

Astroworld Tragedy:
Page Society Case Study

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Abstract:

Travis Scott's Astroworld 2021 Festival resulted in the death of 10 people, after an uncontrolled crowd surge towards the stage proved too dangerous. This situation is not the first time Scott has incited violence at his concerts; despite this, no safety precautions were in place to protect concert-goers. The public and brands he aligned with were swift to condemn his actions, resulting in the termination of various business partnerships. This case study will analyze how effective crisis communications could have managed the fallout in a different way, to protect his brand and his image.

Introduction:

Astroworld, a musical festival organized by Travis Scott, was started in 2018 to celebrate rap music in Scott's hometown of Houston, Texas. The festival successfully ran in 2018 and 2019, before the Covid-19 Pandemic halted in-person festivals in 2020. With the festival's resumption in 2021 came excitement for the return of live music and eagerness to be in large groups, after a year of social distancing. This pent-up energy and excitement was released in ways unforeseen, with crowds being out of control and Travis Scott orchestrating further chaos. Despite warning signs before the show and cries for help in the midst of the performance, Travis Scott continued to perform until the crowd surge towards the stage became deadly. In trying to understand the magnitude of the situation, it's imperative to understand how influential Travis Scott is in the music industry and the larger global media. His rise to fame was relatively quick, with his downfall coming even quicker after the Astroworld festival.

Background of Travis Scott:

Born Jacques Bermon Webster II, Travis Scott has always had ambitions of making music. His first mixtape, *Owl Pharaoh*, gained traction in 2013. His debut studio album, *Rodeo*, has over 1 billion streams on Spotify and featured his first hit song "Antidote." His subsequent albums have been even more successful, garnering 8 Grammy nominations and 4 number-one hits on the Billboard 100 list. He makes music both by himself and under aliases with other rappers. "Huncho Jack," "JACKBOYS," and "the Scotts" are three variations of Scott and others making collaborative rap albums. His unique identifier in the world of hip-hop and rap is his heavy use of autotune. It creates a distinctive listening experience for his fans, as no other rappers embrace autotune more than him. He has collaborated with some of the most popular current hip-hop artists, such as Drake, SZA, Meek Mill and Quavo. Travis Scott is a prolific rap artist who has exponentially grown his brand value with a wide variety of sponsorships.

Travis Scott Brand:

Travis Scott brand portfolio is diverse, covering various sectors and socioeconomic statuses. The Travis Scott brand is intersected with food, a record label, fashion, alcoholic seltzers, a Netflix documentary, toys, video games and more. His partnerships range from designer brands like Saint Laurent and Dior, to everyday brands such as McDonalds and Reese's Puffs, ensuring visibility regardless of economic class. At just 31 years old, he has cemented himself as an entrepreneur and businessman outside of just the music sphere, with an estimated net worth of \$60 million (Brown, 2021). With this astounding net worth, he has made some philanthropic efforts; he founded the Cactus Jack Foundation in 2020 to help fund creative endeavors for the youth of Houston, his home town. The aftermath of the tragedies at Astroworld prompted him to

start Project HEAL, a subset of his Cactus Jack Foundation. HEAL addresses a variety of issues in Houston, one being safety at large-scale crowd events. Though \$5 million is a substantial amount of money to put forth to crowd safety education, it almost seems like this was too little, too late when looking at his history of crowd instigation at his concerts.

Background of Previous Arrests:

Travis Scott is no stranger to controversy with crowd safety, making a crisis like this one almost inevitable. His first arrest came in 2015, when he encouraged the crowd to jump over protective barriers at Chicago's Lollapalooza Festival. This same year, he incited fans to attack a man who removed Scott's shoe while crowd-surfing at a festival in Switzerland. Just two years later, he was again arrested in Arkansas when he instructed fans to break barricades and rush towards security at the Walmart Music Pavilion. He was also sued this year by a fan who claimed that he fell off a balcony, due to an uncontrollable crowd surge, at the Terminal V Concert in Manhattan. In 2019, a similar incident to the Astroworld tragedy occurred at his inaugural Astroworld festival. 3 fans in the crowd were taken to the hospital after sustaining injuries relating to a stampede towards the stage. With this extensive history of instability and danger in his crowds, his team should have been monumentally more prepared for the deadly catastrophe in 2021. To prepare for the 2021 festival, there was a 56-page handbook on how to handle a variety of crises, such as weather hazards and active shooters (Segal, 2021). But, there was not one mention of crowd surges in this planbook. With his past record of dangerous crowd situations, this was a fatal misstep by his team. Crisis management is an extremely fluid field, with unforeseen circumstances occurring all the time. However, with Scott's track record, it appears that this exact crisis could have been foreseen and therefore, plans could have been in place to diffuse this situation.

Situation Analysis: Day of Astroworld

Fans began to line up for the Astroworld concert in Houston, Texas late the night before the concert. That night, thousands of concert goers had already entered the venue prematurely. The morning of Astroworld, the police chief, Troy Finner, met with Scott to discuss his concerns of public safety during the concert. The medical team was concerned about having enough staff for the event. Most events of this magnitude usually have fire marshals and police present to tame the crowd. Because much of the precautionary advice Scott was given before the concert was avoided, many blame him for the causality and injuries.

By the time the main event started, Travis Scott's performance, 50,000 people had entered the concert venue, many of them not paying and bypassing the security barricades. Scott got just minutes into his first set before the casualties began occurring. 30 minutes into Scott's performance, police received reports of people needing medical attention within the crowd. During the first set, the massive crowd began moving towards the stage and concertgoers became so packed in they began suffocating and passing out. One Astroworld attendee recalled a gruesome moment of the event stating "At one point, someone passed out and had to be surfed through the crowd to exit the front where I was. I just remember her body being pushed on top of me, hitting me in the head. Eventually, it got overly crowded and everyone was jumping and pushing forward and my friend couldn't handle it anymore so she told me she wanted to get out. It was so bad to where I couldn't even move my arms or my legs, I was stuck" (Gee, 2021). The police notified the producers of the concert of the incidents occurring within the crowds and no efforts were made to stop the concert. Minutes after reporting to the producers what had been

happening to fans, police declared Astroworld as a mass casualty event. Scott continued to perform for 40 minutes after the event was declared a mass casualty, despite chants from the crowd saying “stop the show.” Fans also noticed that he stopped the show for a moment and glared into the crowd confused, but seconds later continued. Scott later claimed that he nor his staff were aware of what was happening. That night at Astroworld 300 people were injured and 10 people died. After the event, Scott was seen going to an after party.

Aftermath from the Media and Public

The aftermath of Astroworld was swift and condemning. The media was quick to point out the lack of accountability he took after the festival and the seemingly superficial acts of reconciliation. His first comment on social media after the incident was his infamous apology video, which lacked any substance. It was a one minute and thirty second, black and white video in which he failed to convey any actual plans of reconciliation. This video was a hot topic on social media, since many people cited the lack of emotion from Scott. About a month after this video, an official statement was released by his team which detailed actions being taken by Scott. In partnering with Better Help, a mental health app, Travis Scott offered a free one-month trial for the victims of the Astroworld festival (Cohen, 2022). Not only was the reaction on social media extremely negative, but there were also legal consequences. Scott and his team had over 40 lawsuits filed against them; the most notable was for \$750 million (Cohen, 2022).

His next step in making amends was offering to pay for the victim’s funerals. The victims’ families, however, declined this offer. Richard Mithoff, the attorney representing the family of John Hilgert, a deceased victim, said “I find offering to pay for funerals demeaning and inappropriate given the magnitude of the tragedy that unfolded. The Hilgerts are not about to allow someone else to pay for their son’s funeral. It was one of the last things they could do for their son” (Flores, 2021). The aftermath of Astroworld led to the cancellation of Travis Scott, as his response was not adequate for the severity of the festival.

Comparison: Ariana Grande Manchester

When looking from a crisis management perspective at how Scott could have better managed the fallout, Ariana Grande’s Manchester concert is an excellent example of how to move forward. In May of 2017, Grande’s concert in Manchester, England, was senselessly bombed, killing 22 concertgoers. Even though this deadly act had nothing to do with Grande, contrasted with the Travis Scott incident which was directly incited by him, she felt the urge to help those impacted. She enacted the “We Love Manchester Emergency Fund” to raise money for the families of those who had died at her show. Each family was awarded \$324,000 (McPhate, 2021), and Grande continued to do more to honor the victims. She held a One Love Concert with other artists and released new song covers, both of which proceeds were also donated to the families. She released an initial tweet expressing her sadness for the situation, but then did the work to make sense of this tragic attack. She returned to Manchester to visit wounded fans and their families and did everything she could to support the victim’s families. There are two major differences between this Manchester attack and Astroworld. The first is that Astroworld was incited by Scott himself, while the Manchester bombing was not affiliated with or Grande’s responsibility. Arguably the larger difference is that in a variety of ways, Ariana Grande tried to help the families and do everything she could to honor the victims. The Manchester attack happened 4 years before Astroworld, meaning that while Travis Scott’s team was scrambling to fix his

broken image, they could have consulted this situation and adapted the grace and humility in which Ariana Grande had after dealing with a similarly tragic accident.

Fallout: His Brand Today

Travis Scott once dominated the media and ad space with his promotions and partnerships with companies like Nike, Sony and McDonalds. Following the mass casualty event of Astroworld in Houston, Scott was dropped from many of his brand deals. Scott has been partnered with Nike since 2017, having many successful shoes launched with them. Following the death of Ezra Blount, the youngest victim of Astroworld, Nike announced that they would be postponing its launch of a shoe collaboration between the brand and Scott on Air Max 1x Cactus Jacks. Epic Games, who own Fortnite, took measures to distance themselves from Scott following Astroworld. They removed the artist's famous dance moves from the platform. Fortnite and Scott have had a lucrative and successful relationship together, as Travis Scott was the star of Fortnite's first major concert in 2020, paying Scott \$20 million (Brown, 2020). Mega64, a production company in California, had been working on a project featuring Scott at the time of Astroworld. The day immediately following Astroworld Mega64 tweeted "We have terminated our collaboration with Travis Scott." General Mills, who had previously done campaigns with their subsidiary Reese Puffs in 2019, sent a message to stakeholders about their future with Scott following Astroworld. They began the email by giving their condolences to the families of those that were affected by Astroworld. Later, the email stated that they do not plan to have any more partnerships with the artist.

Conclusion:

Travis Scott and his brand have quietly made a comeback. With the Astroworld lawsuits being privately settled, new music in the works and the birth of his second child with Kylie Jenner, he has seemingly moved on from the tragedy. However, the Astroworld tragedy will also be associated with him and his brand. His efforts that he took to make amends with the victim's families fell short of making a substantial impact and permanently left these families altered. If Scott had listened to the warning signs from the fire marshals, stopped his show when the injuries started, responded in a timely manner or showed more sincere remorse, any of these actions could have better managed the fallout. Astroworld serves as a lesson in how to, or how not to, effectively handle crisis communications and how ignoring warning signs can be a fateful decision.

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