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The Path to Loyalty Among Theater Patrons: The Importance of Interaction and a Sense of Brand Community

Armen Shaomian
University of South Carolina

Bob Heere
University of South Carolina

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand to what extent a theater serves as a focal point for community development, and whether that sense of community leads to more loyal patrons who are more likely to attend shows and donate to the theater. Additionally, the authors wanted to know to what extent interaction between patrons and personnel contribute to this sense of community. Our results support the view that the theater is a focal point for community development, and emphasizes the importance of interaction for a sense of community with the theater. Consequently, this sense of community contributes to a sense of loyalty towards the theater, and the associated consumer behavior (attendance, donations). Managerial implications are that theater managers are encouraged to allow for extensive interaction between patrons, and between staff and patrons, before and after the show, so patrons can develop a sense of community towards the theater.

Keywords: brand community, interaction, theater, brand loyalty, patron loyalty, marketing

Introduction

Theater management in more conservative, smaller cities, where the larger audience perhaps has less affinity with the cultural product, is a challenging endeavor.[1] The financial modus for theaters in these locations is dependent on the ability of a theater to create a lineup of (commercially oriented) performances that have a wider audience appeal, and thus are able to attract larger audiences to fill their seats. The theaters also have to be cognizant of satisfying a smaller group of important donors who are often interested in shows that press the artistic and intellectual envelope, and are not as easily accessible to a larger crowd.[2] As such, the success of

theaters might rise and fall with the quality and selections of the shows they choose to perform or have performed, and their ability to read the needs and wants of their audiences.[3] When we review other options that people have at their disposal to spend a leisurely night, theaters seem to be in a tough spot. For instance, where a movie theater has the flexibility to replace a poor show (i.e., film) immediately with a new product, theaters that depend on live performances have no such flexibility, thus they may suffer much more from a poor product than a movie theater. Moreover, a movie theater is seldom blamed for the quality of the movie, as patrons see the movie theater solely as a medium that allows them to watch an entertainment product. This is different for theaters, where theater directors are held responsible for the selection and quality of the shows.

As François Colbert mentioned, a marketing director of a theater has no control over the artistic programming of shows.[4] Therefore, theater directors are similar to sport arena managers who are dependent on the performance of their professional sports teams to sell tickets. Similar to theaters, they have very little flexibility to change the quality of their team, and they too, rise and fall with the success of their product. Therefore, the scholarly field of sport management does offer some interesting insights that theaters might profit from, one that could be illustrated by emphasizing the difference between the Chicago Cubs and the Houston Astros. Both have been fielding unsuccessful teams for quite some time now, but the Chicago Cubs are maintaining their attendance and are still among the top revenue generators in Major League Baseball, whereas the Houston Astros are struggling and their attendance is among the worst in the league (www.espn.go.com/mlb/attendance). The difference between these two sport teams is interesting, as it shows that entertainment organizations can find ways to commit their patrons to their organization, even if they offer an inferior product. Marketing scholars have discussed this phenomenon through the concept of brand loyalty, which allows us to examine why patrons are loyal to a brand (e.g., the Chicago Cubs).[5] This line of research could benefit theaters as it gives them the similar opportunity to examine why certain patrons are loyal to their theater, while others defect.[6] Pusa and Uusitalo discussed the importance of brands for art museums and provided a discussion of strategies a museum can develop that stretch beyond the mere quality of the product.[7] While they provide a valuable insight for organizations who would like to use branding as a strategy to connect to their consumer, it focuses solely on the relationship between the individual

and the brand, and does not include a discussion of the relationship between consumers and how these relationships can benefit the organization (brand).

This oversight might be considerable, as one of the most important precursors to loyalty that has been identified is a sense of (brand) community, which provides patrons with a sense of moral responsibility towards the organization *and* fellow consumers, even in hard times.[8] Particularly for entertainment organizations that have little control over the quality of their product (e.g., sport teams and performance theaters), a sense of community can be extremely important, as it prevents patrons from defecting from the organization and discontinuing their support. Brand communities arise when patrons have a relationship beyond the brand or organization itself, but also develop relationships with other patrons and develop behavioral patterns together that are centered on the brand. When they do, they become ambassadors of the brand, they help the organization recruit new patrons and they put peer pressure on other patrons to maintain their membership in the organization.[9] In these instances, the consumers become co-creators of the brand, and add value to the brand.[10]

Brand community scholars have examined many different organizations as forms of community, among them cars, computers,[11] motorcycles,[12] theme parks,[13] and sport teams.[14] Within the arts world, Chen noted the involvement of participants at the Burning Man Festival,[15] which hinted at the existence of a brand community. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether live-performance theaters could serve as a focal point for community development. Do patrons see these theaters purely as a medium to experience a show (as with movies), which would imply that the shows, not the facility, serves as the focal point for a sense of community, or do they identify with their fellow patrons and the theater itself?

A fairly recent development among theaters and other nonprofit performing arts venues has been the creation of social patrons groups, many of which specifically target young professionals. Organizations such as *Generation O* at the National Opera at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, the *Green Room Society* at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County in Miami, and the *Young Patrons of Lincoln Center* at the Lincoln Center in New York City, are all examples of performing arts venues and theaters engaging young professionals through members-access-only events, audience outreach activities, and networking opportunities. By curating special

events reserved for donors who contribute at specific membership levels, organizations are creating individualized social communities within their general pool of patrons, creating brand awareness with an eventual goal of patron loyalty. Yet, while we have anecdotal evidence of the value of these brand communities, and intuitively might understand the need for creating interaction between patrons, we have very little empirical evidence of this phenomenon. A study by Wiggins-Johnson, Peck, and Schweidel indicated that the relationship between organization and consumer was a poor predictor of donation intentions, indicating that in order to gain a better understanding of what drives people's engagement with the organization we should perhaps explore the relationships among our patrons.[16]

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct an empirical examination of the sense of community that patrons have towards their theater, and with other patrons, and how this sense of community contributes to levels of loyalty among patrons. For several months, surveys were distributed among theatergoers of a local theater in a medium-sized city on the east coast of the United States with the aim of recruiting responses from loyal patrons who were attending most shows, as well as patrons who only frequented one show per year. They were asked about their interaction with other theatergoers, about their sense of community with the theater, and their loyalty towards the theater.

Literature Review

Challenges in the Nonprofit Art Industry

According to a newsletter survey done in 2005 by GuideStar, an organization dedicated to the reporting of U.S. nonprofit organizations, the most challenging obstacle for nonprofits is "finding the money to accomplish our mission."[17] As nonprofits lose funding in economic downturns, they have to become more innovative with their marketing efforts in order to continue their mission and gain followers or patrons who in turn may become donors. "Getting the word out about us and what we do" was the third most difficult challenge, one that correlates directly to the marketing efforts and the difficulty that organizations may face reaching their audiences effectively with limited budgets. Theaters, like other forms of live entertainment, face aggressive competition from the rise of online services providing on-demand entertainment ranging from streaming concerts to personalized playlists of films. This has created a larger pool of competi-

tors for the time, and more importantly, money, of the average patron. Theaters are not only competing with other theaters or performing arts organizations, but they are also competing with a broader aspect of live entertainment providers, such as spectator sports, music concerts, and various forms of fairs and festivals. In certain parts of the country, where the allure of college sports dominates many weekends during the fall season, organizations have to be mindful of their programming calendar in order to be able to sell tickets. This was illustrated by Corning and Levy, who examined the choices of performances that theaters produce and how they match the tastes of the markets they serve.[18] They noted that there was a general preference towards musicals, along with comedies, over dramas, indicating that the general patron is looking at the live performance theater as an instrument for entertainment fulfillment, perhaps at the expense of more intellectually challenging theater endeavors.

Stafford and Tripp claimed that despite diminished public funding, performing arts organizations have only recently started to apply basic marketing principles to their overall strategies, indicating a need for a greater understanding of some of the current trends in marketing.[19] Nevertheless, over the last few decades, marketing research in arts has emerged,[20] and with the advent of relationship marketing, more and more arts organizations are engaging in research.[21] A study on the subject of community theater patronage,[22] suggests that local theaters should spend more time analyzing the demographics of their patrons in identifying the most suited marketing strategies, a call that was repeated by Colbert.[23] Within this emerging field, the research on the relationships that organizations build with consumers[24] might be of particular interest for live performance theaters, as they discuss how to engage the consumer with the organization, and create loyal consumers.[25] Yet, within the entertainment and art industry, one needs to take into account that for many people, the choice to engage in these kind of activities are not individual decisions, they are often group-based decisions and many people attend these events as part of a group, rather than as an individual. A study by Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon showed that the continued attendance of soccer fans (as a proxy for loyalty) was best predicted by how strongly they identified with other fans, rather than their own individual attitude towards the team.[26] This study supports the view that in order to better understand how to create loyal patrons, we need to better understand to what extent patrons see the theater as a community of people they identify with.

Brand Communities

Muñiz and O'Guinn have discussed brand community as a special-ized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.[27] The authors argue that one of the key components of a brand community is the "group experience," e.g., those moments when consumers interact with each other with the brand as the focal point in those conversations. In the context of a live performance theater, this group experience would not only be the view-ing of the show, but also the interaction the patrons have before the show, during the intermission, and after the show. Through an examination of three brand communities (Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and the automaker Saab), Muñiz and O'Guinn define three markers that are prevalent in their specific research.[28] First, they identified "consciousness of kind." Using several in-person interviews on a monthly basis over a twelve-month pe-riod, the authors conclude and reflect on the fact that the commercial and mass-mediated characters in which these communities exist affect their character and structure and give rise to their particularities. These brand communities provide people with an identity, and they often refer to the brand community in terms of "we" rather than "they." Second, the au-thors mark the existence of "rituals and traditions," which ensure that "the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and be-yond the community."[29] Third, and as a final marker of the community, the authors note that successful brand communities provide members with a "moral responsibility" to the brand, a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces, in times of threat to the community, col-lective action, and indicates a level of loyalty among patrons.

These studies call for a better understanding of the interaction be-tween consumers, and the importance thereof for the sense of brand com-munity they have, particularly outside of the context of a brand that is tied to a product. Consumer loyalty is an important part of corporations and their way of marketing themselves in order to keep selling their products. While larger companies spend a considerable amount of their budgets on marketing, theaters and their nonprofit counterparts have limited means of marketing their brands aside from the general marketing they do of their seasonal lineup of performances. However, not much research has been conducted in the realm of patron loyalty in the performing arts within the brand-marketing arena. As stated earlier, theaters have to be cognizant of

consistently providing superior productions, ranging from the choices of the plays they produce, to the actors and staging that they present, in order to keep patrons loyal, returning to their shows and purchasing tickets. Ultimate loyalty emerges as a combination of perceived product superiority, personal fortitude, social bonding, and their synergistic effects.[30] Currently, the majority of research concerning brand communities and consumer loyalty has been conducted based on corporate brands, such as the car model the Ford Bronco, the Macintosh brand, or the Chicago Cubs.[31]

Most of the current brand community work is focused on successful brand communities, which prohibits a better understanding of how these different components of brand communities come into existence. For instance, how could a theater create a group experience that leads to more interaction, and as a consequence, a heightened sense of community? The original study of Muñiz and O'Guinn[32] used a triad to explain the relationship between consumer and organization (vertical relationship) and the relationship between different consumers (horizontal relationships), yet Katz & Heere argued that not all consumers are equal[33] and that consumers are part of a scale free network that can be subdivided between "leaders" and "followers."[34] They call for a better understanding of how consumers interact and what the effect of this interaction is on the formation of a sense of brand community.

Brand Loyalty

Oliver defined loyalty as, "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior."[35] Loyalty does not occur overnight, and individuals move through different "loyalty phases" with corresponding actions, following a cognition-affect-conation-action pattern. In the cognitive state, a brand is more preferable to its alternatives, creating a "liking" for the consumer to be affective towards the brand. It is followed by a "conative" commitment to buying a specific brand concluding in an ultimate "action loyalty" where the consumer overcomes obstacles in order to purchase the brand he or she feels most loyal towards.

Key within the construct of loyalty is the patron's resistance to changing preference, despite negative situational influences, and this resistance is seen as the key precursor to being loyal or identifying with a

brand.[36] Pritchard et al. conducted a study among service patrons in the travel industry, linking commitment and loyalty to specific brands related to travel services, using an individual psychological approach. They identify three psychological processes in patrons, namely *informational complexity, cognitive consistency, and confidence*.[37] *Informational complexity* refers to the factor, which contributes to the "attitudinal stability of commitment," of processing certain information in order to form "complex cognitive structures." This is a resistance to change or shift attitudes, especially for those who are highly committed to a brand or service. *Cognitive consistency* refers to the fact that consistency supports commitment—it becomes more difficult to change loyalty or allegiance to one particular brand over another due to the fact that consistency helps develop a strong loyalty. The third informational process is attitudinal *confidence* as a result of being consistently loyal towards a brand. Many of the current loyalty programs are built upon the seminal work conducted by the authors mentioned above. They are targeted towards individuals and their attitudes towards the brand.[38]

While the importance of this work cannot be overstated, it misses a more communal approach and is ignoring the importance of other consumers in our loyalty formation process. Heere et al. suggest that our loyalty is less dependent on our attitudes, than the attitudes of others.[39] They found that our connection with other consumers was more important in continued engagement with the organization, than our personal attitudes towards the brand. What they are suggesting is that if we would want to gain a better understanding of how we develop our loyalty towards a brand, we should examine the relationship among consumers. Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould demonstrated the importance of other consumers to the development of brand community, and consequently consumer loyalty, by reviewing twelve common practices consumers engage in, and allowing other members to begin or maintain their engagement with the brand.[40] They argue that community leaders act as ambassadors for the brand, and support other members in their consumption of the brand. Hence, based on the literature, we offer the following hypotheses for this study:

H1: Patron interaction has a positive effect on the sense of community patrons maintain with the theater.
H2: Patron interaction has a positive effect on consumer loyalty towards the theater.

H3: Sense of community with the theater has a positive effect on consumer loyalty towards the theater.

H4a: Consumer Loyalty will have a positive effect on people's purchasing of a Flexpass (partial season ticket).

H4b: Consumer Loyalty will have a positive effect on people's attendance of X Theater shows.

H4c: Consumer Loyalty will have a positive effect on people's donations to X Theater.

Method

Research Design

To address the research questions, we conducted a survey design study and worked with a theater located in a midsize city on the east coast of the United States. Over a period of three months they allowed us to distribute surveys among their patrons, providing us with 497 surveys overall. Surveys were inserted into the programs, which were then distributed to the audience prior to the show. The theater director then made an announcement to the audience prior to the show in regards to the survey to encourage the audience to complete the survey. The surveys were then collected during the intermission, or patrons could drop them off in assigned "survey boxes." During the data collection, three different shows were performed, containing a wide variety of themes and styles, including a musical, a comedy, and a drama. After an examination of missing data, 96 surveys were eliminated, leaving the researchers with 401 responses. The sample represented all age groups, with an even distribution among all the age groups (starting at the age of 18 to over 74, with categorical increments of 10 years), more women than men (47% to 30%, 22% missing responses), and a dominantly white audience (86% white, 8% African-American).

Instrumentation

To measure interaction, new items were proposed that measured whether people interacted with others at the show. These items measured whether people interacted with other patrons or with staff, whether they considered the theater to be a place where they met their friends, or whether the theater was a place where they made new friends. Since the concept of interaction is relatively straightforward, we did not conduct a content

validity test of the items, and instead relied upon reliability measures, such as Cronbach Alpha, and item-to-total statistic to test for internal consistency.[41] For the measurement of sense of brand community, the scale of Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann was used,[42] which has been tested elaborately on both validity and reliability and is largely overlapping with the widely used organizational identity scale of Mael and Ashforth.[43] The brand loyalty scale was adapted from Heere and Dickson who used it to measure loyalty of fans towards a sport team.[44] These adaptations were minor and reflected the change of setting. For instance, their item: "I would still be committed to the team, regardless of the lack of physical skill among the players," was replaced by, "I would still support the theater regardless of the lack of any famous shows in their lineup. A full overview of all items, and their reliability assessment, is provided in Table 1. Finally, respondents were asked how many shows they attended (attendance), if they ever donated more than one hundred dollars to the theater, and whether they purchased a Flexpass, which allowed them to pick six shows of their own choosing during a theater season.

Data Analysis

To examine the reliability of the constructs, Cronbach Alpha's and item-to-total statistics were calculated.[45] To test the hypotheses, the authors used structural equation modeling (SEM). To examine the appropriateness of the model the authors calculated the Chi-Square to degree of freedom ratio, RMSEA, and the CFI. Factor loadings were calculated to examine the convergent validity of the constructs.[46] The SEM then provided us with the regression paths between constructs to test our hypotheses.

Results

All measures were found to be internally consistent with Cronbach Alpha scores above .8[47] and item-to-total statistics above .5.[48] A complete overview of the items can be found in Table 1. The Chi-square to degree of freedom ratio was 3.496, the CFI .929 and the RMSEA was .079, indicating a reasonable fit of the model. All factor loadings were above the cut-off of .7. The mean scores for Sense of Community were 4.42, with a standard deviation of 1.65, indicating that on average people did agree with statements that discussed the theater as a community. Interaction received a mean score of 2.93 (SD – 1.24), indicating that interaction was not very common to the theater experience and that many people did not

Constructs	Cronbach Alpha	Item-to-Total Statistic
Interaction	**.897**	
I interact with other attendees before and/or after the show or during intermission.		.782
I interact with theater staff before and/or after the show or during intermission.		.752
The X theater is a place where I meet my friends.		.801
The X theater is a place where I have met new people and built new relationships.		.746
Sense of Community	**.928**	
I am very attached to the X Theater.		.780
Other X theater members and I share the same objectives.		.828
The friendships I have with other X theater members mean a lot to me.		.641
If X members planned something, I would think of it as something "we" would do, rather than something "they" would do.		.710
I see myself as a part of the X theater.		.720
Brand Loyalty	**.880**	
I would still support X theater regardless of the lack of any famous shows in their lineup.		.682
I could never switch my loyalty from X theater to another theater even if my close friends were members of another theater.		.715
I would still be committed to X theater, even if their best actors would leave.		.734
It would be difficult to change my beliefs about X theater.		.713
The reason I am supporting X theater is beyond their annual line up of shows.		.718

Table 1. Instrumentation and reliability measures.

interact with other patrons and staff. Finally, loyalty received a mean score of 4.8, indicating that on average, people experienced a sense of loyalty to this theater.

The structural equation model is provided in Figure 1 and shows evidence of the three hypotheses. We found support for the first hypothesis with Interaction having a strong effect on Sense of Community, confirming the importance of Interaction and group experiences within a brand community. We did not find support for the second hypothesis, as Interaction did not have a direct effect on Consumer Loyalty. This might indicate that Interaction among patrons in itself is not sufficient for Consumer Loyalty, and only if this Interaction occurs in a brand community context, does it lead to Consumer Loyalty. We confirmed the importance of Sense of Community to Consumer Loyalty as we found support for our third hypothesis. Finally, we found partial support for our fourth set of hypotheses, with Consumer Loyalty having a positive effect on attendance and donations, yet failed to provide support for the effect of Consumer Loyalty on the purchase of a Flexpass.
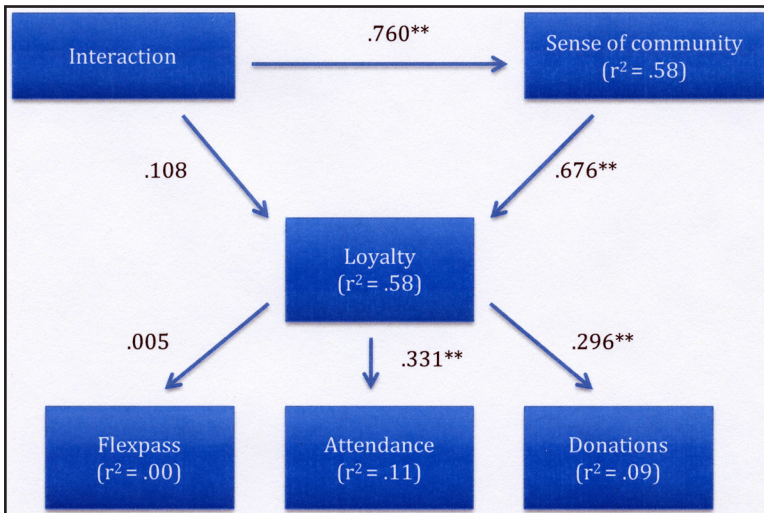

Figure 1. The interaction – community – loyalty framework.

Discussion and Findings

The findings of this study lend support to the notion that theaters are more than a mere medium to watch live performances, and that patrons perceive them as a focal point for community development. One of the

main challenges of local theaters is to build a loyal following that will continue their support of the theater, regardless of any shows that might not have appealed to them. As Wiggin-Johnson et al. argue, understanding why people donate to theaters is a complicated issue, and people's individual disposition towards the theater is not a strong predictor of why people choose to support a theater through donations.[49] While Wiggins-Johnson et al. limit their discussion to donations, it does not seem far-fetched to extrapolate this finding to other kinds of consumer behavior such as attendance. Instead of looking at an individual's disposition, we should aim to better understand the community and how individuals interact with each other in this community. Pusa and Uusitalo provide a strong discussion of how to connect the brand to an individual,[50] yet they do not incorporate the communal value that an arts organization could offer.

Our proposition that managers can build such a following through the formation of a community seems to be supported by the findings, and sense of community and interaction appear to be medium predictors of loyalty and consequently, consumer behavior. Thus, we argue that the key to building such a community is to allow for interaction among patrons and/or staff before and after the show. Muñiz and O'Guinn argued that group experiences were crucial to the formation of a community, and that individuals need a platform that allows them to discuss this experience.[51] Interaction among patrons is at the essence of such group experiences, and it also allows group leaders to advocate and evangelize the value of the brand community.[52] The proposed model discussed in this study supports these connections and confirms the importance of interaction on a sense of brand community, and consequently, the importance of sense of community on consumer loyalty and consumer behavior, such as attendance and donations to the theater. The sole exception was the "flexpass" that the theater was offering to their patrons. This initiative was started to give loyal patrons the flexibility to buy tickets to multiple shows, without committing them to particular shows. However, while the initiative might have been worthwhile, our study suggested that there is no relationship between sense of community, loyalty, and the purchase of this pass, which opens the door for a more thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of this program.

While this study provides interesting insights into the relationship between interaction, sense of community, and consumer behavior, it indicates that we might only have scratched the surface of understanding the

importance of creating (reinforcing) a sense of community among theater patrons. Following the conceptual work of Schouten and McAlexander,[53] Muñiz and O'Guinn,[54] Underwood, Bond, and Baer,[55] and Schau et al.,[56] future research should focus on other elements of brand community to activate. For instance, Underwood et al.[57] discuss the facility (i.e., the social space) as an important characteristic of brand community, yet we know little of how the facility could be used to increase this sense of community. Similarly, many of these authors discuss history and traditions as important characteristics of brand communities, yet within the arts world we have little knowledge of how to activate such components. Schau et al. discuss twelve brand "practices" that community members undertake on behalf of the brand, indicating that these loyal followers become brand ambassadors who are extremely valuable to the organization.[58] Among other things, these ambassadors "badge" their allegiance to the brand (e.g., wear clothing displaying the name of the organization), evangelize on behalf of the organization (word of mouth), and support new members to consume the service or product of the organization. Future research should continue to explore how people can be incentivized to engage in such behavior.

Implications for Management

Our study offers theater managers a different approach to building a loyal theater following. While we cannot overstate the importance of the relationship between organization and patrons, the focus on the horizontal relationships between patrons can offer a very effective and alternative method to increase the loyalty of the patrons towards the theater. As such, this study offers a plethora of opportunities for theater managers to capitalize on. Sport arenas have been very active over the last decade to display the history of the organization, thereby activating a sense of community. They display banners of previous championships or titles, hang jerseys of former all-star athletes from the roof, and display accomplishments of the organizations prominently within the facility. Theaters could implement similar strategies to share the history of the organization with their audience and activate the sense of community among their patrons.

The theater that we worked with in the context of this study had their managers come up on stage before the performance to interact with the audience and ask them questions. It was a very powerful ritual that allowed the manager not only to connect directly to the audience (i.e., consumer – organization relationship), but also offered the audience the chance to

get to know more about the other patrons (i.e., consumer – consumer relationship). Additionally, the theater had plans to renovate its bar area, so it could host more after-show parties and festivities, which would allow for further interaction among patrons after the performance. A study by Katz and Heere illustrated the importance of pre- or post-game consumer interaction to the overall event experience, strategies such as these are extremely important in the formation of a brand community.[59] Allowing patrons to share their experiences with other patrons and build relationships among themselves is crucial to the development of a sense of community, and managers are well advised to develop strategies to allow for such interaction.

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ARMEN SHAOMIAN is a pianist and educator with an extensive background in performing arts management and entertainment industries. Dr. Shaomian is an assistant professor in the Department of Sport and Entertainment at the University of South Carolina, where he has been creating curriculum and internships related to the study of the entertainment field. He is also the Founder and CEO of Armenize, Inc., an arts consulting agency specializing in nonprofit arts management and foundational strategies. Prior work includes Programs Manager/Associate Producer for the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts (NFAA) and its signature YoungArts program. In his role as Associate Producer, Dr. Shaomian oversaw live performance logistics as well as strategic relations with the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York City, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., as well as the United States Department of Education and the United States Presidential Scholars program.

BOB HEERE is an associate professor and Ph.D. program director in the Department of Sport and Entertainment at the University of South Carolina. Prior to joining the university he held academic appointments at the University of Texas at Austin, Florida State University, The Cruyff Institute for Sport Studies (the Netherlands), and Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand). His research expertise is on the social impact of sport on society, with a particular focus on social identity theory and community development. He has conducted research on five different continents, cooperating with researchers from China, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Serbia, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Brazil, and South Africa. His research allowed him to work with organizations such as the Beijing Olympic Games Organizing Committee, Fulham Football Club, the University of Texas at San Antonio Roadrunners, the World Golf Foundation, and the Multicultural Refugee Coalition Austin. In 2013, the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) awarded him the status of NASSM Research Fellow.