The Power of After-Hours: Young Adult Engagement and Programming in Museums

Hannah E. Barber
hxb5355@rit.edu

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THE POWER OF AFTER-HOURS: YOUNG ADULT ENGAGEMENT AND
PROGRAMMING IN MUSEUMS

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE
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BY

HANNAH E. BARBER

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Abstract

This project explores the cultivation of an ever deepening relationship between young adult audiences (ages 21-40) and museums and cultural institutions through the use of special event programming. Museums are turning to after-hours events to capture this audience’s attention, developing them as a mode of communication to solidify connections between the institution and young adults. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg’s construct of a “Third Place,” developed in his psychological study focused on the comfort of individuals in physical spaces, I investigate how several museums in the Rochester, New York, area are pursuing young adult audiences by creating social and engaging spaces within their museums. Through the use of observation, survey questionnaires, and research into adult programming, I evaluate current approaches undertaken by museums hosting these events and determine trends that correlate and compare to the larger trend of after-hours events in cultural institutions. The millennial generation is an increasingly significant segment of the population that desires cultural immersion and socializing in their day-to-day lives. It is for this reason that museums should seriously consider this audience’s desires and cater to their needs in order to solidify their support in the future. At the same time, museums must abide by standards for ethical behavior during such occasions; therefore, this research will be a guide to interpret the trends and practices implemented at after-hours events.

Key Words: After-hours events, young adult audience, museum, cultural institution, engagement, Third Place, millennial.
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Introduction

The engagement of young adult audiences has been of increasing importance to cultural institutions in recent years. As a demographic that has shown lower involvement and engagement levels than others, the need to find new opportunities for young adult engagement is imperative to successfully transform them into regular visitors. The National Endowment for the Arts created a survey that revealed a long-term trend appearing among adults, 18-34, stating that they have declining interest and participation in museums and museum visits.¹ These findings are worrisome when discussing the longevity of museums and the potential power and influence that this audience will have on the success of museums in the future.

This section reviews the findings and results of scholarly works such as participatory studies, visitor surveys, and observational accounts regarding the participation of young adults in museums and cultural institutions; all contribute to the understanding of the types of engagement that young adults desire. This review has identified several fields of participatory studies throughout different fields of scholarship, bringing them together in a multidisciplinary manner.

Museums and Young Adults

Museums are cultural institutions that facilitate learning, education, and scholarly research.² They hold valued cultural items that preserve human history and require protection. These characteristics have not always lent themselves to providing an appealing environment for those external to the scholarly world. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), a nationally recognized organization that accredits museums and sets standards for ethical behavior, surveyed

the visitor demographics within art museums and galleries, producing evidence that adults
between the ages of 45 and 54 are traditionally the core audience of museumgoers.\(^3\) According to
one study from 2010 that includes several Denver-based museums, young adults, ages 19-35,
typically felt excluded and uninterested in the content and programs that museums have
provided, because they seem to cater to the social and economic elite of the community.\(^4\) This
finding is reinforced by data indicating that the average age of participants in these museums’
cultural programming was 45 years old that year as well.\(^5\) Since the age of individuals already
engaged in museums are older than the participants that the museums now aim to involve, one
can surmise that young adult audiences have a negative perception of current programming
practices. Their lack of engagement could adversely affect their future willingness to volunteer,
donate, and visit museums.

More recently, museums have been challenged to become more inclusive and offer
alternative educational events. They have been threatened by other sources of leisure time
activities competing for the young adult audience’s time and attention. Museums have responded
by developing special events that are open to the public, not just to the members. Museums are
using events of all types, especially those including food and beverage, as catalysts for social
engagement between the visitors, the museum, and the collections. This trend is apparent in both
large and small institutions as they pitch their appeal to age groups that have not traditionally
been their visitors.

\(^3\) Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, “Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums,”
us.org/docs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/demotransaam2010.pdf

\(^4\) Jessica Lynn Brunecky, “An Analysis of Institutional Support for Young Adult Programming: How Six
Denver-Metro Area Cultural Institutions are Adjusting to Changing Patterns of Cultural Participation
Among a Young Adult Audience,” (M.S. thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2010).

\(^5\) Ibid., 10.
Young adults and museums have had an indifferent relationship because they did not possess a common understanding of each other’s interests. The modern young adult desires experiences that are new and different, that engages them intellectually and provides opportunities for socializing. Cultural institutions, specifically museums, have established missions that focus their efforts on education. Today, museums are incorporating young adult programs that encourage learning in alternative ways into their routine schedules.

Currently, museums are experiencing a paradigm shift away from collections and preservation towards a focus on the visitor’s experience. This is how museums are filling the “white spaces,” noticeable gaps in museum programs, and creating motivating and interesting events for young adult audiences to attend. Traditionally museums have relied upon lecture style presentations to supplement their collections. Studies have found that such programming does not adequately appeal to the young adult demographic. On the other hand, observational studies that indicate that young adults find museum exhibits dull and uninteresting could be inaccurate. Events that cater to both the young adult audience’s interests in cultural subjects and also allow them to interact in a social context, stimulate enjoyment, and engage with the institutional

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environment. In total, young adults are drawn to experiencing different styles of learning and engaging with others in a social setting that align with their interests.

The challenge in young adult programming lies in creating events to educate and intrigue individuals who have differing needs and desires than what the museum traditionally offers. The American Alliance of Museums draws on the visitor study conducted at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum about young adult engagement in their museum saying that the need for diversification is imperative to the success and longevity of museums. Diversifying programs at a cultural institution provides opportunities for far more audience segments to engage with organizations. It is the duty of museums and cultural institutions to create events that appeal to as many demographics as possible.

Looking at this phenomenon from a limited global perspective, there are examples of institutions using new programming to develop their relationships with young adults. The Night of Museums is an event that has been held in the Republic of Croatia’s cultural institutions since 2005. The event specifically aims to attract younger audiences that have ceased attending museums. It has had overwhelming success with the young adult visitors in Croatia, with reports

11 Ibid., 19.
13 “The annual event, which is traditionally held on the last Friday in January, tries to accomplish one of the basic strategic goals of the Croatian Museum Association which is to implement activities which deal with the perception of museums as heritage institutions, institutions of identity and important participants in the sustainable development of tourism. Through activities organised during the Museum Night, visitors are encouraged to recognize museums as dynamic institutions which connect people with global information resources, ideas and creativity they are searching for, as well as institutions that make up the richness of human expression and cultural diversity available to all users on all types of media. Furthermore, it encourages activities that develop curiosity as a motive for visiting museums, museums as institutions of knowledge, and also a space for fun and meaningful leisure activities.” “Night of Museums 2016 Set to be Held Across Croatia,” CroatiaWeek, January 12, 2016, accessed February 27, 2017, http://www.croatiaweek.com/nnight-of-museums-2016-set-to-be-held-across-croatia/.
stating an increase from 10,000 visitors in 2005 to an amazing 324,000 visitors attending The Night of Museums 8 years later.\textsuperscript{15} The participating museums look at young adult programming as a way to attract an untapped audience. In this project the Republic of Croatia also identified aspects of the after-hours events that attracted, and detracted from, young adult’s experiences. They identified that “most of them still do not visit the museums to the extent they would like.”\textsuperscript{16} They would visit the museums more frequently if there were more events like The Night of Museums, if the museums would operate in the evening hours, and if the entrance to the museum was free of charge.\textsuperscript{17} These are important considerations for institutions to contemplate if they want to meet the needs and desires of the young adult population. The results of this study indicate that young adults crave cultural engagement but in ways that museum have not provided.

**Using Food and Drink to Engage Audiences**

Museums now aim to encourage the participation of young adults by providing unconventional ways for them to interact with and at the institution. A new technique that is being attempted is the incorporation of food and drink to create an experiential opportunity. This creates a multisensory experience that allows visitors to create personalized meaning for the experience.\textsuperscript{18} Museums are also using food and drink as the subject of entire educational programs.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 268.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{18} Kathryn Murano, “Designing Visitor Experiences,” Lecture, “Museum Education and Interpretation” course taught at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, November 9, 2016. I was a student enrolled in this course and this content was retrieved from the lecture notes and discussion from that evening’s lecture.
The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City uses its culturally rich neighborhood to incorporate food and drink into a multisensory tour that has elevated the museum’s visitor numbers. They incorporate the Lower East Side’s multicultural eateries that began when immigrants flooded that area of the city. This not only creates a historically relevant dialogue, but also treats visitors to the delicacies of the area that derive from the cuisines made there in the early twentieth century. It is an opportunity for individuals encountering this historic area of New York City to have an enlivening experience that draws upon a multitude of senses and creates a relatable atmosphere for all to enjoy.

In contrast, other institutions are using food and drink to entice young adults to attend evening events purposely aimed at introducing them to the museum. When reflecting on the attendance of museums as a leisure time activity, individuals in America have indicated a steady 11-15% visitor interest from the years 1998 to 2005. This reveals how Americans are spending their time and money, evidently diverting away from museums as their choice of entertainment. By incorporating food and drink, this can reverse the seemingly uninterested segment of the population into first-time visitors. Specifically, allowing visitors to consume alcohol while exploring the collections is a tactic that museums have used to draw in new audience segments. By offering visitors at these events the option to purchase alcoholic beverages, the museum is opening itself up to potential vulnerabilities. However, museums have reported that they have experienced less damage at these types of events than they do during peak school visitation.

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20 Ibid.
periods.22 These events are created for “intelligent evenings,” rather than drunken entertainment – at least that is the goal.23 When considering alcoholic consumption at a museum evening event, it is the context in which alcohol is consumed that determines the behavioral outcome of the attendees.24

Finally, museums use food and drink in their fundraising. Whether they benefit from the cash bars or admission prices, these are opportune segues to get attendees to donate to the museum and to create networking opportunities to convince individuals to pursue gift giving in the future.25 There is also the possibility of creating relationships that can retain attendance and promote membership.

Deane Brengle, a regular contributor to an online fundraising newsletter, suggests that the standards and guidelines for the best fundraising practices should be simple and logical when offering alcohol and food at a function.26 Many nonprofits engage in this practice for a variety of reasons, whether it is for “schmoozing” donors into offering money to the museum, or to increase the attendance rate if they feel that it may be lower without serving alcohol.27 At the event, it is suggested that the hosts do not make excessive consumption of alcohol the focal point of the fundraiser.28 While there are events outside the museum that focus on the consumption of alcohol, that should not be the case for a museum event. Keeping that in mind, it is also a rule of

23 Ibid., 17.
24 Ibid., 17.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
thumb to have non-alcoholic drinks available, so that people have options. Brengle also notes that under-aged drinking, insurance, and licenses are factors that should be considered when deciding to host events with which alcohol is involved. As for food, it is always appropriate, if not highly advised, that food should be served when providing drinks at an event. Without food, there is a potential for guests to become sick, belligerent, or unable to stay. All of these suggestions provide insight into the appropriateness of serving food and alcohol in a museum fundraising setting.

Ultimately, museums have the task of conforming to strict ethical guidelines regarding fundraising and programming. Generally, museums find their money in a few different ways: through admissions, fundraising, and donations. Although some studies compare museum-going with other activities, they are ultimately not-for-profit institutions and therefore must abide by their ethical guidelines. These fundraising and programming strategies are ways in which the museum can appease both their ethical restrictions as well as satisfying the visitors.

First-Hand Experiences with Food and Drink in Cultural Institutions

While there are a plethora of institutions that have begun to use food and drink as enticements at special event programs and educational programs, some have excelled and others have failed. The success of these events is conditional upon the behavior that audience members exhibit. First-hand experiences in after-hours events have proven that individuals attending these events exhibit both appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In one case, a single after-hours

\footnotesize{29} Ibid.
\footnotesize{30} Ibid.
event transformed the space of an institution into an inviting space where visitors came to explore the collection, attend presentations, consume drinks of their choice, and socialize with other interested patrons. According to Rachel Abbott, the community engagement specialist at the Minnesota Historical Society, this Historic Happy Hour has become a featured event in the community and has popularized the Alexander Ramsey House. Programs providing food and drink can encourage repeat visitation and effectively use it as an entry point for first-time visitors. Abbott also notes that these types of non-traditional events can transform the mindset of a young adult audience away from stereotypical ideas about museums. Therefore, it transforms the relationship between of the individuals involved and the house while remaining as a mission-based program.

Similarly, other after-hours events are so successful that they sell out quickly. At the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, they have seen consistent sell-outs and even bargaining for the Institute’s tickets to their Science After Hours events. This demonstrates the enthusiasm that these events can create. Although there is still the concern for appropriateness, institutions across the country find it reassuring that these events pull new visitors and members into their spaces. They offer a different experience to the patrons and offer the museum a chance to present their collections in new ways to further their outreach to the community.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Alternately, there is inappropriate behavior that occurs at after-hours events. Disobeying signage, becoming sick, and misusing facilities have been some of the incidents that cause museums to worry.\textsuperscript{39} There are some incidents that place museums on high alert for the mistreatment of their institution and ultimately, the mission. Overall, however, the collective reviews of institutions hosting these types of events have been positive. A possible reason for the successful outcomes of a majority of these events could be that patrons are enthusiastic about the unique accessibility that after-hours events offer to the general public. These events satisfy young adults desiring new and worthwhile experiences, which are important to them as new and repeat visitors.\textsuperscript{40}

The “Third Place”

The “Third Place” is a concept that Ray Oldenburg developed in The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day. This psychological study addresses common spaces that are transformed into “Third Places” when visitors create an atmosphere of mutual sharing. Oldenburg describes a “Third Place” as a shared common space; not just a place to escape, but an enabling place for those who encounter it, a “temporary world within their ordinary world.”\textsuperscript{41}

It is a public place that is not home or work but a third realm where people gather voluntarily.\textsuperscript{42}

These are neutral places that people feel are psychologically comfortable and where they find companionship among the others that join them there.\textsuperscript{43}

Museums can function as these kinds of third places, as socializing common grounds for individuals to share thoughts and ideas. Indeed, some spaces in cultural institutions are made for this type of interaction. For example, a visitor study was performed at two institutions located in central London quite close to one another—Tate Modern and the Southbank Center. The findings show that spaces within the Tate Modern, a collections-based museum with a free, general admission policy, have the ability to transform into a common area, suited for socializing, interacting, and as a neutral space. Generally, the Tate Modern spaces are free, with the exception of special exhibition admission prices, allowing for a fluid movement of individuals visiting and leaving with little or no restraints. In other instances of public spaces such as movie theatres, concert venues, and others, there is an obligation to pay hefty prices for those who attend, which restricts many members of the public from using them as “Third Places.” Similar to the Tate Modern, but more conducive as a “Third Place,” the Southbank Center, a community center with a garden and outdoor space, is a focal point for the community to gather and interact in the “third realm.”\textsuperscript{44} The centre hosts a variety of art exhibitions as well as musical performances, lectures, and performance events.\textsuperscript{45} Providing the community with a space that allows them to casually interact and rejuvenate themselves from the daily chaos is why the Southbank Center is so successful with the London community.

The United Kingdom has become particularly interested in the participation and inclusion of young people in cultural realms. According to Vaskiliki Tzibazi, a professor at The University

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
of Winchester and expert in museum learning and interpretation, “this agenda stems from the notions of social inclusion and cultural democracy… the New Labour government vision of building a culture of participation for… young people within services and policy making.”

This idea of including younger individuals into the “Third Place,” and allowing them to make it their own, is an initiative that several countries like the UK are doing. They desire the input and inclusion of younger adults’ ideas and presence in the cultural realm. By creating the atmosphere of a “Third Place,” museums can have the ability to attract new audiences. Much like the notion of providing new programming for differing audience segments, the “Third Place” is another tool that museums and cultural institutions have that can ultimately improve their visitors’ experiences.

Museums are able to embrace this idea of a “Third Place” by creating a climate wherein visitors feel psychologically attached to the space. In the Southbank Center example, visitors felt that the Center was “somewhere that is accessible, where they can gather voluntarily and informally, where there is a regular clientele, where informal associations develop, that has a playful, “homey,” democratic mood; where they feel they have a sense of ownership and characteristics.”

If museums could harness this ability to make visitors feel accepted and as though they belong in their spaces, this could change the dynamic of their institutions. Individuals, especially young adults, could find purpose and meaning in the museum space, not just as a temporary, special occasion gathering spot, but as repeat, welcoming places to congregate.

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In contrast, many museums are not accessible to the general public. Obstacles such as admission prices, inaccessibility, and other cultural/social hindrances become major factors in the choice whether to visit a museum as leisure time activities. “Admission prices do have a significant impact on those from lower-income groups who are interested in visiting museums. Demand among members of lower-income groups is affected by not only the actual charge but also the imagined charge. Most non-visitor respondents expressed a belief not only that museums charged for admission but also that admission prices were high.”48 The obstacle created by high-priced admission fees could negatively impact a museum’s success as a “Third Place.”

Conclusion

Overall, participatory studies, visitor surveys, and observational accounts lead to the conclusion that there are resources showing that museums are using strategies to address an underrepresented and overlooked audience segment. Museums have the ability to contribute more to creating the kind of socially engaging experience that young adults desire and developing into a “Third Place” for them to enjoy. Through the use of food and drink, museums have discovered ways to engage this audience; they need to harness this method and perfect it in the museum world. There is such a strong need for this large population in America and abroad to become involved and therefore, it is the duty and responsibility of museums to incorporate programming adjusted to fit their needs.

Further observation and evaluation is needed to accurately propose that museums are successfully reaching this particular audience segment and contributing to their learning experience in each situational setting. By using tools such as visitor surveys, observational

evaluation, and interviews with internal museum sources, museums can determine whether they are creating a unique experiential environment for the patrons. The more information provided about the topic, the further museums would be able to critically look at their young adult programming.
Observational Studies

In December 2016, January 2017, and February 2017, I conducted visitor observational studies at three after-hours events. The first was conducted at The Strong, the second at the Memorial Art Gallery, and the third at the Rochester Museum and Science Center. Because the author of this research paper is within the target age range of the intended audience, these observations aim to provide an inside look into the features of these after-hours events as well as the composition of the audience and their participation.49

The Strong, National Museum of Play: The Happiest Hour

The Strong, located in Rochester, New York’s downtown area, is an institution heavily focused on the quality of play and how to entice play in learning.50 Their mission states, “The Strong explores play and the ways in which it encourages learning, creativity, and discovery and illuminates cultural history.”51 This museum includes permanent collections as well as hosts a variety of interactive games and displays aimed at activating and engaging visitors. As a museum of play, many of its interactive exhibits cater towards a younger age group and their interests. Their reputation in the local community stems from their involvement with the Margaret

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49 Please also note that all of the observed after-hours events were hosted by American Alliance of Museums (AAM) certified institutions.
50 Margaret Woodbury Strong founded the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum of Fascination in 1969. The collection originally began with Strong’s personal collection and her desire to illustrate how the industrial revolution changed everyday lives in America. In the 1990s, The Strong shifted its focus to include much more family programming. The mission is now focused on illuminating cultural history and incorporating play into everyday learning.
Woodbury Preschool, their orientation towards families, and their subject matter. They have even been recently nominated as one of the favorite family museums in the United States.\footnote{USA Today held a competition online to gage which museums in the United States were considered by the public to be the best family oriented. “The Strong National Museum of Play - Best Museum for Families Nominee: 2017 10Best Readers’ Choice Travel Awards,” USA Today, accessed March 2, 2017, http://www.10best.com/awards/travel/best-museum-for-families-2017/}

On December 7, 2016, The Strong held an after-hours event called “The Happiest Hour.” This event is hosted quarterly by the museum and is strictly for a twenty-one plus audience. Their hours for the event were 5:30pm-9:30pm, an accessible time for the intended audience segment. Walking into the museum, I noticed that visitors’ ages ranged between twenty-one and thirty-five years of age. Most came either with friend(s), partners, or co-workers. Upon entering the hallway into the main hall, I was greeted by a staff member and given a food voucher that was included in the admission fee. Next, a DJ booth resided in the entrance area playing popular music while couples were dancing around the booth. Once I moved through the entrance area, the main dining and conversation area was in the large exhibit hall. Tables were arranged around the room and people were eating and conversing with each other, some mingling about the space. There were nearby activities, such as the miniature Wegmans grocery store, which had a grocery-finding game. There were also many other activities such as karaoke, a craft-making station, drawing, pinball machine games, interactive exhibits, and large-scale board games stationed throughout the rest of the museum (see Figures 1-6). Although there were numerous temporary attractions for the special event, many young adults were engaging with the permanent exhibitions as well. By positioning the temporary activities around the permanent installations, the participants had choices for engagement.

During the event, a few participants within the intended age demographic indicated their opinions of the event. Jumoke Ridley, a twenty-one year old participant describes The Strong as,
“better without the kids. You have to be an adult when there are kids [at the museum].”  

Another attendee, Jenn Palmer, said that she enjoys the museum with and without children but prefers that the after-hours events be solely for adults. These descriptions are indicative of what many participants may feel. One appealing aspect of these twenty-one plus events is that there are fewer social restrictions about the behavior that adults may exhibit in the museum space.

The food and drink was another significant aspect for The Happiest Hour event. Upon entry, I was given a voucher that had perforated tabs with station names and locations of the food. The stations were scattered around the museum, acting as a way for participants to explore the museum and find each location. At the stations they provided a sample of food and a staff member tore off a voucher tab. There were four stations that gave sizable samples of the catered food. A local restaurant, named Marshall Street Bar and Grill, catered the food, which they donated to the event. Macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets, chips and chili, and fresh fruit were the choices for the evening, all very tastefully prepared. The food quality was very good: homemade chips, special recipe macaroni and cheese, and hand cut fruit were all upscale touches. Around these food locations, patrons congregated in communal spaces to chat, eat, and drink. The museum created a large seating area in the main open space outside of the recreated Wegmans food market that most groups gathered in. Being a local Rochester restaurant that regularly caters to city residents, it was obvious that this restaurant knew what the clientele liked and was willing to serve their original food.

In other parts of the museum there were cash bars that sold alcohol to the patrons. They had a small selection of drinks that ranged in price from $4-$6 per drink. There was not a limit

53 Jumoke Ridley, interview with the author, December 7, 2016.
54 Jenn Palmer, interview with the author, December 7, 2016.
on how many drinks you could purchase, indicating a level of trust in the patrons to act accordingly to museum etiquette. The drink choices included a Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Grigio boxed wine, hard apple cider cans, Bud Light beer cans, water, and soda. Overall, I did not observe any inappropriate behavior during the event. I saw individuals who were visibly intoxicated but remained respectful. The Strong also entrusted patrons to take the food and drink into any area of the museum. Since the museum is a safe and playable setting for children, that was not a surprising gesture. The museum closely followed common protocol like that suggested by Deane Brengle, the fundraiser columnist. His suggestions to always serve food with alcohol, as well as not to make the alcohol the main attraction for the evening, was an apparent message that the museum gave.\footnote{Deane Brengle, “Are You Serving Alcohol at Your Fundraising Event?,” 2016, \textit{Fundraising for Small Groups Newsletter}, 2016, accessed October 23, 2016, http://www.fundraising-newsletters.com/are-you-serving-alcohol-at-your-fundraising-event.html.} They also abided by the idea that there should be other options for drinks such as soft drinks and bottled water. The Strong was selling both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, giving the audience options to partake or not.

On another note, the interaction between individuals, particularly strangers, is an aspect I also observed. At one of the interactive exhibits, a digital Bingo board game, I encountered a single man who had lost the group he had arrived with. I offered to play with him while he waited for their return and we partook in a game of Bingo. As I encountered it, I reflected upon the idea of the “Third Place,” a psychologically comfortable space where individuals can find companionship, and noticed that this is an example of that notion. We were comfortable and engaged in a common area of the museum.\footnote{Ray Oldenburg. \textit{The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day}. 1st ed. New York: Paragon House, 1989.} The board game acted as the catalyst stimulating communication between strangers in a comfortable manner. At The Happiest Hour event, it was
evident that the young adults felt engaged, enjoyed their time, and did not withhold their enthusiasm for the evening. In an atmosphere so geared towards children and their needs, adults seemed to revert back to childhood themselves. They were enthusiastic about the exhibits and used all of the interactive games whether they had a fee or not. They exhibited behaviors that lead me to believe that they truly enjoyed their time at the museum. While the evening was coming to a close, I noticed that there were still many people playing with pinball machines and engaging with interactives. This connects back to the quotations from attendees earlier in the evening, where they felt as though their time at The Strong was more enjoyable since it was an exclusively adult event. It is very possible that individuals were more willing to engage and participate with the museum in a child-free ambiance and feel liberated enough to express themselves and their interests without the restriction of children.

Interestingly, it could also be the addition of food and drink that distracted visitors from the common ailment of “museum-fatigue,” “commonly defined as the point in time when a museum visitor begins feeling slight to mild mental/physical exhaustion during their museum visit.”

In this specific observation, it did not seem as though participants remained in spaces beyond a traditional day at the museum. Beverly Serrell conducted extensive research into how long museumgoers can last before “museum fatigue” strikes. Her conclusion indicated that visitors typically spend less than 20 minutes in exhibitions regardless of topic and size. With these responses and professional studies, I concluded that The Happiest Hour does not adhere to these findings. I observed participants who attended the museum for hours and remained in exhibit spaces for much longer than the anticipated 20 minutes because the subject matter of play

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57 “Museum Fatigue: The 100 Year Old Problem With Museums,” Museum Hack, accessed February 7, 2017. https://museumhack.com/museum-fatigue/. This concept has been around for more than 100 years. Benjamin Ives Gilman conceptualized the original idea in 1916.

is fun and enjoyable for many. This event was an expression of The Strong’s effort to attract and hold the visitor’s attention. From an observational standpoint, I would agree that they were successful in that regard.

Having spaces for social-interactivity for individuals who seek cultural immersion can facilitate connections between the institution and its visitors, especially to solidify the relationship for the future of the museum itself. Between allowing active participation within the institution, creating space to be psychologically comfortable, and finally combining food and beverage, a common thread throughout every person’s life, this formula assembles a culturally engaging event in a museum setting. The Strong did just so with the Happiest Hour event. Their strategy and execution left me, an individual within the targeted demographic, satisfied and enthusiastic about the evening spent at the museum. I thoroughly believe that their attempt at attracting new, younger adults to their cultural institution was successful that evening.

Memorial Art Gallery: College Night

The Memorial Art Gallery is an encyclopedic art focused museum situated in the center of the Neighborhood of the Arts area of Rochester, New York. Their stated mission describes them as a place that “enhances people’s lives by cultivating relationships and building community through the direct experience of art and creativity.”59 They are a well-established gallery due to their connection with the University of Rochester and other local entities. Their collections are based around a 5,000-year span of artwork from around the globe and they host

events throughout the year to encourage public engagement with their collections and special exhibits.\textsuperscript{60}

On January 26, 2017, the Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) hosted an after-hours event aimed at college-aged students called “MAG College Night.” Overlapping the same evening, MAGThursday was hosted by the gallery as well. The MAGThursday event, or third Thursday, is a monthly event put on by the institution that focuses on engaging a group of the public that would otherwise not come to the museum without modified hours. The Memorial Art Gallery also has half priced admissions during the third Thursday evenings of every month.\textsuperscript{61} The premise of MAGThursdays is to accommodate the working portion of the community by leaving the galleries open until 9PM. Typically operated as separate events, they collaborated for the first time as an after-hours event that evening.

To begin, when I entered the establishment, there was a large line for the MAGThursday event that extended around the entire atrium. On the other hand, the College Night did not appear to have any line in the atrium. It was difficult to find the correct check-in point because they had positioned it out of sight, near a staircase. I eventually found the table and was easily checked-in due to my pre-registration, and was given a pin for entrance, a map, and a ticket for a scheduled time to go into the temporary exhibit gallery.

My first indication of disorder was when I entered the main, permanent gallery, where the line for the temporary exhibit was backed up through the permanent gallery space. Even with specified entrance time tickets, the crowds seemed to overwhelm the space. After a fifteen-minute wait, I was allowed to enter the temporary gallery space that was hosting an M.C. Escher

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
exhibit with original prints of some of his most famous, and some of his most underrated works. Once again, the crowd size was slightly overwhelming for the space. Every print or object that was present had large crowds around them, making it difficult to adequately view anything. The museum took precautions by employing several security guards around the gallery and several staff members to walk around as well. The patrons in the art gallery seemed engaged and clearly took time to view each piece. Often I heard discussions between individuals in a group about the artwork, the artist, or relevant topics. In one instance a woman began discussing the artwork with me. She asked if I knew why M.C. Escher used a certain subject matter she had noticed in a print and we began talking about our favorite pieces that were in the gallery. She was clearly enthusiastic about being there and wanted to express her interests to others around her. This moment resembled the idea of the “Third Place” because of the ability to comfortably engage in such a manner with complete strangers as well as being either a free or low-cost event for the whole community.

Outside of the gallery there were patrons roaming the hallways that led to other permanent galleries, once again discussing the artwork as they walked by. Overall, I observed a great variety of ages at this event. For the College Night, it was clearly college-aged students, most likely 18-22 years old. On the other hand, the MAGThursday event attracted a variety of people. I noticed families with children, older couples, young professionals, and even individuals who could be considered seniors at the event. The open gallery was attractive to a wide swath of the public and was successful in accommodating those who would not have otherwise been able to come to the gallery.

Specifically focusing on the MAG College Night offerings, I observed a variety of events and activities for the students to enjoy (see Figure 7). The museum placed the College Night activities in an elegant room that was located in the opposite wing of the museum from the galleries. From my observation, there was not a large number of students who congregated in the designated room to partake in the activities or consume the food that the Memorial Art Gallery provided. With approximately a dozen tables set up in the room for sitting, crafting, coloring, and eating, there were few that were fully occupied. They also brought a DJ into the space who was playing contemporary dance music. Unfortunately, no one was dancing and very few seemed to be paying attention to the music at all. Along the far side of the wall from the entrance there was a long table that held various desserts and cups for hot chocolate that was advertised on the poster. The Memorial Art Gallery also provided activities such as a scavenger hunt in the galleries. When visitors checked in at the College Night desk they received a map of the gallery and objects to look for. It was a strategic way of getting students to look more closely at the artwork and exhibit. Although it was not advertised on the College Night Facebook page or poster (see Figure 7 and 8), there was a cash bar and the restaurant portion of the gallery was open. A downside to the food and drink that was provided at the College Night event was that neither was allowed in the gallery space. The Memorial Art Gallery has strict regulations on food and drink in the gallery spaces; therefore participants were to enjoy those aspects separately from the artwork itself.

Overall, the atmosphere of the gallery was lively and enthusiastic. A twenty-one-year-old participant, Devon Southwick, spoke about his reaction to the College Night experience. “To see

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63 These were not aspects that I focused on due to the fact that they did not coincide with the activities and advertised aspects of the MAG College Night. Patrons were enjoying alcoholic beverages and food from the vendors but I did not observe any contact with these vendors from the students at the College Night.
such iconic work of art up close made me appreciate the artwork better, especially since it has been so commercialized. I was very excited about [the event] being free, it appealed to me very directly.” He also said that it was a very worthwhile experience to attend the event because his university, Rochester Institute of Technology, provided transportation for free and allowed him access to the gallery that he would not have otherwise had. From the perspective of a current student, like Devon Southwick, this statement could be considered standard for many others that attended the event. Other local colleges like the University of Rochester also provided similar transportation to and from the gallery that evening. Having these opportunities for accessibility for a college-age audience is a way to engage and entice them to become immersed in this type of setting and therefore be attuned to the cultural entities surrounding them. The Memorial Art Gallery clearly desires to engage the young adult audience in a more consistent fashion than before by offering free transportation through school sponsors as well as opening their doors for free. This targets the student population and exposes the museum as a space for them to feel comfortable and welcome.

Generally, this occasion had all of the elements for a terrific after-hours event. The Memorial Art Gallery provided open access to college-age participants, free food and drink well suited for the winter season, activities for visitors to participate in, and entertainment like music and dancing. Although these aspects contributed to the overall achievement of the program, it fell short in regards to engagement. The college-age visitors were not fully participating and engaging with the activities and offerings of College Night. Inconclusively, participants did not desire to use the available entertainment and therefore diminished the energetic atmosphere of the College Night room. From the response of the interviewed visitor, the real attraction of this

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64 Devon Southwick, interview with author, January 26, 2017.
65 Ibid.
event was not the food, drink, or entertainment, but the open and free access to the exhibits and galleries. This could suggest that based on the accessibility, this event could align with Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the “Third Place.” The MAG found a way to allow visitors access that they may not have had before. Therefore, although the activities and food did not contribute to this type of place-making feeling, the MAG could have succeeded in creating this “Third Place” for college students anyway.

Rochester Museum and Science Center: After Dark

The Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC) is located in the Neighborhood of the Arts (NOTA) area of Rochester, New York. This museum is both the caretaker of historical objects from Rochester’s past and a museum dedicated to learning through science and technology. Their mission statement indicates, “the Rochester Museum & Science Center stimulates broad community interest and understanding of science and technology, and their impact — past, present, and future — on our lives.” The museum is involved in the Rochester community, hosting several events and special programs throughout each year.

On February 10, 2017, the Rochester Museum and Science Center held their quarterly after-hours event titled After Dark. This special event was based around the temporary exhibit about the four natural elements, Elements of the Extreme. The After Dark event ran from 7PM to 11PM on a Friday night, and was also sold out days before the event began with 500 tickets sold. The weather that night was not cooperative with inches of snow falling right around six to eight o’clock (See Table 1). Upon arriving, the museum entrance was fairly clear of people. The line for checking in was minuscule and there did not seem to be many individuals on the mezzanine

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level of the museum. When I got to the front desk it was around 8PM and the clerk was highlighting names for checked in visitors. I noticed immediately that there was approximately half the number of names highlighted on the sheet by the time I arrived indicating that approximately half of the expected number of visitors had not shown up. After checking in I began wandering about the museum, looking at the specialty events and activities that the RMSC had planned. As indicated on the Facebook page and website there were activities scattered throughout the building. The activities included geode smashing, volcano making, dancing, music, food, cash bar, welding/glassmaking, exotic animal presentation, paper plane making, Electricity Theatre, and a costume contest (See Figure 9).

Although these activities were abundant and inviting, I noticed that the audience was also taking advantage of visiting the newest exhibit, Elements of the Extreme, and looking in the permanent galleries as well. The temporary exhibit space was the first gallery that I entered and the atmosphere was joyful and playful. I saw several adults engaging with the exhibit and interactive activities. Areas of particular interest included a cloud maker, a model roller coaster, an earthquake simulator, and a hydrogen rocket launcher (see Figure 10). The exhibit had several interactive stations, making it fun to be a part of. I also noticed that most individuals had drinks in hand while interacting with the exhibits. This suggested to me that the adults wanted to enjoy the accessibility of the bars in the museum in combination with the fun of the exhibits and activities provided. As I was exiting the temporary exhibit space I noticed that there was the exotic animal presentation happening right next door, a convenient placement for visitors to catch the show. The presenters had several animals on hand including a kangaroo, monkey, silver fox, tenrec, toad, and more (see Figure 11). The room that the presentation was in was full of people and others were standing in the very back trying to listen in on the presenter’s speech. I
saw many visitors taking pictures of the animals while they were circulating around the room and several were in awe of these rare animals.

Once the presentation concluded, I went to get refreshments. A local restaurant, Max Rochester, catered the After Dark event that evening. At the cash bar there were several options for drinks including soft drinks, water bottles, wine, beer, and mixed drinks. I did notice the disproportionate servings and inflated prices. The beer and small mixed drinks at $5, as well as the soft drinks and water being a few dollars was a reasonable price point for such an event. When it came to the wine however, the company was charging $8 for a five ounce serving of wine. Personally, that is not a price I would be willing to pay and while walking throughout the museum, I noticed very few individuals who were drinking wine. At this point I assumed many people were turned off from purchasing the wine even if it was their first choice of beverage. Transitioning into the area that catered food, the selection of snacks was fairly diverse. Max Rochester’s variety included grilled vegetables, pita chips and hummus, crackers, and soft pretzels and melted cheese. These options were upscale from regular bar food, much like anyone would get at a pub. This may suggest that the RMSC designs their events for clientele that are accustomed to this type of service.

In the same space as the food and drink there was a DJ with music, a dance space, and tables. There were very few visitors dancing in the space but they were mingling around, talking to friends, eating, and looking at each other’s costumes (see Figure 12). The costume aspect of the event was one area in which I saw people engaging with each other. There were quite a few groups of friends who had dressed to reflect the natural element theme and they were attracting attention from some of the other visitors. Having the costumes be a part of the event could act as
a social object, as defined by Nina Simon, for strangers to begin interacting with one another.\textsuperscript{67} As for the other areas of the museum, there were several locations where I saw heavy engagement with the objects and interactives. In the first floor Adventure Zone many adults were using the climbing walls, playing with the weight pulleys, and sharing experiences with the objects available. The overall atmosphere of the area was light-hearted and lively. The overall age group that I observed at the event ranged from 25-45 years old. Also, the participants that I saw were not outwardly intoxicated and were well under control, even into the later hours of the event.

While at the museum I interviewed a twenty-two year old participant, Andrew Case, to get his opinion on the event. When asked what he thought about the event he responded, “I’d definitely come back. The drinks were a little pricey but there were options that weren’t as bad. The museum has stuff here that is fun when you are five years old and when you’re a little intoxicated.”\textsuperscript{68} Then when asked what his favorite part was, he said “I like a lot of the exhibits and having drinks around was nice. It’s not that I want to come here to get drunk, but it’s another reason to come back and experience something different.”\textsuperscript{69} For this participant the food and drink were enticing attributes to the After Dark event. This could suggest that it is an aspect that the public cares about and looks at before deciding to come to such events. As for creating a “Third Place” type of space, the RMSC had strong qualities of Ray Oldenburg’s idea but did not execute them in the most effective way. When discussing the accessibility of the museum in regards to price, it was higher than most other museum events of similar scale in the Rochester area, although of higher quality. Considering that the average American spends around 4-5% of


\textsuperscript{68} Andrew Case, interview with author, February 10, 2017.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
their annual income on entertainment, that is a small percent of their budget allocated to
entertainment events such as museum visits or after-hours events.\textsuperscript{70} It is important to consider the
price of admissions to such events as an investment for the audience members and to honor such
an investment with adequate pricing of other factors such as food, drink, and other entertaining
activities. The price of food and drinks were an upscale aspect of the event, but were not the
main attraction to the evening. It is possible that if the museum had reconsidered the scale of
food and drink and chosen caterers at a lower pay rate then they could have lowered the price of
admissions therefore more visitors able to attend the program that would not have otherwise been
able to. The overall event had strong qualities that with a few adjustments could make a great
after-hours event.

In conclusion, the observed after-hours events brought culturally enriching opportunities
to the residents and members of the local community. With the observations complete, I would
like to bring the focus to a content expert from the RMSC staff, Joelle Adolfi. Before the
observational studies were conducted, I organized an interview with Joelle Adolfi on November
9, 2016, to gain insider perspective on the planning and execution of these events. Upon
concluding the observational studies preformed at all of the museums in Rochester, I met again
with her on March 1, 2017, to interview and discuss the events I attended to gather further
information.

Interview with Joelle Adolfi, Associate Director of Youth and Family Programs at the RMSC

Joelle Adolfi, the associate director of youth and family programs at the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC), is a content expert when it comes to after-hours events. Her duties begin with the planning and preparation of such events, as well as collaborating with other individuals from the various departments within the museum. During my interview with her on November 9, 2016, Adolfi revealed a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the protocol and planning of the RMSC’s after-hours events titled: After Dark.

She describes her predecessor as the prominent advocate of these types of events that could attract an alternative audience than what the museum had traditionally been seeing. Since Adolfi assumed the responsibilities of the programming position in 2011, she began to make the once abstract idea of After Dark come to fruition. The first After Dark event was held in March of 2013 and they continue to attract large crowds today. Adolfi originally envisioned these events to be “geek-out” opportunities, a “platform for people who are in science to connect.” The museum could act as a place for the scientifically-interested community to join and have intellectual space for discovery and creativity. The events have since morphed into social opportunities for the young adult community to be introduced to the Rochester Museum and Science Center and to engage in a space they may not feel traditionally welcomed in. When asked if the museum experiences difficulties attempting to attract a young adult audience, she responded that during the after-hours events, no, however, “on a daily basis, it is hard to retain that age group in other museum functions.” She also commented on the museum’s mission statement pertaining to the after-hours events. “Do we meet our mission every time? Absolutely

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71 Joelle Adolfi, interview with author, November 9, 2016.
72 Ibid.
not,” there is still area for improvement with each iteration of the event. She acknowledged that the development team within the RMSC has recently become an integral part of the creation of the events. They see the events as an opportunity for the museum to gain the intended audience’s interest and eventually create dedicated philanthropists through these initiative programs. Currently, the development team is working on getting sponsorship, membership, or donations from millennials who attend these events. The collaboration of the multiple departments within the institution becomes a major factor because of the different agendas and goals of each group. Coming together as a team with professionals from all areas of the museum has obstacles but indicates the dedication that the museum has to throwing a successful and effective after-hours event.

Discussing the food and drink part of the events, Adolfi commented that she believes there is a pull for this audience to attend when food and drink are provided. Generally speaking, the museum still finds that they must be conscious about the areas and exhibits that are open to the adult audience during these events due to the uncertainty of the patrons’ level of appropriate behavior. This attitude may stem from examples of other museums having difficult times. The museum combats this by only opening certain exhibit spaces on the first, second, and third floors and contain the numbers to approximately 500-700 people depending on whether the planetarium is also open. When asked if the RMSC has experienced difficulties controlling alcohol

73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.

First person accounts of inappropriate behavior at the Milwaukee Art Museum’s after-hours event are found in this online article and also demonstrates the worrisome factors museums must consider then allowing intoxicated patrons access to collections. “Martinifest at Milwaukee Art Museum,” Big Red & Shiny, March 19, 2006, accessed October 8, 2016, http://bigredandshiny.org/4777/martinifest-at-milwaukee-art-museum/.
consumption or guests, she indicated that they have had one instance of inappropriate behavior. Since the person was intoxicated, they were acting inappropriately and disturbing other guests. They were asked to leave by staff members and have not returned since. Adolfi concluded the interview by stating that the museum always has areas to improve upon but she believes that the events have become a regular and successful part of the RMSC’s activities.\(^79\) Looking towards the future, she disclosed that they are currently trying to implement the same types of after-hours event at the Rochester Museum and Science Center’s satellite nature center, Cumming Nature Center in Naples, NY, in order to expand their community reach.

These statements indicate the ongoing discrepancies that the museum sees between the attendance of the after-hours events and the attendance they track on a daily basis at the museum. They find that outside of the events specifically catered to the adult audience ages 21-40, they have a difficult time encouraging frequent attendance unless they are a part of a family. While the museum is successful at attracting a number of young adults to special events, their membership numbers do not correlate with this demographic group. An event that incorporates the overarching mission of the entire museum with after-hours events would be a way to attract millennials to regular museum events.

The purpose of the After Dark events was to engage audience demographics that were not seen in RMSC’s previous events, lectures, and programs. Adolfi felt as though offering events that catered to a crowd that appreciated science and technology would open the museum to a wider audience, particularly the millennial generation that is difficult to engage.\(^80\) Through firsthand observation, it is clear that the millennial generation is one of the main groups attending these after-hours events. In addition, Adolfi expressed that a majority of the After Dark events

\(^79\) Ibid.
\(^80\) Joelle Adolfi, interview with author, November 9, 2016.
have sold out since the beginning of the program and therefore shows the community’s enthusiasm for such an event. If the millennials are regularly attending this event, it is possible that they are also attending the other local institutions in the Rochester area that hold similar events and see sold out ticket sales as well. If this is the case, these events could be considered attractors to the engagement of young adult audiences in museums.

Joelle Adolfi, being the leader in the RMSC’s efforts to engage the young adult audience, is a knowledgeable professional on the planning and obstacles of such a program. This interview highlights the first-hand experience in developing and gauging what is useful and what is unfit in such a setting. Therefore, her ideas and concerns can strongly correlate with other museums and cultural institutions’ uncertainties of hosting after-hours events.

**The Rochester Museum and Science Center’s Visitor Surveys for After Dark**

The following surveys, obtained through Joelle Adolfi at the Rochester Museum and Science Center, reflect data collection performed at each of the eleven After Dark events between January 2014 and October 2016. The numbers indicate the participants’ responses to selected questions to understand their needs, desires, and preferences within the context of the After Dark event. The data encompasses the audiences’ likes, dislikes, overall ratings, and museum-to-audience communication. All of the data is interpreted by the author and displayed as comprehensive graphs for ease of deciphering. This quantitative analysis can be used as a reference for other institutions that host similar events.

The visitors were asked to complete the surveys either at the museum or afterwards via email. As Adolfi indicated, the accuracy of the results is unsubstantiated and may be skewed by
first impressions.\textsuperscript{81} Further, Adolfi felt as though individuals could have rosy retrospection\textsuperscript{82} about their experience at the After Dark events if they encountered the surveys at a later time.\textsuperscript{83} Nevertheless, they serve as a viable source of information about the experiences of museum-goers to after-hours events.

As to the survey content, visitors were asked a series of questions about the aspects of the event that they liked, disliked, and other questions that prompted feedback from the visitors. For the purpose of this thesis, I looked closely at responses to the following questions:

“what did you like most about the RMSC After Dark event?;”

“what did you like least about the RMSC After Dark event?;”

“how did you hear about the event?;”

and “rate your experience.”\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{81} Joelle Adolfi, interview with author, March 1, 2017.
\textsuperscript{83} Joelle Adolfi, interview with author, March 1, 2017.
\end{footnotesize}
What did you like most about the RMSC After Dark event?

The first question evoked individual responses that I categorized into subsections that shared similar characteristics. The categories begin with “food and drink.” This one incorporates responses that included or mentioned food and drink as their favorite part of the event. In ten of eleven surveys visitors clearly stated that food and drink were the major positive factor, that enhanced the event for them.

The next category was “exhibits.” Within this category I included all responses that indicated the temporary exhibit, permanent exhibits, or Electricity Theatre as their favorite part of the event. This is important because exhibits are a part of the regular function of the museum, regardless of special event or day-to-day activity. Within this category I noted that visitors came to enjoy or see the collections during a convenient time for them. This answer emerged in every survey.

The largest category was “entertainment.” I included answers that indicated interest in the following activities: music, dancing, band, costumes, atmosphere, activities, crafts, science
demos, people, laser shows, and the ability to enter the museum after regular hours. All of these are only available at the After Dark events for adults. This was the most common response that appeared in every survey that was conducted.

The “childless” category was revealing. I choose this particular category because of the very specific answers that some participants gave. In some cases, it was the only factor they identified as the most favorable aspect of the event. This result appeared in eight out of eleven surveys that were conducted.

Finally, another category called “other” was chosen due to the vague or non-conforming responses that visitors gave for the survey. Typically the “other” category consisted of answers like “everything” or “nothing” or an obscure reason why they found the evening enjoyable that did not suit any other category. The answer occurred in all surveys but in low numbers.

When dissecting the results of this question, there are noticeable areas of high concentration. Entertainment and exhibits show high results for most of the After Dark events while the remaining three categories show indication of interest but to a lesser degree. When looking at the total numerical breakdown for all surveys the numbers come to 330 responses indicating entertainment as their most favorable aspect, 137 responses for exhibits, 52 for other, 42 for food and drink, and 29 for childless evenings. It is clear the entertainment was the most favorable aspect of all of the After Dark events. Activities, costume contests, and special science demonstrations were the highlights of many participants’ nights. Therefore, it seems as though museums like the RMSC and other similar institutions should focus their energy on providing the best possible entertainment for after-hours events to ensure that a majority of their audience is satisfied.
An interesting comment found in the Carnival of Curiosity event survey under this question speaks to the goals that Joelle Adolfi desired for the RMSC. A visitor wrote, “interesting idea, not seen in Rochester, drew in 20-40 year olds.”85 This comment hits three key points that any after-hours event seeks. To begin, the visitor notes that the idea of the After Dark event was particularly interesting. Then they follow up by stating that they have not seen this type of event in Rochester, NY. This statement is simple but impactful due to the visitor’s ability to identify a unique opportunity in the city of Rochester. Finally, they comment on the age range that they noticed. This is also important because it confirms Adolfi’s beliefs that that is their target age and that the museum is reaching out to that particular group of individuals. Overall, comments like that and other similar ones are what make this question valuable to the institution.

What did you like least about the event?

It is important to understand the visitors’ ideas in all areas of the events at an institution. The question asking about their biggest dislike at the after-hours events may lead to suggestions and changes to better the future events for any museum. In this case, the RMSC began surveying patrons about their least liked aspect of the After Dark events. It is evident with the visual representation of the answers that visitors found aspects identified under “other” to be their biggest obstacles. These comments were grouped under the originally stated categories due to continuity purposes. Therefore there is a disproportionate amount of answers that fell under the “other” category because they did not fit the conventional categorization schema. Many visitors commented on the timing, layout, cost, and line lengths as being some of their least liked aspects of the events. Several described incidents like the events being too long or short, desiring them to be on different days, accessibility of finding activities within the museum, the lack of signage, bar and bathroom line length, and admission costs.
In many cases, the survey included suggestions by a number of patrons that the museum move the events to Saturday evenings rather than Fridays, a suggestion that may apply to other institutions that host these types of events during the week. As for lowering the cost of admissions, there could be a variety of reasons that impact the price of the tickets. Any institution that programs events such as after-hours must consider that the cost of admissions is a concern for some community members. Other comments like signage, lines, and way-finding were noticeably abundant and should be a prominent concern for any institution that is engaging new audiences.

Moving to food and drinks, this was another category that got a fair amount of attention. Patrons commented on instances where food ran out before the end of the event, the food not having a large enough selection, and the drink prices being too expensive. This category also took into account the bartenders’ attitudes towards customers as many claimed that they were unfriendly and unprofessional. The comments overall indicated that in these instances, the museum needed to be more considerate of the guests’ needs and wants, especially pertaining to food. As for beverages, the price range was the biggest factor that was of concern for visitors. Their ability to afford the beverages at these events is important, especially if the food and drinks were the factors that motivated them to come to the event to begin with.

Entertainment was the next category with a majority of the answers arguing about the appropriateness of the activities and entertainment. Many guests commented that the entertainment was too juvenile or foolish to have at an adult after-hours event. They felt as though the event should have more mature activities for adults to enjoy. Other commented about the inappropriate language used in the music that was present in the dance space. Specifically, guests pointed out entertainers they did not feel met the criteria for being at the events. Others
noted that they were disappointed in the activities and entertainment and that they would have liked to see more. A majority of the responses contained some criticism of the entertainment.

Finally, the last significant category was exhibitions. A majority of these results stemmed from the visitors responses to closed exhibits. Many discussed their disappointment when they came to the museum and certain areas or exhibit spaces were closed to the public. In some cases the visitors said that they specifically came to enjoy certain exhibits that were unavailable. In other cases, the visitors wrote that they were disappointed that the museum had not updated some of the previous exhibits since they had last attended an after-hours event. Some even took it so far as to say that they noticed old exhibits that had been there for years without being updated. Overall, patrons wanted more from the museum in terms of exhibition spaces and new content.

It is noted that there was one instance of patrons suggesting that the event be made accessible for children. Although this goes against what after-hours events typically target, there are visitors who feel as though it would be nice to be able to provide children the opportunity to attend the museum after closing hours. It is a singular opinion but nonetheless valid.

With all of these results and answers over the span of two-and-a-half years (January 21, 2014- October 21, 2016), the museum can proactively use this information to accommodate visitors to a better extent. They can formulate strategies to combat the visitors concerns and make the experience better for their enjoyment.
Next, the surveys asked the visitors to rank the activities that occurred at each of the After Dark events. By dividing and grouping categories in a consistent manner, the results fall under three representative areas of food/drink, entertainment, and exhibitions. These numbers show the responses from all of the surveys when combined together. The audience members who participated in the survey were asked to rank their experiences based on the predetermined scale of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or N/A, with 1 being the poorest experience and 5 being the greatest experience. Therefore, the N/A responses are neither counted for or against a particular category’s success.

To begin, the overwhelming number of visitors rated their entertainment experience the highest. The survey indicated that approximately 47% of all answers rated the entertainment the highest it could be. This shows that the audience was successfully entertained whether or not that was the specific reason they attended the event. This 47% response shows that the audience
highly approved of the entertainment and activities that the RMSC provided during the After Dark series. Looking at other results for the entertainment category, they still indicate high rankings. 31% of the audience rating entertainment a 4 and 15% rating it a 3 with only approximately 7% rating the entertainment factor lower than 3. The distribution of the rating is falling to the higher end of the scale therefore showing that this aspect of the after-hours events is highly successful.

Turning to the exhibit portion of the ratings, these showed a similar distribution of ratings as the entertainment section. A large portion of audience rated the exhibit spaces and topics at a 5, approximately 58% found them to be great. Similarly the ratings for 3 and 4 follow similar patterns as entertainment. As for ratings of 1 and 2, they account for only 5% of the responses for exhibitions. These results are indicative of the extent that the visitors are viewing the exhibits present at the after-hours events. They are enjoying the content that they are seeing, and some specifically note that they enjoy the temporary exhibition spaces the most.86

The food and drink category had slightly different results than the previous two categories. Food and drink had equally dispersed results for the 4 and 5 rating as opposed to overwhelming results for the “greatest” rating possible that the other categories had. Between the 4 and 5 rating, they both resulted in an equal 34% split. Along with that, the 3 or “average” received about 21% of the visitors’ rating. Finally, the combined ratings of 1 and 2 yielded only 10% of the responses from the visitors. These numbers can indicate that there are some issues with the food selection and/or drink selection. Many visitors throughout the surveys expressed their opinions of the drink prices being too high for the products, service being slow or

unfriendly, or food running out before the end of the event. All of these factors could contribute to the results shown.

Overall, the results from these surveys over the span of a two-and-a-half years (January 21, 2014- October 21, 2016) show that the RMSC is successful in the audience members’ opinions. Most surveys showed high praise for the entertainment and exhibition portions of the events. The area that showed the results skewed towards an “average” rating was the food and drink portion. This is clearly an area in which visitors had the most difficulties with, for a variety of reasons. These ratings are important because they specifically identify where the museum is succeeding in the public eye and where they can improve on their after-hours events.

87 Ibid.
How is the public hearing about this?

The question of “how is the public hearing about this?” is an important issue to discuss when thinking about the types of visitors the after-hours events are attracting. How individuals obtain the information could impact the way in which events are marketed as well as how the museum can anticipate the needs and/or expectations that the visitors may have. The survey data for the RMSC After Dark events indicate that most individuals are either seeking information from the Internet, social media, or hearing about the events from friends. According to the Pew Research Center, the most popular social media outlet for several years has been Facebook.com with 79% of all online adults using the platform. 88% of adults between the ages of 18-29 and 84% of adults between 30-49 are the heaviest users of Facebook by far. 89 From previous observation, the average age range for the After Dark event fell between 25-45 years old, landing right between the research data’s core user group. The Facebook event pages that each institution


89 Ibid.
hosted for the after-hours events publically shows who is either interested in going, going, or was invited to attend the event by a friend (see Figures 6, 8, and 9). Museums are using online and social media presence to build a stronger relationship and to gain the attention of new visitors.

The survey results also indicate that the public is learning about the events through other means, one being “print.” In this category, several options fell under the term including newspaper, flyers, and banners, all of which were identified by the visitors who answered the survey. In each instance, the survey responses showed that patrons heard about the events through print material, indicating that the museum’s efforts to attract audiences are not lost on investing in print material. Although the numbers are not as high as some of the other categories, there is still a fair number of audience members who are motivated to attend the events based on the print advertisements that they see.

The final mode of communication identified by the survey results was the Rochester Museum and Science Center’s internal efforts to communicate about the events. The visitors indicated that they discovered the event through emails, member services, or staff members at the RMSC. This is an important category to identify because it shows the direct impact that the RMSC as an institution can have on the community. The most common result with this answer was that the After Dark visitors received emails from the RMSC due to their previous connection to the institution. There were also a number of answers stating that they were members of the organization and therefore were informed because of it. This shows that members and previous visitors are actively engaged with the institution regardless of the type of event.

Overall, it is evident that most of the visitors who attended the After Dark events were engaged either online, with the institution’s social media accounts, print, or direct RMSC advertisements. All of these strategies seem to work well for the publicity and marketing of the
after-hours events. Diversifying the ways in which the museum communicates about the after-hours events is an effective method to expand the audience that participates, even though there are still an overwhelming number of individuals using the Internet as their primary resource for finding events. Obviously creating a large social media and online presence results in the highest number of participants, but using other forms of advertising has an effect on the audience and furthers the museum’s reach to engage new visitors.

These survey results over the span of two-and-a-half years (January 21, 2014- October 21, 2016), have the ability to translate from institution to institution and show overarching successes and obstacles for those that host after-hours events. They provide quantitative evidence that also capture the ideas and opinions of the visitors who participated in the activities. Using these surveys as a starting point to assess the strengths of the after-hours events, as well as their limitations, can help guide a museum to better their audience satisfaction and therefore improve their programming.

**Recommendations**

Museums currently find themselves at a crossroads with matters surrounding the engagement of the public, specifically young adults. The millennial generation is a difficult group of individuals to encapsulate and diagnose in a single swoop. There is a delicate balance to sufficiently produce a fundraising event that supports their interests and ability to connect with the institution while also benefitting the institution itself. From observational studies, survey questionnaires, and interviews with content experts, the fundamental suggestion for any museum is to intimately know the audience that they seek to engage. The more information they know
about the audience they want to attract, what their needs and desires are, the greater the success of the after-hours events.

This research points to areas in which museums can think about the public perception and engagement before the event begins. It is evident through the surveys conducted that being knowledgeable about the ways in which community members hear about events is an important step in beginning the dialogue between institution and visitor. This is an imperative phase of communication because this is how individuals learn about the museum’s offerings and become interested in attending events. In these initial phases, it is also important to effectively communicate the true mission of the event. Whether it is fundraising, public engagement, networking, or a special interest focus, it is essential to let the audience know the purpose of the event upfront. This could also contribute to how the visitors conduct themselves while at the event, especially with the presence of alcohol. By providing a clearly stated mission to the event, patrons can decide if this is the type of entertainment they seek or if they desire a different setting for their leisure time activities. This could be accomplished by dedicating space on advertisements or letters to briefly state the mission of the event. An institution could also make patrons aware of it by providing material at the actual event that states the goals of the institution. An example for a fundraiser could be to have info-graphics discreetly scattered throughout the event showcasing the financial dispersion of donated funds to programming, community outreach, children’s education, afterschool programs, and more. This strategy lends itself to informing the audience as well as graphically representing the institution’s efforts within the community. It has the potential to inspire individuals to contribute to the museum or at least get the patrons thinking and learning further about the institution they are at.
Moving forward, my recommendations also consider the discrepancies over admission prices that the visitors identified in the surveys. All institutions that host these types of events should consider the expense for the intended audience members. In many instances, patrons expressed their desire to have lower admission costs to the after-hours events. They believe the events were worthwhile but felt they were too expensive. Perhaps contracting with less expensive caterers or attempting to get donated food is a way to cut down on the cost of admissions. Other ways to lower admission cost would be to sell tickets at a base price and have individuals pay additional charges for the activities that they specifically want to attend. With accessible technology, such as Square Up credit card processor, or traditional cash exchange, patrons could pay-as-they-go throughout the event. This could eliminate the visitors’ apprehension about paying full ticket price and allow them to have the ability to customize their experience to their preferences.

I believe that providing food and beverage is a powerful incentive for community members to join the after-hours events. It is clear that having food and drink present can act as an entrance point for some who are unfamiliar with the institution and can be the common thread throughout an event. I would recommend that each institution be mindful about the type of clientele that attend the events and cater the menus, hors d’oeuvres, and drink specials to their desires. There were some discrepancies when it came to the price of the drinks and the patrons’ willingness to purchase them. Therefore, make sure the price range is commensurate with drinks outside of the museum setting. In the survey results, it was also noted that patrons of past events enjoyed the specialty drinks that fit predetermined themes. By offering special food and drink options, it is another way to differentiate an after-hours event from another night out.
Along with special food offerings, cultural institutions often have special activities, speakers, or attractions at the after-hours events. Considering that many visitors expressed difficulty finding the entertainment at museum events, I would suggest that institutions offer a guided map of their facilities and activity locations while including a schedule for activities, if applicable. These events attract first-time visitors who are unfamiliar with the layout of the museum. Guests should be able to easily learn the location of the activities so that there is no chance of them missing out. A simple printed map of the institution along with plotted locations could help guests overcome confusion and avoid the disappointment of missing activities.

This coincides with another recommendation to have a designated theme for the event. Having a unified theme that all patrons are aware of can bring the audience together in a manner that the museum would otherwise lack. All audience members are different and come with different expectations, but by having a theme, visitors know what to look for. It also pushes the host to focus and be creative with the implementation of the topic. The Memorial Art Gallery accomplished a very focused topic by centering College Night on the M.C. Escher exhibit. Many individuals in the art community seemed excited about this topic and therefore, were excited to attend the event. Through my observation I concluded that most individuals attending the event had high interest in the subject matter and theme. Other examples would be the RMSC deciding to have themes based on their museum’s current exhibits, or The Strong basing their theme on the season of the year. These are all engaging methods of involving the visitors in a different way. It is another point of entry for individuals who may not be comfortable in the space as well. Themes encourage the public to participate with the museum in a non-traditional way and open the events up to the public’s creativity. Overall, themes open the dialogue and participation between patrons and the museum.
Finally, it is difficult to strictly define ways in which museums and cultural institutions can accomplish the sense of a “Third Place.” From Ray Oldenberg’s description and examples, I would recommend that museums follow strategies of free or low cost events. It is up to the institution to determine their level of comfort with opening the museum up for minimum cost but this opportunity has the ability to transform the museum into another type of space and redefine the audience’s perceptions of what a museum space can be. It is evident in the previous literature and surveys that cost is a prohibiting factor for some audience members and therefore the museum needs to take cost into consideration when designing the events. A solution for this issue could be to create completely separate events, similar to after-hours, that specifically open the museum for adults-only gatherings at a no or low-cost level. Having events in the evening hours that allow visitors to have a minimal admission cost could engage a sector of the young adult audience that may not otherwise visit the museum, gaining a member of the community who is invested and interested in the mission and goals of the institution. Museums and other cultural institutions must strive to make their visitors feel as comfortable and welcomed into the space as possible. With that type of positive engagement, individuals may be able to open up even more and change their perception of the museum to a “Third Place.”

All of these recommendations will ultimately facilitate deeper relationships between the young adult audience and the cultural institutions that seek to engage them. Drawing from observations, surveys, interviews, scholarly literature, and more, these recommendations and suggestions serve as reminders to be considerate and aware of the audiences’ needs and wants as well as accounting for cultural institution’s limitations. This topic is complex in nature but the suggestions can provide ways to improve an event or freshly consider new opportunities to engage an audience.
Conclusion

After-hours events are particularly important due to their efforts to reach previously unrecognized or underrepresented portions of the public. Young adults, ages 21-40, make up a large segment of the public and they desire entertainment and social engagement within cultural institutions. Hence engaging this population is important to the future of museums due to their potential financial contributions to institutions, their willingness to engage in social events, and their ability to be reached through the uses of online marketing and socializing. It is imperative that museums and other cultural institutions consider the needs and desires of this audience, especially in the effort to engage new visitors.

Overall, the responses from patrons while conducting this research has been overwhelmingly positive and should motivate more cultural institutions to start or continue after-hours programs. There are areas for improvement for all of the institutions involved in this type of programming, but small adjustments would enable them to enhance the events to their fullest potential. My hope for the future would be that these after-hours events begin to change the perspective and perception that many individuals still have about museums and cultural institutions. Museums have become a more engaging and contemporary place for the public to utilize and appreciate. Therefore, looking forward I see a bright future for museum to continue the ever-evolving relationship with the young adult audience they seek to draw in. The deepening relationship that these events are building can only be an asset for both the public and the institutions involved. More importantly, museums must engage the young adult audience in ways that will continue to deepen their interconnected relationship and potentially create a redefined space within the public’s mind.
Further research is needed to develop significant data to assess the level of impact and further participation that visitors of the after-hours events have after attending these events. As well as expanding the knowledge base of the “Third Place” and the correlation between visitor experience and the institution, is necessary to fully realize the impact that creating this type of space can have on engagement. In total, this research has begun to unpack the meaning behind after-hours events and seeks to further develop the scope of context to fully comprehend the topic.
Appendix:

Figure 1: Karaoke was a featured event at the Happiest Hour. Participants were able to select songs and sing to an audience in the atrium area. Photo by the author.

Figure 2: At The Strong’s Happiest Hour, adults were able to engage with the interactive exhibits. This is a large Etch A Sketch that uses cameras to detect the features of faces and creates sketches that are displayed on a large screen. Photo by the author.
Figure 3: The pinball machine room was one of the most popular locations throughout The Strong that evening. The visitors were able to play with antique machines while consuming food and beverages in the area. Photo by the author.
Figure 4: There were several interactives available to play with at The Happiest Hour. In the superhero exhibit, participants were able to fly across the cityscape. Photo by the author.

Figure 5: In the pinball machine room some visitors elected to stay for a large portion of the after-hours time. Playing with the pinball machines was a largely attractive feature for many of the participants. Photo by the author.
Figure 6: This Facebook event page indicates the amount of people interested in attending the event, who went to the event, and who was invited to the event via social media. The Strong also lists the offerings they intended to have that evening. Screen capture from Facebook.com. https://www.facebook.com/TheStrongMuseum/.
Figure 7: This is the advertisement poster for the College Night held at the Memorial Art Gallery. This shows the date, time, and activities the museum offered.
Figure 8: The Facebook page for the event indicates the amount of people interested in attending the event, who went to the event, and who was invited to the event via social media. This also lists the activities and offerings that evening. Screen capture from Facebook.com. https://www.facebook.com/MAGRochester/.
Figure 9: This Facebook event page indicates the number of individuals interested in the event, going to the event, and invited to the event via social media. It also indicates what the museum intended to offer. Screen capture from Facebook.com. https://www.facebook.com/rocRMSC/.
Figure 10: A participant interacts with an earthquake simulator in the Elements of the Extreme exhibit at the Rochester Museum and Science Center. Photo by the author.
Figure 11: The Rochester Museum and Science Center brought in a collection of exotic animals to present at the After Dark event. This shows the kangaroo that was at the presentation. Photo by the author.

Figure 12: On the second floor of the facilities, a DJ, food, bar, tables, and dance space was provided for participants. Photo by the author.
Table 1: These statistics indicate the entertainment offerings, weather conditions, and event information that could have determined individuals’ participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Time/Date:</th>
<th>Weather:</th>
<th>Event Title:</th>
<th>Number:</th>
<th>Theme:</th>
<th>Offerings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Rochester Museum and Science Center</td>
<td>February 10, 2017 7-11PM</td>
<td>Very snowy, 2.5 inches in the evening, 13 mph winds, 25 degrees</td>
<td>RMSC After Dark: Forces of Nature</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Forces of Nature</td>
<td>Exotic animals Dance DJ Cash bar Snacks Costume contest Elements of the Extreme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: These statistics indicate the entertainment offerings, weather conditions, and event information that could have determined individuals’ participation.

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Strong National Museum of Play</td>
<td>December 7, 2016 5:30-9:30PM</td>
<td>Little or no snow, 37 degrees, 10mph winds</td>
<td>The Strong’s Happiest Hour: December 2016</td>
<td>More than 1,300</td>
<td>Ugly Sweaters</td>
<td>Food Drink (alcoholic and not) Interactives Games Dancing DJ Paper crafts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: These statistics indicate the entertainment offerings, weather conditions, and event information that could have determined individuals’ participation.

<table>
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<th>Event Title:</th>
<th>Theme:</th>
<th>Offerings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Memorial Art Gallery</td>
<td>January 26, 2017 7-10PM</td>
<td>Cloudy, 32 degrees, 15mph winds</td>
<td>MAG College Night</td>
<td>College Night</td>
<td>Food Non-alcoholic drink DJ Scavenger hunt Coloring Crafts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Joelle Adolfi Interview with Notes on November 9, 2016.

What is the function of the group that puts on these events?
The group is a mix from people of all of the departments (exhibits, collections, marketing, development, education)

Do you think the RMSC has a difficult time attracting young audiences 21-40?
During those events, no. “On a daily basis, it is hard to retain that age group in other museum functions.”

Do you believe that the after-hours events are achieving both an entertainment and educational/engaging effect, are you meeting the mission you initially made for these programs?
“Do we meet our mission every time? Absolutely not.” There is still room for improvement with each iteration of these events.
The first event ran in March 2013

Do you think the use of food and drink attracts visitors that have never been apart of the museum’s visitor segment?
Yes, there is a pull for this audience to come and enjoy when food and drink are provided.

What are some ways your group is looking to improve or change the after-hours events?
The improvements could be integrating the development aspect into the events. Currently, the development team is working on getting sponsorship and membership or donations from Millennials that attend these events. The development team has pushed their way into these events and therefore they have a large say on what happens at the events.
They are also attempting to host one of the after-hours events at the Cummings Nature Center for the first time.

Joelle originally envisioned these events to be “geek-out” opportunities, a “platform for people who are in science to connect”
“You get what you get until you contribute”

Have you taken inspiration from another institution for your programs?
No, her predecessor was passionate about starting programs that engage new audiences and she took it on after and created their own version of after-hours.

Have you had any troublesome experiences with visitors at the RMSC during these events?
No, the only experience that has ever been negative was when a man was becoming difficult and the staff approached him and he has not come back since.
They keep the events confined to certain areas of the museum 1-3 floor because of their worry about alcohol being incorporated into the mix of the museum and exhibits. They also keep the number of people to a maximum of 500 if they are just using the main building on campus and 700 if they are using the planetarium.

Do you think that these After Dark events act as a socializing event that leads to intellectual evenings?
“Depends of the theme”, sometimes there are certain themes that lend themselves to a more intellectual evenings. The speakeasy was an example that was not as intellectual. The focus of that one was the distillation of alcohol. It was a theme brought back by popular demand.
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