Music festivals have become the newest and trendiest addition to the music industry. While festivals have been around in the industry for an extended amount of time, in today’s society they have become the newest source of entertainment that people spend ridiculous amounts of money, time, and energy on. Festivals like Bonnaroo, Summerfest, Lollapalooza, and Coachella have caused millions of people to flock to different states to share their love for music and live entertainment, all while spending a pretty penny on tickets and travel just to post about everything they’ve experience on social media once the festival is over. People begin preparing for music festivals months to a year in advance, so it only makes sense that festival organizers and sponsors being preparing even farther in advance to give their attendees the best experience possible. The preparation and communication that goes into organizing and carrying out a festival practically requires an army of people. Organizers want to create an even better event than the year before, bringing new talent and promises to their attendees. However, in 2017, Fyre Festival became the biggest trending topic in the festival world, with locations, luxuries, and perks that had never been promised before. The festival soon became a topic of conversation all around the world and on social media as people watched everything go up in flames.

Fyre Festival

Communication theories

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Fyre Festival was a music festival idea drawn up by Billy McFarland, a now 27-year-old, self-proclaimed serial entrepreneur. He briefly attended Bucknell University before dropping out after a year and then continued to launch multiple high-profile ventures before he turned 25 (Huddleston, 2019). Before Fyre Festival became a topic of conversation, McFarland made a name of himself by launching a credit card called Magnises, which sold clients (mostly millennials) ‘invite only’ experiences in VIP events, concerts, and clubs. The card had a membership fee of $250 a year, but people bought into it (Huddleston, 2019). However, it ended up being criticized for just copying his clients’ original cards and reverting all of their charges from the Magnises card to their original cards. When McFarland realized he was gaining criticism and complaints from that business venture, he teamed up with Ja Rule (a rapper), and launched a new company called Fyre Media in 2016 (Huddleston, 2019). The two created Fyre Media and promoted it as a celebrity booking app that allowed users to book artists as popular as Beyoncé or Jay-Z for private events (Huddleston, 2019).

As the McFarland and Ja Rule continued their business venture, the pair traveled and ended up on a small island, Exumas. The island didn’t have a great infrastructure but the two thought with the right investors, they could make the island a focal point of a festival (Billboard, 2017). After coming up with the concept of an immersive music festival that the entertainment industry had never seen, the idea of Fyre Festival was born. In order to cause an uproar of interest for the festival, McFarland flew out some of the top models and influencers like Bella Hadid and Emily Ratajkowski to the island for a promotional photo shoot. The influencers were then payed upwards of $250,000 for a single post on their Instagram’s as advertisement to their followers to buy tickets (Huddleston, 2019). The promo materials about the festival promised, “The best in food, art, music and adventure” accompanied by footage of jet skis, yachts, and models…all on a “remote private island, once owned by Pablo Escobar” (Billboard, 2017). Ticket prices started at $1,500 and increased as ticket packages became more premium, leading to tickets as expensive as $25,000 (which could only be booked in groups of ten people, so $250,000) (Blair, 2019). Within 24 hours of tickets going on sale, 95% of them had been sold to almost 5,000 people (Blair, 2019).

As reporters and journalists were welcomed to the island weeks before the event to get media coverage, they were nothing short of disappointed. What they experienced was a lot covered in gravel with not nearly enough space to build what was needed, there was no luxury beach, and little to no progress made for the festival (Billboard, 2017). McFarland and his team were nowhere near being prepared for the festival in the coming weeks and promoters were nervous. Suggestions were made to continue developing the festival grounds but postponing the festival from 2017 to 2018 and honoring the tickets that had already been sold. Ja Rule, however, didn’t like the idea of postponing the festival and continued on with business (Billboard, 2017). As festival goers began to arrive on the island, disappoint, confusion, and mass chaos ensued. No one had any directions of where to go and the environment was nothing close to what was promised by the advertisements. There were no sandy beaches, no luxury villas, and no yachts. There were no buildings to stay in at all, just a cluster of carpeted hurricane tents (Burrough, 2017). As panic started to set in for those now stuck on a deserted island with no infrastructure, artists and musical acts started dropping out of the festival, and chaos continued to become more intense. People began rushing to tents trying to find a place to stay, only to realize the tents and beds were soaked with water. People began stealing bedding, cots, food, or anything they could out of pure panic (Burrough, 2017). Everyone at the festival turned to the internet to document their experiences in real time, #fyrefestival became a trending topic very quickly as people at the festival, and at home talked about the event. Days after the disaster, as everyone found their way off of the island, journalists and lawyers rushed to create stories and lawsuits about the catastrophe that was Fyre Festival. It turns out, the festival organizer, Billy McFarland, who hadn’t really given any communication in the time of chaos, was nothing short of a scammer. McFarland had been scamming investors and industry professionals for years (Burrough, 2017).

McFarland ended up costing his investors (including Ja Rule) more than 26 million dollars. He ended up admitting to falsifying documents including bank statements and pleaded guilty in 2018 to three counts of wire fraud, one count of bank fraud, and a charge of making false statements (Huddleston, 2019). McFarland also ended up pleading guilty two times due to prosecutors finding out that he was also operating a fraudulent ticketing scam. He was then sentenced to six years in prison and ordered to pay more than 26 million dollars in restitution to the investors and customers he defrauded (Huddleston, 2019). To this day, no one is sure if any ticketholders for Fyre Festival were ever refunded for the thousands they had spent, or if anyone on the island were compensated for their labor and work in trying to make the festival happen. The event went down in history as one of the worst attempts of an event in the festival and entertainment industry. Streaming services like Netflix and Hulu have both produced documentaries about the failed festival and people are still wondering how everything went so wrong.

Communication was a large factor in the series of events that made Fyre Festival go down in history. Some argue that there was a lack of communication from McFarland when it came to the actual festival taking place, others argue the festival had promised too much from their communication of what would take place at the event that it became impossible to actually achieve. However, one thing that almost everyone can agree on is that social media played a large role of communication as the festival went up in flames. Festival goers and people at home were all communicating online (primarily Twitter) about what was happening on the island in real time. The hashtag #FyreFestival became a trending topic on Twitter where most people were posting pictures and videos of what was going on around them. Attendees who had already landed on the island used social media to warn those who were waiting for flights or packing for the trip, tweeting updates for them to see what was going on and to tell them to stay home. “So Fyre Fest is a complete disaster. Mass chaos. No organization. No one knows where to go. There are no villas, just a disaster tent city” one user tweeted while posting a video of a crowd of people trying to figure out what to do (Baggs, 2019). Others were trying to communicate with the festival founder, Billy McFarland, who was nowhere to be found saying, “I tweeted out a picture of a planning notebook we found on the ground and it’s hysterical” (Baggs, 2019). As Twitter continued to become the top source of communication for everyone involved, the fact that there was no direction was communication in itself. People observed what looked like an abandoned plot of ground and just assumed the message being communicated was that no one really cared enough to try to fix or help what was going on around them. Influencers and bloggers who attended the festival began documenting everything for their YouTube channels and telling their viewers about the chaos going on around them. Social media was easily the biggest source of information and updates for anyone involved in the situation. Even Ja Rule, who was an investor and friend of McFarland used social media (Twitter) to release a statement during the chaos, “We are working right now on getting everyone on the island SAFE that is my immediate concern…I will make a statement soon I’m heartbroken at this moment my partners and I wanted this to be an amazing event it was NOT A SCAM as everyone is reporting I don’t know how everything went so left but I’m working to make it right by making sure everyone is refunded…I truly apologize as this is NOT MY FAULT…but I’m taking responsibility I’m deeply sorry to everyone who was inconvenienced by this” (Blair, 2019). Many argue that the statement felt ingenuine and rushed in a time of chaos.

The role that social media played in communication with the events of Fyre Festival were really important. Social media allowed for everyone involved at the actual festival to voice their concern and warn everyone else about the festival. People ended up cancelling their flights and getting some money back because they saw what was happening on social media. News outlets and journalists were using social media to communicate with those on the island to gain information and media for new reports and stories. Twitter was easily the top form of communication during the series of events, which is what made the event so important and recognized as a failure. By taking pictures and videos in real time of what was happening around them, festival goers were able to hold McFarland accountable for what was going on around them as he was nowhere to be found. Everyone figured McFarland wouldn’t make a statement due to the fact that all representatives and those tasked to answer questions about the festival had stopped replying to emails, texts, and calls as the situation got worse. As there was a lack of communication from McFarland and Ja Rule in the time of the event, it continued to fuel the frenzy that was happening on Twitter. Some argued that those who spent so much money on tickets deserved to be scammed, because it was obviously too good to be true. Mass media outlets soon picked up stories in the news about the festival.

The story of Fyre Festival spread like wildfire across mass media headlines for weeks. News outlets like *Good Morning America* were reporting about the overselling and underdelivering in the modern social-media age (Cohn, 2019). News outlets were using livestreams, tweets, videos, and photos from festival goers to show the actual problem with the event. As more news coverage was released from the media, the public was finding out more about Billy and the messages and communication he was receiving from his team. At various stages leading up to the festival, McFarland’s executive and PR team told him to cancel the event to avoid any backlash and problems, he obviously didn’t listen (Cohn, 2019). Due to social media, every single detail of McFarland’s scam was broadcasted to the world. There was no control, no spin, and nothing that he could own up to or try to perceive as less serious because everything was already posted (Cohn, 2019). Social media and mass media easily pushed the event to the frontlines of importance for the world to witness.

Agenda Setting was a large component of how the events and chaos surrounding Fyre Festival came to be so important in the media. Agenda setting shows the importance that the media plays in shaping what is show in social and political reality. The theory helps the public learn how much importance to place on an issue by the attention it receives by the media. Agenda-setting theory was formulated in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, meant to explain the relationships between the emphasis that the mass media places on issues and the importance that media audiences attribute to those issues (Weiss, 2009). The theory inspired the ways that news media coverage can prioritize issues, or set the agenda, for the public. As time carried on, the theory adapted and changed as society did. Not one group sets the agendas for the others, instead, the real-world importance of an issue or event will equally affect everyone/everything (Weiss, 2009). It’s also important to note that the perceived salience of an issue is related to the evaluations the audience members have with the issue. Agenda-setting has expanded to include both the cognitive aspects of the agenda-setting function and its emotional aspects as well (Weiss, 2009).

When this theory is applied to news coverage, the term framing describes the process of organizing, defining, and structuring the story being told. Media theorists argue that even when journalists want/try to be objective or neutral in their coverage, the way that they report on issues has the ability to give the audience cues on how to understand the issues, what to focus on, and how to feel about it (Weiss, 2009). The public also has the ability to talk about events and place them at a level of importance due to how often we talk about it as a society. The theory gives audiences a way to place or rank events in order of importance based on the exposure they receive in the media or online. The more the media talks about a story or topic, the more its importance is pushed onto us. It might not tell us what to think, but it definitely tells us what to think about and how important it should be in our lives.

The whole idea of Fyre Festival was started on social media and carried on in the media world. McFarland used the media and his own connections in the media (models, reality stars, entertainers, etc.) to place importance on the event right away. It’s a common thought that if McFarland hadn’t used social media and people with millions of followers and public importance/exposure to first help him announce the idea and concept of the festival, it wouldn’t have become such an important idea and so popular of a concept. As the idea and promise of the festival carried out, people began posting about the festival more and more on their own social media accounts and news outlets started producing content and stories about the festival. Due to the promise and luxury of the festival, with attractions that had never been presented or done before, people thought it was going to be an iconic moment. The public talking about the festival definitely framed the event to become a moment of importance in the entertainment industry.

As events carried on for the festival and people began realizing how much of a mistake buying tickets and attending was, they began to share even more of their opinion in a public way. By tweeting and sharing pictures and videos of their experiences, people viewing the content at home almost couldn’t believe what they were seeing. However, because of the exposure that the festival was gaining, although negative, people began to pay more attention to it. Whether or not they knew what the concept of Fyre Festival was or whether or not they knew who Billy McFarland was, due to the traction of the event in the media, they were playing close attention. No one was telling them to tweet with the hashtag #FyreFestival, but people were. Attendees of the festival were tweeting about what was happening in real time, but people who weren’t involved and had never even heard of the festival were using the hashtag to start a conversation to gain understanding of everything that was going on. It’s the idea that people started to care about what was going on simply because there was already so much communication building around the topic.

As more mainstream media outlets began to build stories and share news coverage on the event and how everything went downhill, that’s when the publicity of the event gained the most coverage and the highest level of importance for the public. Prior to major media outlets talking about the festival, it was easy to mention Fyre Festival and those who weren’t active on social media probably had no idea what you were talking about. However, now that major news outlets and high-profile journalists were cultivating stories on the festival, older generations started to care. The lifespan of the festival continued to live on and extend for weeks at a time, just because of the media exposure. If the event had just been communicated about online and on social media, it would have easily become a fad in the news and the topic would have been dropped a week or two later. However, because the storyline of the event was being re-told on TV and radio, people were beginning to look back into what happened to the festival and how McFarland was being reprimanded due to his lack of communication and professionalism with the event. People placed the event at a high importance because the media had never seen a scandal similar to Fyre Festival in almost the entire history of the festival or entertainment industry.

Netflix and Hulu picked up documentaries about the event, simply because they knew it was an event that the public was curious about and wanted to know more. While it probably wasn’t necessary to create numerous films about the event, the public pushed the idea and almost made it happen just because they were talking about it so much. People wanted to know more about how everything happened and how people fell for the scam when it obviously seemed too good to be true. The interest in the event continued to carry on when McFarland started going on trial for all of the lawsuits filed against him, which is where most people realized that whether or not the festival was successful, McFarland was still gaining all of the publicity that he wanted.

Rhetoric was a large part of McFarland being successful in selling the idea of Fyre Festival. Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric gave a starting point for understanding the art of discovering all available means of persuasion (Rhetorical Theory, 2020). Rhetoric is used to construct and carry out a persuasive argument. It’s used to think through invention, organization, style, delivery and memory. When utilizing rhetoric, it’s important to recognize and understand your audience and know what they want in order to be as persuasive as possible. Those using rhetoric should consider using logic (logos), emotion (pathos), and ethics/credibility (ethos) (Rhetorical Theory, 2020). There are certain moments that each component should be used for the best outcome. By utilizing the components of rhetoric, one is able to persuade an audience and help them see a point or make a decision. However, it’s important to remember that even though you may be trying to reach an audience, each person is an individual. Each person in the audience is able to determine how they perceive the message and the end result that is being presented.

McFarland definitely utilized or tried to utilize rhetoric when defending himself after the festival was a fail. Prior to the festival taking place, McFarland had persuaded investors to believing that if the festival failed, they would have a right to a payout. However, he hadn’t secured any cancellation insurance policies (Huddleston, 2019). Those who know McFarland said his greatest talent was “selling himself” and that he was “just stunningly ignorant of what it would take to make his promises a reality” (Huddleston, 2019). He used his credibility of having a successful family background and being a successful, young entrepreneur, even though in the end everyone knew he had been scamming people for years. He eventually apologized during his sentencing, by saying his actions were the result of his fear letting everyone down (Huddleston, 2019). He knew exactly what he had to say and how he had to present himself to get people to believe him. He used emotion when he knew he wanted people to feel for him after the festival and made it a large tactic during his sentencing. Even though he was using tactics from rhetoric to try to lessen his case and make others feel for him, it didn’t work.

People who know McFarland before everything happened always knew that he had an attitude where he knew he was too good for anything bad to happen to him. He was cocky and knew that he had the power of persuasion and could easily convince people around him to help him in his newest business endeavor. Obviously, McFarland had to be pretty persuasive to convince super models and social media influencers to fly out to a random island and convince them to promote a festival that hadn’t even been planned yet. He knew exactly what he was doing and after the festival went down in history as one of the biggest failed attempts in the entertainment industry, people truly began to see what he had been doing to trick and scam people. Even though most knew the festival was too good to be true, they were still persuaded because McFarland put up a front that he was the most qualified and capable person to throw the festival, and they believed him.

It’s pretty self-explanatory why Fyre Festival became such a big event in the music festival and overall live music industry. Billy McFarland and the overall concept of Fyre Festival proved that with the right buzz and interest, you can cause a complete uproar for any concept or idea. With all of the chaos and social media conversation about the festival came news headlines and even more scandal. To this day, people are still trying to get refunded for their tickets and the infrastructure of the island the festival was supposed to be held on is still working on economically recovering. A lot of people, including myself, can’t help but wonder what would have happened if the festival had actually been successful. Would it have changed the entire basis that music festivals were created upon? Would Billy McFarland continue to try to one-up himself every year with a new concept for the festival? This event really interested me, and I remember staying up to date with everything that happened online and in the mass media about what was happening in real time. As someone who wants to work in the entertainment, music, or social media field(s), I had a lot of opinions about this event and how it seemed too good to be true. There’s a lot that could have been done for damage control or to prepare for the event a lot better than what had actually been done. However, even though the festival was a complete fail, a lot of people in the industry learned a lot from McFarland’s mistakes.

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