
- banners, giveaways, displays
- annual portfolio review dedicated to comic book artists, official trade show Comic Book Expo, ProCon
- activations, experiential marketing

10 CHANNELS
Direct channels:
- official website extended to social media: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, Reddit, online forums and blogs

11 VALIDATION AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES
The brand awareness is very high also internationally. Comic Con International: San Diego holds a positive image in the eyes and minds of its consumers, attendees, fans, volunteers. It's regarded as a brand, providing unique experiences, exclusive opportunities, and warm memories. It's thus regarded as a convention with a heart. The fans support it even more for being a non-profit organization. It enables its attendees to meet in a friendly atmosphere and share their views, experiences and to have an opportunity to meet famous panellists and Hollywood celebrities. The brand is perceived to be of a high-quality experience and the design, logo and name are widely recognizable. Consumers are generally satisfied with the merchandise, yet miss more freebies, improvement as concerns logistics of scheduling, transport, and lottery system for purchasing badges. In terms of brand loyalty, consumers have positive experiences and look forward to returning to the convention each year anew. They would recommend visiting SDCC to their friends and colleagues. Fans, employees, attendees, and volunteers altogether live the brand.

Source: own work.