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RISING FROM THE ASHES: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW ONE INFAMOUS PROMOTIONAL  
EVENT CAUSED A COMPANY'S RUIN AND A CONCEPT ON THE FUTURE OF  
INFLUENCER EXPERIENCES

Janis Blair Kruger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

April 2022

Approved By:

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis and its research focuses on the topic of modern influencer marketing through digital media. Throughout the thesis, traditional marketing tactics and the power of influence is discussed, and then it moves into the topic of modern advertising and the role that modern social media influencers play in reaching the consumer. The methodology behind influencer marketing is explained and consumer behavior is analyzed. The 2017 Fyre Festival promotional event is then used as an example to dissect this marketing tactic and how the event impacted the future of influencer marketing. Finally, a modern-day, hypothetical campaign based on the concept of the Fyre Festival is presented and shows how the idea could be executed in a successful way.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJHSSR	American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research
FOMO	Fear of missing out
GEN Z	Generation Z
GWI	Global Web Index
ROI	Return on Investment
U.K.	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States
VIP	Very important person
VR	Virtual reality
WOMM	Word-of-mouth marketing

## INTRODUCTION

### Methodology

When approaching the research for this thesis, I quickly decided to take a qualitative approach to research as opposed to quantitative. While I did see value in quantitative research, I felt that I did not have the most access to an immediate audience that was diverse enough in opinion to fairly represent the former and current state of influencer marketing. As a result, I turned to qualitative primary and secondary research methods and found great success in displaying and explaining how advertising methods have significantly changed in recent years. The thesis dives into this topic by first explaining the traditional advertising methods, opinion influence, and generational behavior patterns. From there, the research moves to modern advertising and the role that social media “influencers” play in it. Several secondary resources are used to explain who these influencers are and how their message affects their audience. From there, the thesis explains how brands are best able to utilize this new tactic to best sell their products and spread brand awareness. It specifically discusses consumer behavior and the level of trust that this marketing has created in the consumer and influencer relationship. In Chapter II, firsthand, primary research from an interview with Matt King, a modern influencer with a rich history in digital media, on influencer marketing is introduced. This research directly segues into Chapter III, where additional qualitative research in consumer behavior is used to discuss how companies have been forced to look for new strategies to try to most effectively reach their audience. Brands have now realized that a print ad is nowhere near as effective as it once was; instead, event advertising that creates a personalized experience has been shown to be a very effective method of modern advertising. The topic then ties to a review of a former promotional event, The Fyre Festival, which was a new music festival hosted in 2017 to promote the



company Fyre Media. I chose to primarily use two published documentaries for this portion of the research, as both offered more detailed information than a majority of published written material. These documentaries offered two very different perspectives on the event, and both gave detailed information on how influencers played a pivotal role in the event's promotion and ticket sales. The final two chapters analyze the Fyre Festival's highly effective advertising strategy and how it can successfully be used for modern advertising. Using influencer marketing in the capacity that it did, the Fyre Festival showed just how powerful influencer marketing is. In today's quickly updating digital environment, conclusions are drawn from this research and analysis for how brands can best reach both the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. By analyzing this research, the thesis is concluded with a campaign based around the idea of the Fyre Festival. Throughout the thesis, the reader is guided on a journey led by qualitative research that lays groundwork for them to draw their own conclusions and takeaways.

## **RESEARCH PORTION**

## **CHAPTER I: THE HISTORICAL IDEOLOGY BEHIND INFLUENCERS**

The idea of an “influencer” is not a new or revolutionary concept because of the creation of social media platforms. Rather, it is something that has been around for as long as mankind has. The terms “influencer” and “opinion leader” are synonymous, and by human nature, some people are naturally going to look to others to decide what is best for the group. If everyone has an outspoken opinion, the group dynamic would never work. This being said, it is not to say that opinion leaders are always right but to show that it is ingrained in mankind to look for those who will set the trends. Similarly, the theory of “social proof” states that:

One means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct. The principle applies especially to the way we decide what constitutes correct behavior. We view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it...the actions of those around us will be important in defining the answer (Cialdini 116).

The concept of social proof aligns with the human desire to avoid mistakes and embarrassment in society’s eyes. On one hand, it acts as a major convenience and as a shortcut for man to decide his best course of behavior. On the other hand, this tested “shortcut” does not always mean that the repeated behavior is the correct one. Cavett Robert, a sales and motivation consultant, often advised his sales trainees by saying, “Since 95 percent of the people are imitators and only 5 percent initiators, people are persuaded by the actions of others than by any proof we can offer” (Cialdini 118).

Throughout history, these opinion leaders were prophets, philosophers, teachers, storytellers, and authors (Blaney & Fleming 1). Looking at specific examples, the first caveman to eat a poisonous berry could have broken off from his group, picked the fruit, eaten it shortly

after, and dropped dead on the spot. When his group of cavemen found him dead on the ground next to the bush with a blue juice stain on his face, the cavemen (who have no previous knowledge of the poisonous fruit) will most likely conclude not to eat the berries from that bush because they will end up like their friend. Moving forward a few thousand years to the Oregon Trail, once word got out and newspapers started writing that gold had “been struck” in the West and that infinite wealth lay in this undeveloped piece of the United States, thousands of pioneers loaded their families to join those with newfound wealth. They wanted their families to have the same “success” that the initial few gold miners had. Fast forward to the 1980s, a middle-aged woman is sitting in a hair salon in west Kansas reading the newest tabloid and sees that a certain company’s diet plan has helped Cindy Crawford lose weight and look the way that she does on the runway. Suddenly this woman is much more inclined to look into this new company, sign up for their “magic diet plan,” and expect to look just like the supermodel. Looking at a modern scenario, @careyshane1996 on Instagram is scrolling through her Instagram stories and sees that her favorite influencer, @thegoldenretrivermom, has recently tried a new at-home teeth whitening treatment. Her perfectly white and flawlessly straight smile is shining brighter than a new pair of stark, white tennis shoes. @careyshane1996 is suddenly tapping on the affiliate-linked page and placing an order so her coffee-stained smile can look just as bright for her sister’s bridal shower next week.

In reality, were the influencer’s teeth pearly white because of the at-home strips, or did she make a trip to her dentist last week to get her teeth professionally whitened, or did she simply put a filter on her photo before posting it? There is no way for the user to know the answer to this question, but because the social media influencer’s teeth looked so beautiful and she has followed the influencer for several months, @careyshane1996 is much more willing to

purchase the brand in hopes that her teeth look the same. In the case of the cavemen, the opinion leader was right. If the group were to eat the berries from the same bush, they too would die. In the case of the tabloid reader, there is a slim-to-none chance that the service “recommended” by Cindy Crawford will make our average woman look like she’s ready to hit Milan’s runways. For the few, first Americans to strike gold, was the small statistic enough to cause the onset of an American stampede, or was it all false advertising? The players change, but the game does not.

In this case, the “game” of selling a product or service has changed to digital format. Paperboys no longer test their skill to throw the local, coupon-filled newspaper perfectly on the doormat, companies don’t wait for the release of their print ad in the most recent issue of Vogue, and the yearly addition of advertisements in the Yellow Pages no longer weigh down desk drawers. Instead, all of this information has moved to fast-paced, constantly updating feed ads, Home Screen applications, and a quick Google Search. The traditional methods of media are still taught in college classrooms but are almost always followed by the ever-changing methods of digital and social media marketing tactics. Curriculum for marketing programs and the future of the advertising industry is no longer a standard one focusing on traditional methods. Rather, it is continuously having to be updated with the changing digital media scene.

Today’s consumers value convenience, and the role that digital media has transformed into has blurred the lines between scrolling and shopping more than ever (Global Web Index 17). Social media platforms allow consumers to become more educated on the brand, see the newest products and how to use them, and see which “influential” people are associated with the brand. Although definitely not the only target audience, Generation Z (Gen Z), the generation of young people born from 1997-2012, is the main target audience for digital marketing. This is the first generation to have grown up in a world with the existence of social media, and many in this

generation have been digital users since a young age. This generation is the one that spends the most time on both their mobiles and on social media, and the generation that digitally follows celebrities associated with a variety of entertainment fields (Global Web Index 4). Global internet users widely use social media to follow celebrities and their lives through a screen; 20% of global users use social media for this purpose, and this statistic increases to 26% for Gen Z users (GWI 4). Additionally, Gen Z is the only age group to look to social media for brand research more than search engines. From 2015 to 2019, there was a 40% increase in Gen Z's use of social media to research a brand or product (GWI 17). With this new "search engine" for Gen Z, brands must find the most effective ways to reach users and draw them to their social media pages. One of the most prominent tactics to do this is through the use of influencer marketing on digital platforms.

"Influencer marketing" is defined as a:

"Type of social media marketing using celebrities, organizations or individuals that have a certain level of expert knowledge and influence in a specific area... The breadth of product influencers are promoting is vast, and many have built an empire as a result" (GWI 6).

This rise in this type of digital marketing is largely credited to social media development, dominance in mobile and digital content, the demand for video-led content, and brands having to reach consumers in a nontraditional way (GWI 6). Best put, social media is no longer something that users download to "keep in touch" with faraway friends; instead, users are utilizing it for entertainment, opinion-influence, and education. This can be seen in users scrolling for a laugh, updates on world news, and product research (GWI 6). The image and impact of influencers on

social media has changed drastically since social media began, but the role that they play is invaluable for brands' advertising strategies.

## **CHAPTER II: INFLUENCERS ARE THE MODERN BILLBOARD**

In today's digital age, influencers are one of the most popular vehicles that brands use to effectively sell their products. Unlike the early days of influencer marketing, the role of being influential belongs to a much wider, more diverse group than it once did. Before social media, celebrity endorsements were one of the primary choices of influencer marketing for brands. By associating the brand with a celebrity's image and popularity, businesses were able to capture consumers' attention through the celebrity's reputation. For example, Michael Jordan has not played professional basketball since 2003, but because of Jordan's fame and long-standing partnership, Nike continues to sell extraordinary amounts of Jordan shoes even though he has been retired for many years (Schaffer 8). Additionally, in the past, brands began using traveling salesmen and telemarketers instead of newspapers or radio to connect with customers through personal interaction. Today, marketing has taken this personal aspect to the next level and everything has turned digital. As traditional media tactics have declined, the market has become highly fragmented, and it is more difficult to reach consumers. As companies have shifted their attention to digital media to better reach their customer though, they have kept the three foundational marketing tactics: "define the right goal, observe and identify the right influencers, and create the right connection" (Russell 383).

In the modern, digital world, smartphones allow specific information to be accessed immediately and communication can happen instantly and from anywhere in the world. Additionally, social media has allowed for a different kind of social interaction to develop and today's power players, who are known as "influencers," look different than any type of celebrity that came before them. Popular influencers on social media no longer require millions of fans or followers or existing "celebrity status" like influential people in the media once did. Gone are the



days of going to school and earning time, training, and technique to become a select, influential member of the media (Falls 6). Instead, today's influencers could be a seemingly "normal" person next door with little experience/prior knowledge and still have the opportunity to impact their audience and create real brand deals with companies to help sell their product. According to Aspire's 2022 *State of Influencer Marketing* report, an influencer is, "An individual who has the power to shape the perceptions and purchasing decisions of others, due to their passion, valued opinions and high level of trust" (10). The definition of the term, "influencer" even looks different than it did ten years ago, but it has remained a buzz word since influencer marketing really started to gain traction during the 2010s. These social media influencers can be video creators, audio creators, course creators, gamers, resellers, live streamers, meme pages, artists, musicians, and photographers (The Creator Economy 27). As long as they are passionate about sharing their thoughts and opinions, anyone can be a modern influencer.

A new marketplace of influence was created when social media was established and utilized for selling products. Marketing naturally relies on creating an emotional connection between the customer and the product, and influencer marketing has shown to be an effective method for reaching both the Millennial and Gen Z audience. In the past, brands turned to traditional marketing methods to get their name in front of an audience to create brand awareness; companies hoped that this awareness would potentially lead to a future product purchase. This obviously changed when social media gained traction in the early 2010s; in December of 2017, digital ad spending officially surpassed television and spending globally for the first time (Schaffer 17). Now, the eyes that were once predominantly watching a television screen instead look at a smartphone screen each day. In fact, although social media's inception may not have intentionally caused the change, "The world went from a trickle of information to a

flood of biblical proportions, filling every eye and ear with news, opinions, rants, and arguments from every angle and perspective imaginable” (Falls 7). Unlike the world’s previous low-technology state, influencers now have this direct line to the public and can better understand the audience to which they are advertising through the data that they have access to. According to the book, *Winfluence*,

“The goal of influencer marketing is to have your influencers spark that fire that becomes great word of mouth. If their followers tell friends and those people tell more friends, and you coordinate those sparks with enough of the right influencers, you get a pretty nice word of mouth and influencer marketing case study” (Falls 16).

Because human beings are naturally social beings, communication is going to happen—whether that is in-person or online. As social beings, humans are also going to look to those that they trust to help them make decisions. When making decisions and taking in information, consumers trust a recommendation from someone that they rely on for truth over something that a brand says about themselves. The goal for brands is to make the customer believe that the brand has his/her best interest in mind, and influencers aim to make their audience feel as if they are being authentic with their followers.. Trust is a tough thing to build, but, “Influencer marketing allows you to benefit from trust someone else has cultivated” (Russell 15).

Utilizing social media and influencer marketing can be an incredibly effective tool. “That is why the right influencer is so powerful: they can completely transform how a person takes in and processes information about a brand, product, or campaign” (Russell 14).

Influencers work to be relatable to their audience, and consumers trust influencers more than ever before because influencers are the voice that they actually want to hear when they log onto

social media. With the touch of a screen, consumers can now watch their favorite influencers' lives unfold before their eyes in real time, and influencers show that they share many of the same problems/experiences as their users. Since the audience feels as if they actually know the influencer through these shared "interactions," they are more willing to trust the influencers' opinions on the products that they are promoting. Although a brand may think that their other marketing tactics are clever, that is not what consumers are listening to, but instead,

"...To people that they identify with, who earn their attention day in and day out as they bounce around the social web. These like-minded people are influencers who, when called upon, can persuade consumers to know, like, and trust your company" (Falls 16).

Brands have the opportunity to harness this impact through influencer marketing campaigns on social media. Influencer marketing provides companies with the opportunity to reach their audience through flexible campaigns with low investment, accurate trackable metrics, a higher level of trust with the audience, and access to a new generation of talented storytellers (Blaney & Fleming 5-8).

As long as a person is able to resonate with others and grow an audience, technically anyone can be an influencer. If being a modern influencer on social media was an easy job though, everyone would do it. While there is great opportunity to make money as a social media influencer, a person must have a firm plan and have established his/her "why" – which is more easily explained as the reason the person chooses to share a glimpse of his/her life with a digital audience. Additionally, successfully maintaining a personal brand and effectively communicating with a fickle audience can be a daunting task long-term; social media influencers must be prepared to constantly cater to their audience to continue to capture their attention. Although this

is difficult, this new method to “rise to fame” for celebrity status is appealing enough to put their lives online and to face the challenges that come with this.

After deciding to embark on the journey of becoming an influencer, it is important for people to choose the channel that will best share their content and dedicate the majority of their efforts to that channel. Although influencers are typically present across several channels, it is best for them to decide on one where they will focus their attention and workload in order to more effectively stand out from the crowd in their campaigns. This will help maximize how effective they are and avoid creating mediocre content because they are spread too thin.

Platforms that influencers have to choose to start their personal brand on include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, and Snapchat.

Because of the special relationships that influencers can hold with the consumer, brands have discovered a unique way to reach their target audience through strategic influencer marketing. Although there is fierce competition between brands in influencer marketing on social media platforms that are constantly changing,

“For a brand that executes this well, influencer marketing is a method of reaching people for less money, for saving money on content creation, and for soliciting helpful input from those with a finger on the pulse of the current culture” (Blaney & Fleming 31).

In order to achieve success through influencer marketing, companies must be confident in their individual collaboration and investment with influencers, realize that sales happen because consumers buy from influencers that they trust and not from noisy brands, and generously share their resources and audiences with an open mindset (Russell 5).

Although this campaign could be the first exposure that a brand and a consumer have with each other, the brand is leveraging the trust that already exists between the influencer and

the consumer through the posted content. This is the biggest difference between influencer marketing and traditional marketing, and the personal connection and trust that the influencer fosters with his/her audience helps bridge the gap to selling the product more efficiently. According to a survey done by Rakuten Marketing in 2019 (as cited in Falls, 2021), out of 3,600 shoppers from around the world, 61% interact with an online influencer at least once per day and 35% interact with an online influencer multiple times a day. Additionally, these same people said that online influencers allow them to discover at least one new brand or product each week, and 87% of the 3,600 were inspired to make a purchase because of the information provided by the influencer (Falls 13). This massive exposure has the opportunity to majorly change a brand's sales if they effectively use influencer marketing. In order to be successful, it is absolutely essential that influencers are being authentic and consistent; consumers do not want to feel as if they are being tricked into buying something for the influencer's personal gain. In a survey, 29% of social media users want influencers to be open about their sponsorships and what is being promoted, and by being more transparent, followers may be more receptive to the advertisement (GWI 21).

There is not just one way to break down the different types of influencers on social media. One way to do this though is through what *Will Post for Profit* defines as the four categories of characteristics for influencer marketing: content creators, makers, public figures, and virtual influencers (Blaney & Fleming 10-14). This source defines content creators as those who built their platform/influence on social media because of something that has defined their digital personality that they have created from scratch. Some examples of content creators are platform-independent bloggers/vloggers and YouTubers. Next, makers are a niche group of influencers who have a following because they have created something (examples include:

crafty, educational, or physical creations) that is typically able to be purchased. Examples of makers include artists, brands, and celebrity makers. Third, public figures, although they have influence on social media, are influencers who gained their following separate from the digital world. Examples of public figures include celebrities, skilled professionals, models, and power brokers (activists, politicians). Finally, virtual influencers are complex non-human figures similar to that of a fictional character. They are computer generated and attached to a brand. All four types of influencers are useful for brands, but content creators are typically the most sought after by brands today (Blaney & Fleming 10).

Additionally, another way to classify influencers is through the size of their following on different channels. *The Selling Power of Influencers 2021* report created by the companies Later (a visual marketing platform for Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest) and Fohr (an influencer and ambassador marketing company) labeled five categories that influencers can fall into on Instagram: nano, micro, mid, macro, and mega influencers. In this breakdown type, each influencer type is broken down by their following and serves a different purpose in the role of social commerce.

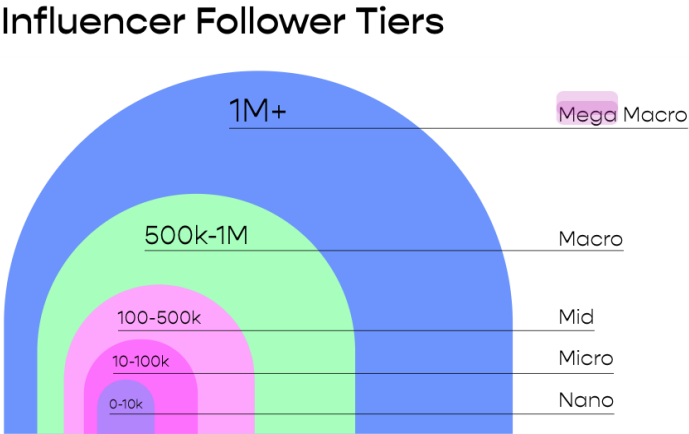


Fig. 1. The five types of influencer tiers based on follower count: LaterxFohr, "The Selling Power of Influencers," 2021, p. 10).

*The Selling Power of Influencers* states that Nano influencers have less than 10K followers, and they are typically at the beginning of their influencer journey and trying to build a following. Since they have a smaller following and less brand attention, they are typically seen as being more authentic and trustworthy to their followers. If used correctly, brands can use these influencers to make a more genuine connection with their followers. Micro influencers have 10K-100K followers and have a more established presence on social media sites than nano influencers. As a result of their larger following, micro influencers have access to certain features (such as Instagram story linking capabilities) and are able to make more money from brand deals. Mid influencers have over 100K followers, and they probably have a more distinguished, niche audience that they cater to. At this level, mid influencers usually have made social media their full-time job, and because of the authority that they have built with their audience, will have higher partnership rates. Their level of experience is more prominent than in lower tiers.

Macro influencers have a following of 500K-1M followers, and this large following gives these influencers a distinct platform. With a following this large, the influencers have an opportunity to reach a vast audience; this can create large shifts in brand awareness and perception. At this influencer level, brands may be paying tens of thousands of dollars for a campaign partnership. Finally, mega influencers have over 1M followers and have the most social clout in the influencer world. At this point, they have reached celebrity status (e.g. a Kardashian-level status), and their partnerships and post costs are a reflection of this (LaterxFohr 12). It typically takes a full-time influencer three years to make a significant yearly income and at least six years to surpass the \$1 million dollars of revenue milestone (The Creator Economy 25). However, with the fast-growing nature of platforms like TikTok and the ability for a video to go viral, this timeline can be sped up.

Although these influencer tiers are numerically distinct, each tier has the possibility to serve a purpose for a brand. While the two largest tiers have the ability to reach an incredibly large audience, their posts for brands and engagement response are typically received as less genuine than smaller influencers' posts. Oppositely, while a nano influencer may have a much smaller following, his/her engagement results are typically much higher and the heart behind a post is more apparent. When looking at engagement statistics, the engagement level on a feed post can be calculated with the following equation (LaterxFohr 14):

$$\text{Engagement Rate} = (\text{Likes} + \text{Comments}) / \text{Total Number of Followers}$$

Nano influencers typically have the highest engagement rate. At this level, their following is typically more targeted because of its small size, and the followers for these niche topics are more likely to respond. As the tiers grow, though, the engagement rate goes down. This is because the account has a larger, more diverse audience, and followers may be more passive on posts from larger influencers. When looking to reach more targeted areas or niche groups, it is best for brands to use influencers with smaller followings.

When surveyed, a large group of social media users aged 16-64 in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) said that the top 5 qualities that they want in influencers are: that they are trustworthy, that they are informative, that they are funny/entertaining, that their content is relatable, and that they only promote products in which they are knowledgeable (GWI 22). According to the 2019 *Global Web Index*, influencer followers in the U.S. and the U.K. tend to trust smaller influencers the most – specifically nano and micro influencers. This same report states that 88% of this group thinks that influencers with over 1 million followers are



not trustworthy, and these numbers are consistent over several platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat).

Large followings make many followers doubt the credibility of likes and content on posts (GWI 24). With the presence of influencers on social media platforms, influencer fraud has been created. Influencer fraud is the result of inflated engagement levels (typically likes and comments) on posts from the result of influencer engagement bots. To the untrained eye, these purchased “followers” make it seem as if an influencer’s post is receiving more engagement than it actually is. This deceives real users and can lead brands to pay an unfair amount for a partnership with an influencer. If influencers are found to be doing this, it can affect their credibility with consumers and brands; brands are especially starting to look closely when choosing influencers to work with and are very prone to noticing accounts using bots. Additionally, as technology advances, new software is being developed that detects fake accounts and social media platforms are beginning to penalize those who partake in creating fake accounts and support fake engagement (Russell 381).

When running an influencer marketing campaign, the channel that brands choose is just as important as the influencers they choose to work with. According to the 2022 *Aspire Social Channel Trends* report, brands choose to increase their presence by: 75% on Instagram, 74% on TikTok, 53% on YouTube, 35% on Pinterest, 27% on Blogger, 26% on Facebook, 10% on Twitter, and 6% on Snapchat in 2022. Instagram has been the power player among platforms for several years, but TikTok’s recent surge in popularity puts it just 1% behind Instagram for brands’ growth plans in the next year. There is expected to be a large shift in growth for video content in the coming years, and 91% of brands will choose to invest more in video content in

2022 (Aspire 20). As its popularity rises, brands and influencers alike must prepare to move more into this content space.

When working on an influencer marketing campaign, brands choose influencers based on their budget, the target audience, and the campaign's goals. While more budgets are being allocated to influencer marketing campaigns though, the amounts agreed upon for partnerships vary greatly between influencers depending on their follower count. Brands are not just paying influencers in cash; 69.5% of influencers surveyed said that their preferred methods of compensation are made up of a combination of both cash and product from brands (2021 Influencer Compensation Report 7). In 2022, 76% of brands plan to increase their influencer marketing budgets (Aspire 28).

In the same way that influencers wish to receive compensation for their partnership, brands hope to receive return on investment (ROI), or "return on influence," as Aspire's report calls it, for their influencer campaigns. Social media influencer campaigns and their results are complex and do not have one simple ROI formula. Instead, it is important for brands to look at short-term and long-term ROI goals. Short-term ROI focuses on, "The number of direct, trackable sales an influencer can drive," and long-term ROI refers to, "The future sales that will be generated as a result of the affinity built for the brand over time" (Aspire 37). There is no "one size fits all" approach to calculate ROI for influencer marketing, and it is best for brands to focus on one objective per campaign. The Aspire Report states that in 2022, the main goal for brands and their influencer marketing campaigns were to focus on sales (38%), and brand awareness (29%). Influencer campaigns will often use tools like promo codes, tracking links, and whitelisted ad analytics to see how much traffic an influencer drives to the brand.

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, influencer marketing faced an unexpected opportunity. With the country under a stay-at-home order, physical doors closed, employees were not able to come into work, customers stayed home, and the world did not know what to expect next. Companies immediately had to begin exclusively using digital communication and ecommerce to reach their customers. By using influencer marketing during this time, brands were able to have new content shot and to keep their social media presence alive. Brandon Perlman, the CEO and Founder of Social Studies, said,

“Since COVID, we’ve really started to understand the power of authentic brand ambassadors at scale. We’ve always encouraged our clients to work with long-term partners rather than one-offs and those partnerships really paid off during COVID. The creators that have an existing, positive relationship with a brand posted on their behalf gratis and highlighted their corporate good deeds,” (CreatorIQ 5).

Matt King is a 29-year-old internet personality who got his start on the former social media platform, Vine in 2015. He was once a part of the popular “Vlog Squad,” which is a popular YouTube channel that was started by famous influencer David Dobrik, after he left Vine for YouTube in 2015. The channel still exists, but King is no longer part of this group. King now has 1.1M followers on his @matrking personal Instagram account and has co-hosted a podcast named *A Hoot and a Half* since May of 2020. In a personal interview with King, he said that COVID-19 changed the scene for influencer marketing in many ways. He said,

During the lockdown, I had the most brand deals that I have ever had. Although it was a time where people couldn’t physically go into work, brands were reaching out to influencers more than ever because it was really one of the only forms of advertising content that companies could make. People were at home, and COVID really flipped the

ecommerce space—there was definitely a shift in ecommerce. Not only that, but it caused a megasurge in TikTok, and that also changed so much for influencer marketing and the approaches that influencers had to take.

In 2021 alone, the creator/influencer industry surpassed \$104 billion dollars, and it is an industry that has yet to reach its maturity (Creator Burnout Report 3). There are now more than 50 million creators, and 46.7 million of those creators are amateurs (The Creator Economy 8). Sponsored post numbers were up significantly from 2020, with a 26.7% increase and 3,798,505 posts (2022 State of Influencer Marketing Report 6). Additionally, sponsored stories experienced a sharp 33.5% increase in 2021, and influencers jumped from posting 12 sponsored story posts per week in 2020 to 16 per week in 2021 (2022 State of Influencer Marketing Report 7).

In fact, younger content creators will soon be the industry experts; they are the only generation to have grown up with social media and influencer marketing. This generation understands that moving forward, digital campaigns must be neutral, diverse, and inclusive. Additionally, “Within a society that now seeks easy access to expertise, experiences and communities to engage with, the creator economy is built around highly motivated, creative and skilled individuals that are using digital platforms to start their own businesses, brands, and communities” (The Creator Economy 7). Users no longer want a faceless advertisement but instead want an online personality to associate with it, and by using influencer marketing, brands are advertising effectively. It has been said that, “Creators are not just there to entertain; they know how to communicate with their generation, and brands cannot miss that if they want to stay relevant” (The Creator Economy 29). When asked about how things have changed for influencer marketing throughout his career and what he thinks the future of influencer marketing looks like, King said,

Influencer marketing has changed quite a bit during my time in the industry. During the days of Vine, it was all about quick returns. You know, the message would be, “Download this app now!” or “Get this mobile gaming app!” Today, it’s mostly about building awareness. For example, right now, I am in Miami for a brand partnership deal with American Airlines to promote their AAdvantage Program. They reached out to me to help make people aware of the program. In addition to that though, I’ve done partnerships with brands like Liquid IV, Oculus, Bose Headphones, Dyson...I did a few things with Dyson during lockdown...As far as the future of influencer marketing, I think it will always be constantly changing and influencers have to stay on edge. I think brands are about to continue to put significant money towards influencer marketing in general, and right now it’s looking like a lot of that will specifically be video-focused content. I’m optimistic that Instagram will still hold its ground as a bigger platform. Honestly though, I’m not sure at this point about VR [virtual reality] but don’t count it out. The future of VR is still primitive. Overall though, it’s almost like survival of the fittest in some ways to see who can do the next big thing to continue to be relevant. That being said, you just have to be willing and ready to adapt to whatever’s next. As we talked about earlier, I got my start on Vine, and one day, it was all just suddenly gone. You have to be ready to move to whatever is next, because there will always be new and emerging markets.

### CHAPTER III: PROMOTIONAL EVENTS AND MARKETING STRATEGY

As previously mentioned, traditional marketing tools have been on the decline for businesses for several years. In fact, 84% of millennials do not trust traditional advertising methods, and brands must become more creative than ever to capture the attention of their audience (Russell 174). With the development of new technology, many new marketing strategies have taken the place of traditional methods and become very popular. Two marketing tactics that have become increasingly effective in recent years are event marketing and experiential marketing.

Experiential marketing can often be tied to event marketing. Experiential marketing is defined as,

“Experiential marketing, also called ‘engagement marketing,’ is a marketing strategy that invites an audience to interact with a business in a real-world situation. Using participatory, hands-on, and tangible branding material, the business can show its customers not just what the company offers, but what it stands for” (Kirsch, “14 Examples of Experiential Marketing Campaigns That’ll Give You Serious Event Envy, *Hubspot*).

The difference between event and experiential marketing is that experiential marketing focuses less on the type of event and more so on the interactions between the brand and customer. Experiential marketing takes an integrated approach to create a long term brand-to-consumer connection and allow a brand to collect valuable data on its customers. These two marketing strategies can easily go hand-in-hand to make events that create an experience to carry out a brand’s message to its audience and help to tell the audience what they should expect.

Touchpoints, which can be defined as, “Interaction points between the organizer of the event and the visitors to the event,” are the way in which visitors experience an event, and this includes all communication and contacts between the two parties (Gerritsen & van Olderen 7). Some touchpoints are intentionally created by the event and others happen naturally, and these touchpoints can occur before, during, and after the event. It is incredibly important for an organizer to realize that these touchpoints can help to create a more positive experience for the visitor; their positive or negative association with the brand or product can last longer after the event ends. There are several factors that influence a visitor’s individual experience, and visitors that have better aligned personal factors when they will attend an event have the most meaningful experience.

Event marketing allows for marketers to communicate with their target audience to get their attention, to add a layer of emotional value for the audience through their individual experiences, and to foster social cohesion within companies (Gerritsen & van Olderen 4). According to *Events as a Strategic Marketing Tool*, event marketing is typically used in four types of marketing: customer relationship marketing, marketing communication, branding, and city marketing. Each of these events,

“Is a planned, unique, physical or virtual event or series of events for one or more target groups; is held at the invitation of an organizing party, and this invitation may also be public – so for everyone; is aimed at achieving an emotional added value to support the communicative objective of the organizing part; creates an emotional added value by means of an experience” (Gerritsen & van Olderen 6).

When people are at these events, their senses will be exposed to different things, and these exposures lead to emotions that they associate with the event and any messaging that occurs at the event.

For promotional event marketing like these, event branding (which is a subset of event marketing) is created and utilized in every aspect of the event. According to *Hubspot's* "What is Event Marketing?" article, although it is similar to a company's branding, the event branding differentiates itself enough to stand on its own and cohesive enough to be recognizable.

According to *InitLive's* "Event Branding 101" article, this branding includes an event's logo, color palette, typography, imagery, name, brand story, slogan, and voice. This can be achieved through both onsite branding (banners, booths, merchandise, promotional materials, etc.) and digital branding (website, imagery, social media, etc.). The branding should, "communicate the event's vision, gain recognition, generate new interest from prospects, attract sponsors and vendors, and create trust and loyalty" ("Event Branding 101: How to Create a Memorable Brand, *InitLive*). An intentional branding plan can mirror the thought that was also put into the rest of the event, but beyond that, companies need to know how to properly promote the event, build original moments for guests, and understand how they measure the success of the event.



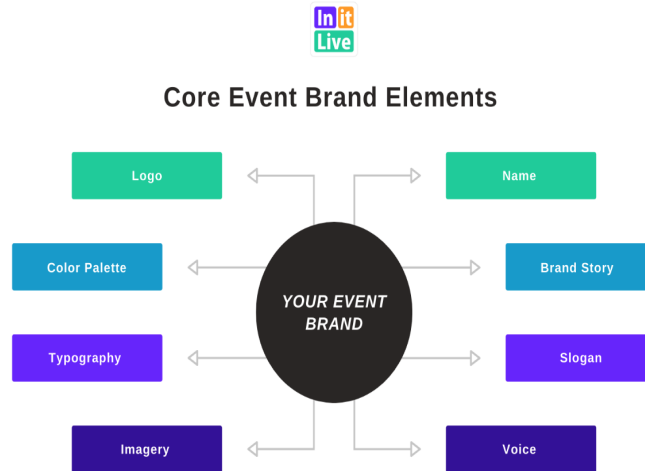


Fig. 2. Eight main elements for event branding: InitLive, “Event Marketing 101: How to Create a Memorable Brand,” 14 April 2021.

When attendees think back to their experience at an event, they often remember things like the food, the people they met, the entertainment, and the exclusive opportunities, and “Branding an event shapes how everyone involved—speakers [or performers], attendees, employees, and sponsors—remembers the experience” (Kirsch *Hubspot*). This branding needs to be cohesive in every way – from the website, to the messaging/imagery, to the design elements, to the products at the event. “The point is, a branded event can help generate leads, build loyalty and credibility, and offer support. Attendees are more willing to buy into your brand promise [and eventually into your product or service] if you provide a valuable experience (Kirsch *Hubspot*).

Management of an event is one of the most important parts to ensure that everything runs smoothly, and according to *Events as a Strategic Marketing Tool*, there are four steps of the management process (Gerritsen & van Olderan 13). The first of these steps is planning, which is where an organization makes the decision to host an event to help achieve an objective or goal. The second step is doing, and this step is where the actual event is organized. It is important that

when organizing the event, those planning it do it in a way that aligns with the objectives/goals. The third step is checking, and during and after the event, organizers assess the objective attainment through evaluation and measurement to ensure that the event aligns with the intentions that were set in the planning phase. Finally, the fourth step is acting. This step integrates the effect measurements and sees how they align with the strategy. Depending on these results, the strategy may be altered. It is important to follow and complete these four steps in order to see if the event was productive, effective, and worthwhile.

Companies have come to realize that focusing on the product is no longer enough for consumers; instead, consumers want to have emotional engagement from companies. As a result, companies must now make the effort to make sure the experiences that they create are as unique and cutting edge as possible, and they do this by using sensory awareness, distinctive themes, compelling storylines, and every conceivable experience tool (Gerritsen & van Olderen 16). This was especially difficult to do during the restrictions that came with COVID-19, but even during this time, companies made the effort to host virtual events. While this was a different kind of experience than most were used to, these online events still continue to bring people together when in-person gatherings were not an option.

Additionally, events can have a negative effect on brand perception if they are not successful or do not align with the standard of the company – especially if the consumer is not familiar with the brand. To prevent this negative effect from happening, brands that choose to host promotional events must ensure that the event is well planned and be prepared to execute it successfully. Additionally, the success of one event will set the expectations of customers for the next one that the company hosts.

The Millennial generation has changed the quality-of-life standard set by their predecessors. In a world filled with technological advancements and an online presence, these young people do not want to follow in the footsteps of their parents where they marry young, hold a job at a company for many years until retirement, buy a home, have children, and live a quiet, stable life. Their idea of “success” and “making it” in life are not necessarily buying a nice car or piece of jewelry. Instead, they prefer to gather experiences and live a dynamic lifestyle rather than collect material possessions. The older idea of a “static” lifestyle seems boring to this generation, and they seek something more dynamic where they can explore new places/opportunities with a close group of friends, have flexible work hours, and be digitally connected (Battacharya & Raghyvanshi 266).

Prosperity is now seen in a much less materialistic way but rather in a way that shows a wealth of unique experiences. Today’s young people want to have individual, memorable, once-in-a-lifetime experiences that enrich their lives. “They believe that life is one chance and they want to make the most of it by experiencing intangible factors more ardently” (Battacharya & Raghyvanshi 265). Millennials believe that these experiences will be enviable to their peers and give them an elevated status. This lifestyle, called the “Experience Economy,” has been made possible through today’s technology – where the entirety of an experience can be booked on a computer screen in a short period of time.

The “Experience Economy” theory explains that Millennials’ expression of freedom, “...Rests in exploring places, meeting people, getting acquainted with new culture and testing different food habits and dress material” (Battacharya & Raghyvanshi 266). These people enjoy sharing their exciting experiences with their digitally connected network. Millennials find more satisfaction by posting a photo of themselves at an exclusive concert, bungee jumping on an

international trip, or doing sunrise yoga than they would by wearing a diamond ring, driving a brand new sports car, or wearing designer shoes. They want the newest experience that could be described as “never been done before” to show their friends and followers. They want to seem cultured to the outside world and as if they are dedicating their lives to becoming a better version of themselves and enriching their body, soul, and mind through experiences. In the mind of a Millennial, being adventurous and spontaneous beats any lifestyle that their parents or grandparents could have lived, and it is safe to assume that this perspective on life will eventually be shared with Gen Z.

When consumers go to book these experiences though, they do their research. Companies must know that,

“Consumers are so empowered in today’s digitally connected world that it is virtually impossible to stupefy them. Before buying products or availing services, consumers listen to word of mouth, rating the product in an ecommerce site and feedback of fellow customers” (Battacharya & Raghyvanshi 267).

Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) capitalizes on someone’s willingness to tell others about a product/service and the message that the “marketer” wants that person to share. Influencer marketing is a method of WOMM. In fact, for 74% of customers, they identify word-of-mouth as playing a big role when making a purchasing decision, and 88% of people surveyed trust written, online reviews from other customers as much as they trust recommendations from people that they know. Additionally, WOMM can drive sales up to five times more compared to paid advertising and can get 200 times more consideration than an ad would (Falls 14). Once an influencer starts to spread the word, a word-of-mouth fire is sure to start.

By using promotional events, companies can also strengthen their presence on social media. After an event is announced on social media, businesses can expect to gain attention on platforms and, “If the promotion (i.e., event) is attractive to social media users, a positive response to this promotion is expected from their side. In the short-run, the company benefits from the generation of sales leads and the buzz created around its brand” (Adamopoulos & Todri 1646). Although event marketing is not necessarily new, combining it with influencer marketing does make it look a bit different than it did when it was first created. By using influencers as promoters, brands are able to effectively advertise its event/brand. The full event coverage can give users who did not attend an inside look into what occurred and draw attention to the brand and its product.

Promotional events can add a layer of exclusivity for the general public, but the publicity that influencers provide can make users feel as if they actually attended the event. If a social media user sees that his/her favorite influencer is attending an event, there is a good chance that s/he is more likely to pay attention to it. Promotional events today are almost always “Instagram approved.” What this means is that there are aesthetically pleasing spaces filtered in for photo opportunities for influencers to create content to share on their platforms. Many social media users love a visually attractive photo, and that is what these pre-planned spaces provide. Additionally, there are often extravagant perks and entertainment that come with these events – such as free merchandise, exclusive concerts, or drool-worthy food. In exchange for an invitation, companies expect influencers to cover these different aspects of the event and share their once-in-a-lifetime experience with their followers. This makes it seem as if the influencers are important and “A-list” enough to attend this exclusive event. These social media posts promote a brand and may draw a new audience of users to the brand that would have otherwise

not been exposed to it. By providing non-attendees with a live experience through influencers' social media coverage, brands are able to widen their audience, extend their guest list far beyond the number of invitations, and be incredibly effective.

When working with influencers to combine event marketing and influencer marketing, it is crucial for brands to use the experience as an opportunity to give the influencer an unforgettable experience. This is done by creating a genuine connection and formulating an opportunity that s/he cannot resist. By being prepared, being thoughtful when planning, and providing the best experience possible, brands create a collaboration that is mutually beneficial for both parties and can help to build the long-term relationship that brands are looking for with influencers. A positive experience through event marketing can cause an influencer to make that emotional connection with a brand and get true value out of the partnership. When brands have the, "It's not about me, it's about you," mindset when working with influencers in event marketing, the influencer will not only feel included at the event, but s/he will feel valued by the brand (Russell 207). By creating a more individualized experience, it is much more obvious that the brand actually cares about the influencer's presence at the event and makes the offer much more irresistible for the guest.

If brands do not create a worthwhile experience for these influencers or are ill-prepared for the event, guests take notice. When asked what raises a red flag at a promotional influencer event, King said:

When I attend an event, I am very aware of what is going on and am constantly looking for any red flags that may arise. If it seems as if there is miscommunication between the event hosts or if there is a long line to get into the event, I always take note of this right away. Just last week, I was at an event that was being held to promote an alcohol brand,

and a popular music group was performing at the event. When I arrived, it was so chaotic that no one could get in; it wasn't just those with an internet presence that couldn't get in – it was legitimate celebrities. When even the most famous people that have a large presence like that can't get in, you know it's not a good situation. Event hosts ended up being able to get people in, and we actually did decide to wait and attend the event, but it was definitely noticeable that things weren't running as smoothly as planned.

When looking at what makes an opportunity truly irresistible for an influencer, there are several tips *The Influencer Code* gives to companies when crafting influencer experiences to ensure that the influencers have a stand-out experience. The first of these is when a brand provides an influencer with affirmation, exposure to a new audience, an/or the position of being an industry expert, a brand can be much more likely to reach a new audience and get valuable advice for what is the most up-to-date news (Russell 229). Additionally, the influencer feels that s/he are being given a special opportunity, and this connection may make influencers more inclined to produce more value, content, and interaction. Next, by providing influencers with exclusive access and very important person (VIP) status, it makes the partnership more valuable to and supportive for the influencer. The personalized perks and status symbol make the influencer feel like a true brand insider at the event and with the brand. “One-size-fits-all” is not an option when crafting experiences for influencers in event marketing; spending the extra time doing research on the influencer can help for long-term connections and raise more awareness with a larger audience because of the influencer's platform. Each influencer wants to feel that s/he is getting an exclusive experience that others are not, and by creating personalized opportunities for him/her at an event, additional brand benefits usually are created. Being an

intentional, good host is important for brands when wanting to leave a lasting impression on both influencers and their extended audience.



## CHAPTER IV: FYRE MEDIA AND THE FYRE FESTIVAL ANALYSIS

Billy McFarland was a normal, young entrepreneur with good ideas and dreams to create something big. He had dreams of breaking into the New York City business world and making a name for himself. At the end of the day, he did not have much to lose; that is, until it was all too late and whatever credibility he held quickly burned to the ground.

Before the actual topic of the Fyre Festival is discussed, it is important to first lay the groundwork for how its founder, McFarland, began his career in the startup world. William Z. McFarland, known as “Billy,” was born in 1991 and was raised in Milburn, New Jersey to parents who worked as real estate developers. His entrepreneurial spirit was apparent from a young age, and he started his first business venture at just 13 years old. Over the course of his young adult years, he had several different business concepts with varying levels of success.

His idea, Magnises that first gained some noteworthy success in August of 2013 was a membership-based credit card that offered social perks. At 22 years old, his concept received \$1.5 million in investor funding, and the brand idea was to create an exclusive social club tied to a “black card” credit card system. His target audience included status-focused millennials in New York City who wanted to be part of something exclusive in the New York social scene but did not necessarily have the budget to do so. A Magnises membership cost \$250 annually and allowed members to feel as if they were a part of something revolutionary. The physical card itself was black and made of metal, and the card is often compared to the American Express Black Card, which is a card that is obtainable only through invitation and has a \$250,000 annual spend. The Magnises card was not a charge credit card at all though. Instead, it had to be attached to an existing card, and the magnetic strip to this existing card was embedded on a Magnises card. *Financer.com* called it, “A poor man’s AMEX Platinum/Centurion Card.”

The company quickly grew, and after hitting the 1,500-person membership mark, the company's member offerings also grew. The Netflix documentary shows a clip of McFarland in an interview for Fox Business, where the headline was: "Magnises is Touted as NYC's Most Exclusive Credit Card." In this interview, he says, "When I moved to New York, I was looking for a community. I wanted perks and guidance, and really, I wanted to be told what to do, where to go, where to find great things in my city. So we created Magnises." The idea behind Magnises was to provide an exclusive opportunity for members to network, to have exclusive events to attend, and to receive unique perks. While the card is what first brought people together, the social benefits and connections that came with the card is what made Magnises worth it for a member.

The business was run out of a West Village townhouse where Magnises events were held. The Magnises Townhouse was a private residence rented by McFarland. These extravagant events were filled with alcohol, live music, and unique itineraries. Additionally, the card offered exclusive discounts with partnered companies – such as stores, gyms, and restaurants – and members could purchase discounted tickets to specific events and shows. Some of the most notable events included Johnny Walker tastings, Tesla test drives, fashion shows, and an anniversary in Ibiza with Ace Hood and Juelz Santana (Financer.com). The business continued to gain traction and quickly grow. According to the Netflix documentary, *FYRE*, mentioned earlier, at one point, an employee claims that Magnises had over 10,000 members and was taking in almost 2 million dollars in membership fees. There were several press stories written about Magnises, and they described McFarland as being one of New York's next biggest entrepreneurs. Ja Rule, a famous rapper, became one of the most notable faces associated with Magnises and was a frequent visitor of the events.

In 2017, though, Business Insider began to report that Magnises members were complaining that their expectations for the company were not being met. Their tickets were not being sent on time, their trips were being canceled, and refunds were taking an abnormal amount of time to process. The Better Business Bureau gave Magnises a grade of “F” in their report. During this time, McFarland was claiming to have tickets for sale to exclusive events in New York. In reality, he had no access to these tickets, but after “selling” these tickets to Magnises members, he would buy event tickets from sites like StubHub at the last minute, pay extraordinary prices for them, and hand the tickets out to those who had bought them. This created a vicious cycle of debt for McFarland; he had to continue to sell these “exclusive tickets” in order to pay for the cost of the tickets from his previous “event.” An interviewee in *Fyre Fraud* said, “I think ultimately, Magnises is what cemented Billy’s idea that he could really make money from defrauding millennials.” Additionally, by the time Magnises moved to an office in Chelsea, there was a lawsuit of up to \$100,000 filed against McFarland for damages to the property and violation of contract for using the property for business purposes (Financer.com). In the company’s last days, McFarland tried to sell the company, and he admitted that at Magnises’ peak, there were a maximum of just 4,000 active users and 40,000 members – a significant difference from the number that was reported to the press.

The story of Magnises begins to lay the groundwork for McFarland’s next business venture. As Magnises was gaining traction in its own realm, McFarland set off on his next idea. The main topic that will be discussed in this chapter, the Fyre Festival, was a promotional event on behalf of its parent company, Fyre Media. McFarland and his business partner/co-founder, Ja Rule, set out to create a marketplace to bridge the gap between the public and booking talent for celebrity appearances. In 2016, Fyre Media was born. McFarland and Ja Rule hired software

engineers to build a website that acted as a marketplace for booking. The idea was that anyone wanting to book talent for a private event could go to the app and complete the entirety of the booking process for an entertainer that was associated with Fyre Media. The idea came to be when McFarland had tried to book Ja Rule, a well-known rapper (and later business partner), for a Magnises event. The existing process was very difficult, and McFarland felt that he had found a gap in the market that needed to be filled. In the Netflix “*FYRE*” documentary, Brett Kincade with MATTE Projects, said that the Fyre Media concept seemed to be, “this bigger brand that would end up being the Uber of booking talent.”

In this partnership, Ja Rule served as the “in” for the company’s entertainment industry connections; McFarland was seen as the powerhouse for the entrepreneurial vision and the connection to venture capitalists. There were several employees working for Fyre Media. As the app’s platform became more developed, employees worked to find ways to best promote it. In the Netflix *FYRE* documentary, MDavid Low, the Creative Director for Fyre Media said, “...In a meeting, I had actually mentioned, ‘Why don’t we throw a festival – a concert – for industry professionals.’” After that meeting, McFarland took the idea and ran with it, and the Fyre Festival was put into motion.

Although the festival was originally intended to promote the booking app, it quickly spiraled into something more extravagant. In October of 2016, the co-founders scheduled the festival to take place over two weekends in April and May of 2017 – just six months after the initial planning began. In the same *FYRE* documentary, Andy King, who eventually served as an event producer for the festival, said that one day, McFarland called him claiming to have bought Pablo Escobar’s former island in the Bahamas – named Norman’s Cay. McFarland said that this

is where the festival would take place, and he then set out to hire the best of the best in the industry to help produce the event.

One of the first of these hires was a popular new media company called Jerry Media, and they were given the task of running all of the Fyre Festival social media. Additionally, MATTE Projects was hired to do the advertising and marketing for the festival. The first thing on McFarland's to-do list was to shoot promotional content for the festival to create a campaign that would launch the event to the public. Ten of the top supermodels in the world, such as Hailey Baldwin (Bieber), Emily Ratajkowski, and Bella Hadid, were flown to the island where McFarland planned to host the festival. Not only did these models each have a large social media following, but they also had significant relevance in the influencer realm at that time. Brett Kincade was one of the MATTE Projects employees sent to film the campaign. In the *FYRE* Netflix documentary, he describes the unstructured chaos that surrounded the shoot and said, "There was no story we wanted to tell. It was 'Capture everything.'" There were two camera crews – one that followed the models and another that filmed McFarland and the rest of the Fyre Media team that was present for filming.

The lines between work and pleasure quickly became blurred, and the promotional shoot turned to a sun-up to sun-down party atmosphere. Alcohol was heavily consumed and activities that had nothing to do with the campaign took priority. This being said, the production team claimed they did everything that they could to follow instructions to film everything possible. In *FYRE*, Mick Purzycki, the CEO of Jerry Media, said, "They captured a ton of footage that was just, really, second to none, and it was the thing that gave all of the New York agencies some insight into what was happening down there." While the shoot was going on, many of the models were posting their own content on their personal social media accounts from their time on the

island, and this content made it seem like all things were running smoothly and that they were having the time of their lives in the Bahamas. These posts from the influential users gained significant attention from the public; although the purpose of the shoot was not yet announced, the public knew that the popular models were working together.

The main launch of the Fyre Festival came on December 12, 2016, for what McFarland called, “The best coordinated social influencer campaign ever” in the *FYRE* documentary. Four hundred of the most popular influencers, models, artists, actors, and actresses were partnered with and instructed to post an image of an orange tile on their Instagram account at 5 o’clock PM. The caption on this post was to include something with the elements of telling users to join them at the festival, tagging the @fyrefestival account, and plugging the Fyre Festival website. The idea behind this strategy was to fill users’ feeds with the same homogeneous and noticeable content. If a user was scrolling through multiple orange tile posts at a time, it was guaranteed to capture his/her attention and pique his/her interest.

These initial users that posted the tiles, also nicknamed the “Fyre Starters,” were paid anywhere from \$20,000 to \$250,000 for the single post because of their significant following. These “Starters” acted as ambassadors for the company and made up what the festival coined the “Fyre Tribe” (*American Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 139, 140). When users clicked the link to the Fyre Festival’s site that was linked on the event’s social media account, users were immediately shown the promotional video that had been shot on the island. This video depicted a fantasy-like, tropical experience that seemed too good to be true. In the documentary, *FYRE*, McFarland described it as, “Showing people that for three or four days, you can escape reality and come experience Pablo Escobar’s old island.”

After the video launched globally and the influencers had made their post, a PR storm hit the festival. In just 48 hours, the campaign had over 300 million impressions (AJHSSR Journal 140). On their website, Fyre Festival advertised several extravagant ticket packages that offered different luxury experiences. One package included a “glamping” style tent, while the most expensive (\$400,000) promised the “Artist’s Palace” ticket holders four beds, eight VIP tickets, and dinner with one of the performers (AJHSSR Journal 140). Presale tickets went on sale, and within 48 hours, the company had sold 95% of the tickets for the festival’s first year. Not much later, the entire festival would be sold out. The social media campaign had been highly effective, and ticket buyers looked forward to living in paradise for a short time and expected to party with their favorite influencers.

After the event’s launch, the team quickly had to figure out the logistics of the event, and although there was an easy-going attitude during the promotion shoot, the mood shifted things quickly started to go south. Fyre’s planning immediately raised red flags. In the *FYRE* documentary, King states, “To do a proper music festival, I would say you should try to start the design and the fundraising, everything, at least 12 months out.” In the Fyre Festival’s case, employees had less than six months to pull a festival, on a private island with little infrastructure, together. Throughout the short planning process of the festival, there was constant employee turnover, a need to find a new island to host the festival on, constant spending over budget, the fact that neither location had enough space to fit the amount of tickets that had been sold, and no proper water or transportation systems on the island. The extravagant plans and promises that had been made to ticket holders quickly began to crumble.

Throughout the festival planning, McFarland seemed to pull money out of thin air. When the project would run out of funding, McFarland would fly back to New York or make phone

calls to fund the next portion of the festival's bills. He also attained more money by selling additional add-ons for the festival. He began adding experience upgrades to the website, when in reality, these upgrades did not actually exist. Throughout this time, the Fyre Media team in the New York were suffering the consequences of McFarland being all-consumed by the festival and were constantly waiting on late paychecks and signoffs to continue their work.

On April 22 – just five days before the festival was to begin – ticket holders received an email from the Fyre Festival. The email explained that the Fyre Festival would be a cashless and cardless; instead, “Fyrebands” would be used as wallets for the weekend. The email suggested that participants load at least \$3,000 before arriving to the island but explained that in order to partake in many of the festival's experiences, they would need much more. For an island that struggled with internet connection issues, this was a risky and desperate move – especially considering that the system had not been tested. The reality of the situation though was that the festival did not have any money, and this was McFarland's newest scheme to raise money. After this email was sent, some attendees received aggressive phone calls explaining that they had not yet loaded money to their band and that they needed to do so as soon as possible. The *FYRE* documentary explains that the first round of Fyreband loaders, who fully expected to attend the event, had uploaded 800 thousand dollars onto the bands. As the amount of time to the event lessened, it became glaringly obvious that the Fyre Festival did not have money or resources. There were numerous phone calls from vendors saying that they had been sent a wire several days ago and that the funds had not yet arrived.

Throughout all of this, what were the attendees thinking? They had received little to no communication about the logistics of the event since they bought their ticket. The media from the promotional shoot was still being used on the social media account. Some guests began to notice



that many of the original images of the accommodations were taken down from the website. Ticket holders began to bombard the Fyre Festival Instagram account in search of answers. The amount of questions – most of which were incredibly legitimate – was unmanageable. The decided solution was to send the legitimate questions to the Fyre team and to delete the other ones/to turn off the comment sections. Guests noticed these actions and became increasingly frustrated and suspicious. They had paid large amounts of money to not even have flight information as the event got closer and closer.

In the final time leading up to the event, the question of “Will this event actually happen?” and “Is it possible to actually pull this off?” arose with the festival team more and more often. Doubts began to creep into the team’s mind, but McFarland was insistent that the event must move forward. He basically gave employees the option of “make solutions to these problems, or you can leave.” It is important to note that almost all of these employees had not yet been paid in full – as they would receive payment after the festival took place. Panic began to set in; there was not enough space to safely accommodate everyone, commercial flights back had not been booked, and the event was not finished. It was a toss up as to if the country would let water for the event pass through customs; the four eighteen wheelers filled with Evian water were stuck at customs until payment was provided. The swanky housing that the website’s packages had promised had turned into leftover hurricane tents. Still, McFarland insisted that the event move forward. At some point, employees had to ask themselves that if by seemingly doing their job and solving the issues that arose, were they enabling the festival’s possibility of still taking place?

The night before the festival was to start, a massive rain storm hit the island. Everything that had been put out for the festival immediately became soaked and unusable. The tents were

now useless and the mattresses strewn about the campsite were filled with water. The next day, Fyre Festival attendees began to arrive. While they had been promised luxurious transportation, guests arrived on charter planes (with the Fyre logo hastily stuck on the side of the plane) in economy seating. Additionally, few participants knew exactly which one was their flight until it was time to board. As the first flight's passengers boarded, Blink-182, one of the artists booked to perform at the festival, announced on social media that they had pulled out of the festival on account that they didn't feel that they could deliver the show that their fans deserved. Still, after being under the impression that their favorite influencers would be present at this groundbreaking event and having no communication that these influencers would no longer be attending the event, passengers decided to continue their journey to the Bahamas.

Upon arrival, attendees were loaded up onto a yellow school bus and taken to the Exuma Point Beach Bar and Grill restaurant owned by a local business owner, MaryAnn Rolle. Rolle had no idea that guests would be coming to her restaurant until less than thirty minutes before they arrived. This stop was meant to act as a distraction for guests while leadership continued to figure out exactly what they were going to do. Regardless, guests did not know any better and were content to drink alcohol by the water. That is, until they were at the restaurant for six hours.

At this point, guests became antsy and began to ask questions about the campsite and the location of their luggage. Guests began to stand in line for long amounts of time in a sort of makeshift "check-in" system until McFarland told them to go grab any tent, and guests ran to get any space that they could claim. The "luxury villas" that guests paid for simply did not exist. That night, the entirety of the guests' luggage was brought out in two eighteen wheeler containers, and with no organization system for it, guests had no choice but to dig through the

pile and search for their individual bags. By the end of the day, the festival had officially been canceled. Company leadership issued a statement saying:

Fyre Festival set out to provide a once-in-a-lifetime musical experience...Due to circumstances out of our control, the physical infrastructure was not in place on time and we are unable to fulfill on that vision safely and enjoyably for our guests...We are working to place everyone on complementary charters back to Miami today...We ask for everyone's patience and cooperation during this difficult time, as we work as quickly and safely as we can to remedy this unforeseeable situation (AJHSSR Journal 141).

The environment at the island could be compared to that of *The Hunger Games* or *Lord of the Flies*. Attendees became barbaric in their behavior and felt that by ransacking tents/the festival materials, they had a better chance at survival. Since the event was said to be cashless, few had any type of payment for transportation or supplies. At this point, the disastrous conditions and false promises began to flood the internet. Pictures of the lackluster food, horrendous accommodations, and laughable "luxurious" yellow school bus transportation – were going viral, and Twitter users blew this information all over the internet. Although the influencers with countless followers were the ones to have promoted the event, the attendees with significantly fewer followers were the ones to actually attend the promoted event and to have their organic content go viral. McFarland and the Fyre Festival were now the targets of digital criticism and the laughing stock of the online world. As everything crashed and burned, people immediately wanted their money refunded, but there simply was no money to pay them. Something resembling a mob made up of these angry, local people began to accumulate outside of the Fyre Festival team's house, and McFarland was nowhere to be found. In fact, the house

where he was staying was almost completely cleaned out. The remaining team had no choice but to fend for themselves and get out of the country as quickly and discreetly as they could.

After everyone returned to the United States, the Fyre team held a meeting in hopes of doing enough damage control and rebranding to save Fyre Media from its association with the Fyre Festival. The team (back in the United States) that had put so much work into the talent booking app and didn't have anything to do with the festival was at a loss. So much hard work had been destroyed in a short period of time because of the festival's magnitude of disaster. While the idea of a rebrand for Fyre Media seemed like a hopeful idea for a moment, there was no coming back from the damage that the festival had caused and the repercussions that were to come.

With the end of the disastrous weekend came a \$100 million dollar class action lawsuit; this was not an issue that would just "blow over" for McFarland and those associated with the Fyre Festival. The extent of McFarland's lies were coming to light. He had lied to investors about the success of the company and made up lies about what was going on in order to get more money. Many of the details had been fabricated and false documents had been sent. McFarland was charged with wire fraud in federal court and the description of festival details were written as: "The festival's lack of adequate food, water, shelter, and medical care created a dangerous and panicked situation among attendees – suddenly finding themselves stranded on a remote island without basic provisions – that was closer to *The Hunger Games* or *Lord of the Flies* than Coachella" (AJHSSR 141, 142). So many people employed by the Fyre Festival were never paid – even after countless hours of excruciating work.

McFarland was arrested on June 30, 2017 and was charged with wire fraud for defrauding investors regarding the Fyre Festival's financial state and history. Even after getting back to the

United States, McFarland was behind yet another scam company in hopes of making money while out on a 300 thousand dollar bail. In June of 2018 though, McFarland was arrested once again, and this time with five felony charges including: fraud, money laundering, identity theft, and witness intimidation. He was charged with wire fraud and money laundering. Through his post-Fyre Festival business scam, he is claimed to have defrauded 15 people for a total of almost \$100,000 (AJHSSR Journal 141). When he received this money, he put it into other peoples' separate accounts so as to not be suspicious and draw attention.

The ultimate con artist had finally been caught. After three companies built on the practice of scamming its customers, McFarland finally ended up in court. In October of 2018, McFarland pled guilty to two counts of wire fraud on account of the Fyre Festival and two counts of wire fraud for selling false tickets under NYC VIP Access. He was sentenced to six years in prison. As the sentencing process was in motion, Judge Naomi Reice Buchwald said, "The defendant is a serial fraudster and to date his fraud, like a circle, has no end...Mr. McFarland has been dishonest most of his life," and the prosecutor requested his sentence be at least 11 years (AJHSSR Journal 141). Lenders forced Fyre Festival LLC, the company to which Fyre Festival belonged, into bankruptcy on August 30, 2017. The day before, one of Fyre Festival LLC's bankrupt trustees had put his/her own lawsuit into motion and sued the celebrity influencers who had posted media promoting the Fyre Festival and been paid for their post.

The main problem regarding the role that influencers' played in the festival marketing campaign was that if an advertisement is posted on behalf of a user's account and compensation is received, it is important that #advertisement or #ad is tagged in the post. This tag lets viewers know that the account is being paid to post for the company; it is not being posted solely on the basis of the user's personal opinion. If this hashtag is not tagged on a sponsored post, there is

some level of neglected responsibility involved for the influencer that posted it. Of all of the influencers that posted in the Fyre Festival campaign launch, Emily Ratajkowski was the only one to tag that the post was an advertisement.

This unregulated social media marketing caused unknowing consumers to be influenced by the campaign and purchase tickets for the Fyre Festival without all of the information about the partnership being disclosed. They were misled by the influencers' intention to also attend the festival and did not receive follow up communications on the influencers' decision not to attend the festival before leaving for the trip. In the aftermath of the festival, there were nine lawsuits filed against the Fyre Festival, but only one of them dealt with the influencers involved with the initial campaign. The lawsuit, named *Chinery et. al. v. Fyre Media*, stated that the festival had paid 400 influencers to post on behalf of the festival but that no indication to the paid partnership was made in the posts. In this lawsuit, "...the plaintiffs named 1-100 'Doe Defendants' who 'deliberately and fraudulently marketed and sold tickets to a lavish tropical destination music festival'" and stated that "...without the widespread and uniform dissemination of the false promise described herein, [p]laintiff and class members would not have purchased their Fyre Festival Passes..." ("Fyre Festival Aftermath: New Rules for Influencers?").

On February 16, 2018, just three months shy of the one-year anniversary of the class action's filing, "...the court granted the plaintiff's request for voluntary dismissal of the entire action without prejudice. The request for dismissal was filed in conjunction with a declaration by the plaintiffs' attorney stating that none of the defendants had been served and the plaintiffs intend to refile the action in federal court" ("Fyre Festival Aftermath: New Rules for Influencers?"). Although their impact from this partnership was obviously seen, none of the influencers have faced direct consequences because of their involvement with the Fyre Festival

campaign. Because of the campaign though, the Federal Trade Commission have since edited their endorsement guidelines and state in the Federal Trade Commission Act that if a social media influencer has a “material connection” with a company, it must be disclosed on the post. Additionally, different platforms have specific terms and guidelines that influencers must abide by for branded content.

## CHAPTER V: COMBINING MARKETING STRATEGIES TO APPEAL TO MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z

In the *Fyre Fraud* documentary, Vickie Segar, a social media strategist, said, “What Fyre Festival did prove is that the power of influence is real, because at the time, there was nothing else but influence.” McFarland’s entire marketing strategy was based on using the internet’s most popular influencers to flood social media with the announcement of the festival. In fact, his advertising strategy was almost solely based on social media advertising. Jerry Media, his hired advertising agency, successfully painted a luxurious picture of the festival on the Instagram account for months leading up to the event – when in reality, the only material that they had to work with was the content from the promotional shoot filmed months before.

The *Fyre Fraud* documentary goes to explain that the marketing of this event was something that really targeted the Millennial generation’s “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO) concept. Jia Tolentino, a writer for *The New Yorker*, describes this term in the *Fyre Fraud* documentary as, “FOMO is something that was invented by the social media paradigm. It’s this underlying anxiety where if you don’t continue to escalate your visibility, your identity will start to crumble to pieces.” Calvin Wells, a venture capitalist who is featured in *Fyre Fraud*, said in the documentary that today’s generation of young people are constantly thinking to themselves, “Am I trending at the right event?” Wells continued with, “You’re either tagged in posts or you’re sharing memes or you’re sending videos that everyone can relate to and laugh... You see what everyone else is doing. The fact that you’re not there creates this fear that you’re less of an individual.”



Although Gen Z is the generation that is often looked at as the one to be the most social media savvy, in 2017, Millennials were the first group to be users on social media and ultimately were the target audience for the Fyre Festival campaign. Segar in *Fyre Fraud* said,

“Millennials are spending around two-hours-plus a day on social media. Every day, I start by hitting up Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. If you’re not relevant in social media, if you’re not talked about, you don’t exist. Instagram, social media marketing, influencer marketing is the most impactful form of marketing for an entire generation.”

This generation feared that if they did not take part in the Fyre Festival, which influencers were advertising as if it were to be the next 1969 “Woodstock” music festival, that they would miss out on experiencing history. In *Fyre Fraud*, Dave Brooks, a Senior Correspondent for Billboard, described the energy surrounding the event by saying, “Who would want to miss seeing Kanye in the Bahamas with Kendall Jenner? I mean, talk about the FOMO movement. Like, it elevated it to a ten. I had influencers begging to go because all the other influencers are going.” In the same documentary, Wells follows Brooks up with, “You’re in Lower Manhattan, where you’re freezing. You got an election that just upended the political environment. The thing that you’re absolutely focused on is escaping from that. And so people are dying to be a part of something that was going to be the—the Woodstock of the Millennial generation.” With the tactical use of recent events and the power of influencer marketing, McFarland was able to effectively sell the public what seemed to be the most out-of-this-world experience that would allow them to escape reality for a weekend.

The Fyre Festival was the first of its kind to ambush social media in the approach that it took; it forced social media users to pay attention to the orange tile and to have a piqued interest regarding the event that the orange tile represented. Additionally, the social power of the specific

influencers that McFarland chose to partner with helped create a sort of unique credibility that the first-year festival had not earned. The “Instagram-comes-to-life” promotional video and the backing of so many celebrities acted as a smoke screen to something great—when in reality, the logistics behind-the-scenes were on the decline. When asked about how those in the influencer industry felt about the Fyre Festival in 2017, as well as how the Fyre Festival is discussed today, King said:

You know, when it happened, the Fyre Festival was the most embarrassing thing to be associated with. People felt embarrassed that they had been scammed into going to something that was such a failure. Now though, it’s almost like a badge of honor; you know, people can say, ‘Yeah, I actually did go and survive.’ I do think it was the first time though that there was this awakening moment and that influencers were put in check. Now, you are weary of the amount of scams that come your way in this industry and have to be careful of something that looks convincingly legitimate, but the Fyre Festival was one of the first times that influencers realized that some things really are just too good to be true in this industry. The promotional video that the festival made was amazing and made it seem like this huge team was there to produce it, but in reality it just shows the trickery that makes small teams and productions appear bigger than they actually are. We can see things like this in hindsight, but at the time, it was the next big, exclusive thing that people wanted to be seen at and associated with.

Similar to the Fyre Festival documentaries that have been created for Netflix and Hulu, similar tell-all series have been made regarding the Anna Delvy and Elizabeth Holmes scandals that have recently occurred in the media. Although a different situation from the Fyre Festival, both influential women used similar persuasions/smoke-screens and their social abilities to

convince the public to believe complete lies. Both McFarland, Delvey, and Holmes desired to be in society's "the room where it happened," and they needed as many influential people on their side to make this happen. When relating this to and discussing influencer culture in his interview, King said:

Today, everyone always wants to be, "In the room where it happens," and some are willing to do whatever it takes to get there. Some influencers need that social media validation to look like they are doing something exclusive, and they end up as a scam themselves and tarnish their authenticity—which is what your audience is looking for most of all. Oppositely though, there are always those out to scam those people that so desperately want that external validation. I can't tell you how many emails people, especially newer influencers, get claiming that they're eligible to get verified on Instagram; all they have to do is enter the login for their username and password. Listen, you can become a verified account on Instagram and the platform does not even let you know. There are just so many things out there like this, and you have to be so aware and almost skeptical of not falling into the next scam. When you hear about stories like Delvey or Holmes, you know, things like that will always be going on – even if no one knows about it at the moment. It can definitely be an interesting culture. Influencers aren't going to be going away any time soon, and as an influencer you have to be really careful about what brands and people you are closely associated with.

In fact, in the future, growing a brand and reaching consumers will only get more difficult as technology advances and influencer marketing matures. Although influencer marketing is already a competitive industry for companies, the market will only continue to become more fragmented, and finding quality influencers to partner with will cost these brands more time,

money, and resources. For the future of influencer marketing on social media, companies will most likely either make their individual brand an influencer, using internal employees (such as the CEO or founder) as their influencers, or use advanced artificial intelligence bots to create a personal connection with consumers (Russell 382).

Poorly planned promotional events that utilize influencer marketing partnerships are still happening even today. King's significant other, Patricia Flach, is a micro influencer on Instagram (on her personal account that has 35K followers) and co-hosts a podcast called *Grits to Glam*. She is much newer to the influencer industry than King, but because she is constantly surrounded by the influencer industry while living in Los Angeles and dating King, she has a unique point of view of the industry. She was present at the interview with King, and she added:

You know, just last weekend [April 15-17, 2022], we went to Coachella, and an event called "Revolve Festival" was happening at the same time. It was a promotional event held for the shopping platform, Revolve, and influencers were invited to attend. Some people had to spend \$2,000 dollars to attend the event, and it ended up being really poorly planned and getting a ton of negative publicity from influencers that attended. Funny enough, a lot of people were actually calling it "Fyre Festival 2.0." Apparently, a lot of influencers arrived at a parking lot to get to the shuttles that were supposed to take them to the event, and it was just a mess. Apparently there wasn't a lot of communication between Revolve and the influencers, and a lot of the influencers were stuck in the sun in this random parking lot and never actually even got to go to the event. I'm sure that there was fault on both sides, but people are really upset about how everything was handled. I don't really understand why the event would have taken place during the same weekend as a huge event like Coachella or why people would pay so much money and spend so

much time to go to a promotional event like this, but a lot of people are really upset about it.

On social media, event attendees complained that there was poor communication between Revolve and attendees, that the brand obviously prioritized larger influencers, that security at the buses had been given no information, and that the event was a waste of time. While some influencers made the event look enviable, many attendees took to social media platforms like TikTok to share their individual stories and reveal the truth behind what the experience was actually like. In these videos, many of these influencers have said that they will be hesitant to work with the brand again or will never work with them again. As a result of this social media use, many people (who did not attend the Revolve Festival) are aware of the brand's failure to live up to expectation, and their view of the brand has also been tainted. This promotional event was put on to create brand awareness, to include as many influencers as possible, and to host a massive influencer marketing campaign on social media. While some guests had a favorable experience, the brand will have a reputation surrounding the Revolve Festival if they choose to have it next year. This recent example is further proof that influencers expect a high level of communication for influencer marketing campaigns, and while they were flattered to be invited to a promotional event such as this, proper planning and execution is crucial for the success of an event.

Is the success of a promotional event covered by so many influencers, such as the Fyre Festival and the Revolve Festival, even a possibility after the extensive media coverage that occurred for these events? King says yes:

I think executing a concept like the Fyre Festival is absolutely still a possibility.

Obviously, it needs to differentiate itself from past events and show that history is not

going to repeat itself. If I were invited to attend an event like this though, a brand was going to pay for me to attend, and I knew it was well set up, I would absolutely go. People would need to know that it is going to be run by a legitimate entertainment company and know that people are going, but I think something like this is absolutely still possible.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by utilizing the education that I received at the University of Mississippi through the School of Journalism and New Media and the research done on behalf of this thesis, it is clear that influencer marketing holds great power in the way that business is conducted and that these online relationships can create an impact that brands would have never expected. So much has changed within the digital space over the past decade in general, and the format of effective communication and advertising has also had to significantly change and adapt to reach its target audience. An authentic connection between the audience and the brand is something that brands strive to achieve, and the new digital landscape allows them a unique opportunity to do so. Rather than relying on outdated, traditional marketing strategies, brands have had to search to find new methods that pinpoint exactly what their target audience wants to see and use the data they receive to see what was most effective.

As the digital landscape has changed, some of these new marketing strategies have proven to be very effective. Influencer marketing has shown itself to be a method that is one of the most effective, and social media platforms have allowed people to make a career out of using their status as an influencer to partner with brands and promote their products/services. This type of marketing allows for the bridge between the consumer and the brand through the influencer by utilizing the connection that the influencer has fostered with his/her audience. Consumers are more likely to buy a product that a friend recommended to them than when a brand talks about itself, and the influencer-to-consumer relationship often acts as a fulfillment to this theory. The relationship allows for the influencer to earn a certain sort of trust from his/her audience through the influencer's authenticity, and consumers will often take the influencer's opinion as reliable and as truth.

Another type of marketing tactic that has become popular with the surge of popularity in digital progression is event marketing. By using events to reach their target audience, brands are fostering a relationship with their audience through emotional connection through individual experiences. By providing a positive and intentional experience, brands can contribute to a positive brand opinion and long-term relationship between the two parties. In addition to event marketing though, experiential marketing takes an integrated approach and provides certain touchpoints that create specific memories/emotional connection for each guest. Today's consumers have decided that brands focusing on a product is not enough; instead, they want a connection.

The two strategies can often go hand-in-hand for an effective and engaging consumer experience. By adequately preparing for an event, providing individualized experiences for guests and being open with their audience, brands can create a positive brand image for their audience. If these things are not done though, it can have detrimental effects for a brand. An example of this was seen at the Fyre Festival music festival in 2017, and it was one of the first modern-marketing and event failures that created a lasting impact. Although being an influencer is often seen as a sought-after venture in 2022, influencers today have to be increasingly cautious that the brands that they choose to partner with are legitimate and that they are who they claim to be.

As the digital space continues to change so rapidly, approaches to marketing will also have to change and adapt. Social media influencers are constantly having to take new approaches to effectively reach their audience, and brands must find ways to also adapt, as well as to choose the right influencers to partner with. Digital marketing will continue to change and grow, but it is



safe to assume that the advertising industry will never go back to a way of having predominantly traditional methods.

**THE HYPOTHETICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN**

## **APOLLO: THE MUSIC EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME**

### **The Parent Company**

This campaign has been prepared under the music festival experience's parent company, Olympio Experiences. The idea of this company is built on the goal of being the primary company to create the ultimate luxury experiences for the next generation of young Americans. These will be experiences specifically curated to be exclusive, standout events that capture the attention of the young people on the internet and an event where guests are able to tell their future children that they were a part of history. The experiences of this company and their branding will each be tied to Greek mythology in some way because they will be events that are “worthy of Olympian attendance.”

Both Millennials and Gen Z have proven that they value experiences over material possessions, and Olympio will be the next company to be the known host of the most enviable, one-of-a-kind experiences that this generation aspires to attend. These events will be worthy of attendees' social media coverage, but they will not just be “Instagrammable.” Instead, it will go beyond an event; it will be an “experience.” Each individual experience will be uniquely different, filled with high-profile and influential people, and it will provide an unforgettable experience that no other company offers. The company will predominantly be promoted through event and experiential marketing, and influencer marketing will be utilized with these strategies.

### **The Campaign**

#### **The Event**

Olympio Experiences will launch its company with an event called, “Apollo,” which will be a luxury music festival experience. The name comes from the Greek god Apollo in Greek

mythology – who is the Greek god of the Sun, Music, and Experiences. The event will be held in Mykonos, Greece and will be one of the most luxurious music festivals to date. As the event to launch the company, Apollo will have extensive media coverage, and it will be a high profile event with the most exclusive guest list and tickets that are difficult to acquire. The event will be a three-day event and will be held annually on the second weekend of September.

When looking at the overall goal and appeal of Apollo, it is important to remember how this event serves to launch its parent company and the company's initial reputation. This will be the most enviable, unparalleled experience that this generation has ever seen. The people who get to attend will be seen as the pioneers of the future of events, and the top-of-the-line brands represented will be considered the standard of luxury. The opulent weekend will be full of exclusive listening sessions, shopping opportunities from some of the most well-known luxury brands, and one-time-only dining experiences from top restaurant groups. Although the guests may be overlooking the Aegean Sea in Mykonos, it will feel a lot more like Mount Olympus.

With the large-scale nature of the event, the event will need ample time for extensive planning. The event will be held from September 8-10, 2023. This allows almost a year-and-a-half to ensure that the event is well thought out, that there is enough time to promote it, and that it is a positive representation for the launch of Olympio Experiences. The team will be well-versed in the event industry, the music festival industry, the travel industry, the legal world, and the technical world; experienced and accredited employees will make up the team. From the very beginning Apollo must differentiate itself from Fyre Festival by showing its legitimate nature so that brand partners and consumers are not skeptical. Guests will receive ample open communication before and throughout the event, and the campaign materials will

show the extensive planning process and the existing/legitimate infrastructure of the island – without giving too many of the weekend’s exciting details away.

Apollo can be considered “The most exclusive event that the rest of the world gets to watch,” and something that happens for “One weekend, and one weekend only.” Guests who are able to buy a ticket will be surrounded by some of today’s most influential people and sponsored by some of the world’s most popular brands. A limited number of tickets will be sold to the general public, while others will be gifted to specific influencers and celebrities. The event will have extensive coverage not only from guests but also from Olympio’s social media accounts, and professional photographers and videographers will be present throughout the entire weekend. Social media users will have the opportunity to feel like they are living the experience in real-time through this coverage from their favorite influencers and celebrities. These users will get an inside look into the event: private listening experiences with top artists, days spent on luxury catamarans, postcard-worthy views, covetable networking opportunities with influential people, and many other unmatched aspects of an experience that would be worthy of a “Greek god’s” attendance.

## **Situational Statement, Mission, Target Publics, & Objectives**

### Situational Statement

In 2017, the Fyre Festival was advertised to be the best luxury music festival that the world had ever seen. It was going to allow attendees to escape from reality and live in grandiosity.

Although tickets for the festival had a hefty price tag, people were willing to spend that money to attend the event that was supposed to be the “next big thing.” After disastrously poor planning from the Fyre Festival’s leadership and poor communication with ticket holders, attendees were flown to the Bahamas for what they thought would be the best weekend of their life. Instead, they arrived to

borderline *Lord of the Flies* conditions in the Bahamas. Attendees took to social media to show the world the disaster that was actually happening and to announce that the popular influencers who had promoted the event were nowhere to be found. The repercussions of this event collectively ended the festival's parent company, Fyre Media, and made a laughing stock of the event. While the execution of the event was outrageously poor, the concept of a luxury music festival is still a salvageable, interesting idea. Whoever next approaches this concept will have stigmas to combat, but with a planned approach and strategy, the host may be able to overcome them and put on a wildly popular/successful event. Through the creation of the Apollo Music Experience from Olympio Experiences, the idea of a luxury music festival may be able to come to life and be executed correctly this time.

### Mission

This campaign serves to launch the announcement of the first annual Apollo Music Experience. It aims to draw awareness to the event, to draw buzz around the experience concept and the parent company, to gain a following on the festival's social media accounts/views on the website, and to sell 80% of the available tickets on the first day of sales. Additionally, it will begin to associate the influential people who will attend the event, begin to form the long-term connection between the brand and the influencer, and speak to the kind of experiences that Olympio Experiences will offer.

### Target Publics

The target audience for this event will be American Millennials and Gen Z members who are between the ages of 18-30 and are familiar with/consistent users of Instagram and TikTok.

Wealthier members of the age group are the consumers expected to actually buy the tickets to the event.

### Objectives

- To create and increase awareness of the launch of the Apollo Music Experience concept
- To create and increase exposure of the Olympia Experiences company and its mission
- To increase the following of the Apollo and Olympia Instagram and TikTok social media accounts and to create a buzz around the music experience on these platforms
- To increase the number of visitors who view the website
- To build credibility for the event and prove that it is legitimate through use of influencers/celebrities who will act as ambassadors
- To sell 80% of the available event tickets on the day that tickets go on sale

### **Strategy, Key Messages, Slogan, & Spokesperson**

#### Strategy

Through the “Apollo’s Debut” campaign, the Apollo Music Experience concept will be introduced to consumers. This will be an influencer marketing campaign that supports the promotional event. The campaign will take place through social media on the Apollo Instagram and TikTok social media channels, and it will utilize influencers and their individual accounts to reach the consumer. This campaign will point consumers to the Apollo social media accounts and the website – where a YouTube promotional video will be linked and information on the event will be provided. Roughly 150 of the most popular social media influencers and celebrities, such as Emma Chamberlain, Billie Eilish, Timothy Chalomet, Kylie Jenner, and Noah Beck will

be chosen to participate in this campaign as ambassadors. As these ambassadors will be associated with the brand because of this campaign, the diverse group will consist of influencers that will represent the brand well. After these ambassadors have been contacted and they agree to partner with Apollo, they will be contractually given tickets to the event, a financial earning, and certain accommodations during the weekend of the festival. In exchange, the brand asks them to partake in their campaign launch and to post content on their social media platform; additionally, they will be asked to attend the event and post content while there, as well as leading up to the event. After seeing these influencers promote the campaign, the goal is for the target audience to become curious about what their favorite influencers are posting about and following along with the event's media.

When looking at differentiation in Apollo from the Fyre Festival, Apollo will learn from the mistakes made by Fyre Festival. First, Apollo will secure and finalize event location and details before the campaign launches and tickets are sold. Ambassadors chosen for the campaign will know details about the event and be knowledgeable enough to know what they are promoting. Additionally, there will be more than one content pool to pull from for Apollo; it will be one promotional launch video for the entire festival. For example, even for the campaign launch, there is a media blast that will go out to the ambassadors, as well as an initial promotional video that is separate from the content that ambassadors are posting. Finally, the campaign will follow the appropriate regulations to ensure that consumers know that the ambassadors are partnered with the brand and are being compensated. When the Fyre Festival launched its campaign, only one influencer captioned it with #ad – which symbolized that the post was in partnership with a brand for promotion. Fyre Festival was a poor example of



executing a luxury music festival, and steps will be taken to ensure that Apollo is as differentiated from Fyre Festival as possible.

### Messages

The key messages that Apollo Music Experience team wants the target audience to understand are:

- Apollo is a new event that is going to draw a large number of young, popular social media influencers and celebrities. It will be a successful event and although a similar concept, it will not end up like the Fyre Festival.
- Apollo is the first of Olympio Experiences' events, and this company will put on luxury events that influential young people will want to attend for many years to come.
- Consumers should follow the event's social media accounts for content and announcements, view the content about the event on influencers/celebrities' social media accounts, and buy tickets to the event if they are able.
- Apollo will be the premier luxury experience for Millennials and Gen Z that few will get to experience, but that the internet will watch and speak about. There may be competitors in this field, but Apollo exceeds them all through their partnerships and unrivaled, inventive planning that sets them apart.

### Slogan

Apollo: The Music Experience of the Heavens

## Spokesperson

There will be two spokespeople for the Apollo Music Experience, and they will be two of the ambassadors. They will be people whose reputations and values align with that of the brand and effectively speak to the target audience. The spokespeople will help personify the campaign and add credibility to it, and their following of fans will hopefully endorse the event because of the association. The spokespeople will work closely with the Olympio company to execute all pieces of the event promotion and ensure that both parties are receiving the maximum amount of benefits from the partnership. The spokespeople will be featured at the event and featured in most of the content promoted by Apollo media.

## Logo

The logo will be something that is used across the entire event and in all branded materials. The logo will be simple but effective; it will be blue and white (to represent the colors of Mykonos) and will include a laurel wreath. The laurel wreath is often associated with the Greek god Apollo in Greek mythology. The laurel wreath will also be used as an abbreviated variation of logo for the event for some branding materials.

A P O L L O 

## **Tactics: Actions and Communications**

### Actions and Events

This campaign will take place over a five-day period six months before the event (March 2023). A song by Billie Eilish will be created specifically for the launch of this campaign, but it

will not be released until the day of the campaign. Three days prior to the announcement, the 150 ambassadors will be broken up into groups of 50. Over the course of these three days, each influencer will be asked to post a video of a plane flying in the sky on his/her Instagram story and TikTok account. A short teaser clip of the Billie Eilish song will be played over each of these videos. Each of these posts will be captioned, “It’s coming. @apollome.” These vague posts will draw the attention of many social media users and create a buzz about the tagged account. The Apollo account will be blank and not have any posts or profile picture; but after each day, the account will follow each of the 50 influencers who made a post, as well as the Olympio Instagram account that will also be blank.

Before the campaign launch, 50 of the ambassadors will take part in filming campaign material. Each of these ambassadors will individually skydive out of a plane while wearing a white skydiving jumpsuit with the Apollo logo across the back of the suit, on the front right chest area, and on the helmet. This footage will be filmed and used in a heart-quickenning, intense promotional video that will be under two minutes. The Billie Eilish song will play over the clips, and at the end of the video all 50 influencers will be standing in a formation that forms the shape of the Apollo laurel wreath logo. A camera will get a wide shot view of this formation; it will end with pans/close-ups of some of the influencers, and the last will put on a gold laurel wreath. The video shows the excessive opulence associated with the event, and implies that the influencers are falling down to earth – as if they are Greek gods themselves.

The ambassadors will take their own “behind the scenes” footage of themselves leading up to their jump out of the plane. At 11:30 A.M. (Central Standard Time Zone) on the day of the launch, the ambassadors will begin to post this content on his/her individual channels. At noon, the skydiving promotional video will be released, and each of the 150 influencers will be asked

to post it on their Instagram story. Additionally, they will all post a photo of themselves on their static Instagram feed wearing their own gold laurel wreath. The captions will say something along the lines of: “It’s here. Apollo: The Music Experience of the Heavens – the experience of a lifetime that I won’t be missing. #apollo #apolloambassador @apollome.” The “Paid Partnership” feature will be used at the top of the post so that users know that the influencer was given compensation for the post, and if Instagram has updated its policies by this time in 2023, the campaign will comply with them. Additionally, if the ambassador was one of the 50 to participate in the skydiving promotional video, s/he will be asked to post at least one TikTok on their personal account about his/her experience/while wearing his/her Apollo jumpsuit and tag the @apollome account and #apolloambassador. Once again, ambassadors will have to follow whatever regulations the TikTok platform has put in place for partnerships in 2023.

From there, users will click on the Apollo Instagram and TikTok account, which will be up and running with a profile photo, a few initial posts, and a link to the website. When the link is clicked, it will take users to the homepage, where another promotional video will be posted. This high-quality, aesthetically pleasing promotional video will be filmed in Mykonos and include other ambassadors involved in the campaign. It will better explain what Apollo is, where/when it will be held, release the date when tickets go on sale, and stress the exclusivity of the event. From there, the website will have additional information about the event to assure consumers that it is legitimate. There will be a large countdown on each page of the website, and tickets will go on sale the following morning at 10 A.M. Pacific Time in the United States.

## Communications

The entirety of this campaign's messaging will be on social media. Social media is going to be the most effective way to reach both Millennials and Gen Z. The content posted by the ambassadors will be provided by the brand, or if it is content produced by the influencer, the content will be approved by the brand before it is posted, so everything will be previewed before it is posted. This is something that will be heavily outlined in the ambassador's contract and clearly communicated to him/her. The content provided to the influencers will include: the promotional song clip (that will be created as a "Sound" on TikTok for ambassadors to tag under), the promotional video, and the gold laurel wreath that will be needed for each Instagram feed post. Finally, a media kit will be prepared and sent out to several news outlets when the event is announced in the campaign launch. This kit will provide details with event and company information where news sources can get accurate information.

### *Controlled Media*

The logo for this event will be the predominant imagery for branding in this campaign. It will be used in all promotional materials in the campaign and for the event promotion in general. For each social media promotion created by the brand, it will not only be included in the opening/closing of the video, but it will also be more subtly included throughout the video (such as on the jumpsuits, helmets, etc.). Additionally, after the launch of the campaign, each of the ambassadors will be sent exclusive merchandise. This merchandise will feature the Apollo logo/colors and be printed on a crewneck sweatshirt, a t-shirt, and a hat for influencers to be gifted after the campaign goes live. The branding is a visual representation to remind consumers of the event. Additionally,

the posts made on social media will be the primary source of controlled media for this campaign to launch Apollo. This media will include the promotional song, the promotional video, the promotional photo for the users' Instagram feeds, and the content videos that the ambassadors produce themselves. To ensure that there is as little confusion as possible, a media kit will also be prepared ahead of time to send to media outlets. This will allow these news sources to have accurate information straight from the brand, and hopefully this will limit the opportunity for false information and negative press. Since the media sources would have legitimate information and details, it may also help to legitimize the event in the minds of consumers. Finally, the Apollo website will contain the most in-depth information about the event, its logistics, the event hosts, who is involved with the event, and how to acquire a ticket.

### *Uncontrolled Media*

For all of the things that can be controlled on a social media campaign, there are so many things out of a brand's control. The campaign will hopefully draw a large amount of attention from social media users and news outlets, but there is no way to control what these mass media sources say about the event/the campaign. Whether shared opinions written in print, digital, or broadcasting media are negative or positive, they will have an effect on the image of the credibility of the brand. There will be a main watch for information created about the event on digital platforms because this is most likely where Gen Z and Millennials will post. If opinions of the event are initially positive, that can help set a positive tone for when tickets go on sale. If consumers think that the event will be "Fyre Festival 2.0" and share it on social media though, it is not the ideal launch.

## **Budget/Cost Estimate**

While there is no way to know how much the budget for this campaign will be, it is safe to set expectations that it will be of very high cost. Each influencer/celebrity will have a different rate for partnership and posts. Additionally, costs for the filming/editing crew for both promotional videos, flights to and accommodations in Mykonos for the ambassadors/employees for the promotional launch video shoot, logo promotional materials for both shoots (jumpsuits, laurel wreaths, helmets, etc.), flights to and accommodations in California for the promotional campaign shoot, the gifted merchandise to ambassadors, the cost of the promotional campaign song performed by Billie Eilish, the cost to have the ambassadors skydive, and other additional, unforeseen costs will have to be factored into the budget for the campaign. This will not be a low-cost production, but there will be a talented financial/accounting team hired to ensure that the money for the event is being tracked and spent appropriately and that the amount of investor/venture capitalist money is on par with where it needs to be.

## **Timeline**

The campaign launch will be March 9, 2023, and the campaign timeline outline is as follows:

Date	Task/Item
April 29, 2022	General planning and fundraising for the event begins.
August 1, 2022 (Subject to change depending on the status of event agreements)	Influencers are contacted about being a part of the ambassador program and contracts are sent out.
December 1, 2022	Influencers are updated on the status of the partnership and reminded of the campaign preparation that will occur in the coming

	months.
January 18, 2023	Apollo promotional video is shot in Mykonos with roughly 25 ambassadors from the group of 150.
February 1, 2023	Campaign promotional video is shot in Texas with 50 additional influencers.
February 6, 2023	Ambassadors need to send their individual content to Apollo for approval.
February 28, 2023	The Deuxmoi Instagram account makes a post with “leaked” information that vaguely hints at foreshadowing of the event announcement.
March 6, 2023	The first group of 50 ambassadors post their TikTok featuring the promotional song clip.
March 7, 2023	The second group of 50 ambassadors post their TikTok featuring the promotional song clip.
March 8, 2023	The third group of 50 ambassadors post their TikTok featuring the promotional song clip.
March 9, 2023	The campaign launches, ambassadors post the promotional video on their individual accounts’ Instagram stories, ambassadors post their feed post photo with the Apollo gold laurel wreath, those who participated in the promotional video shoot will post their behind-the-scenes content on their Instagram and TikTok accounts, the Apollo social media accounts and website go live, the Apollo promotional video is posted to the website and across all platforms, and ambassadors are asked for the data on their posts.
March 10, 2023	Tickets for the event go on sale and ambassadors will receive a follow up from company employees asking for data from their campaign posts.



## **Evaluation**

After the campaign is completed, it is important to analyze how effective the effort was. Since this is the first year of this event, it will be the first year that data is collected. This data will allow for campaign success evaluation comparison in the future, but this evaluation will only have competitor data and campaign goals with which to compare. For each objective set before the campaign started, the event staff will need to see if the campaign helped achieve it. Some data will immediately be available, such as the number of visitors to the website within the first few days of the campaign launch, the number of ticket sales, and the initial buzz around the event after the campaign's launch, the data from the ambassadors' campaign posts, and the amount of users that follow the Apollo social media accounts. Other data will be collected and reviewed at several different points leading up to and after the event. This data will help show the Olympio Experiences company what worked/what didn't for their first event, what ambassadors were the most successful for promoting the event/being included in the campaign, if the campaign was successful in reaching the target audience and in who bought tickets, how consumers responded to the campaign launch, if the campaign changed opinions on how legitimate it is/if it set the tone for the event, awareness of the event that was created throughout the duration of the campaign and efforts leading up to the event, and how legitimate consumers think the event is as the event date gets closer, and who event ticket holders are. This data is extremely valuable for the brand and needs to be thoroughly collected and analyzed throughout the entirety of the campaign and leading up to the event.

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