

## **Crisis Case Study: Live Nation, Travis Scott, and Astroworld Festival**

Ellia Parrish | JRSM 7410 Advanced Crisis Communications | Prof. Kim Marks | Spring 2024

### *Abstract*

On Nov. 5, 2021, eight people were crushed to death in a crowd surge that occurred at the third annual Astroworld music festival (Villarreal, 2021). Two additional attendees who had been hospitalized were declared deceased in the days following the concert, with hundreds more sustaining injuries that ranged from mild to critical (Lozano, 2022). Rapper Travis Scott developed the festival while live entertainment company Live Nation promoted the two-day event (Willingham & Miller, 2023). The involved parties include Live Nation, Scott, county and state public safety and health services, NGA Park, and festival organizers; although, this case study will mainly focus on the responses from Live Nation and Scott. Leading up to the festival's opening night, many red flags were noticed by several parties, but little to no action was taken to mitigate the risks. The tragedy elicited several reactions from the artist and the live entertainment giant as festival attendees and the public begged for answers.

### *Live Nation*

Live Nation is an events promoter that collaborates with artists and managers to create entertainment for 121 million fans through an assortment of experiences (Live Nation). It operates over 44,000 concerts, 270 venues, and 145 festivals. As a leader in live entertainment, "it [Live Nation] produces more concerts, sells more tickets, and connects more brands to music than anyone else in the world" (Live Nation). Some analysts estimate that Live Nation "controls 70% of the ticketing and live event venues market" (Whitten, 2022). In 2010, Live Nation merged with digital ticketing platform Ticketmaster to create Live Nation Entertainment Inc. (LNE). LNE is led by 18 corporate leaders and relies on its decentralized divisions to make

smaller-scale business decisions. The company also offers services that assist with brand strategy, artist and media relations, content creation and digital media, custom events and experiences, promotions and product design, and insights and measurements. Currently, Live Nation oversees much of the global music industry's live entertainment sphere.

### *Live Nation Situational Analysis*

#### Primary Stakeholders:

- Customers
- Employees
- Investors/shareholders
- Suppliers
- Artists
  - Through managers or other representatives
- Venues
- Sponsors/partners
- NGOs
  - Music Forward Foundation
- Governments and regulators
  - At the local, national, and global levels

The groups listed under the primary stakeholders are directly affected and/or vital to the organization's daily operations. Customers support the organization's goals financially by buying tickets and merchandise. Investors, sponsors, and the companies Live Nation partners with also contribute to the organization financially, and they may also provide additional services such as venue locations and free goods. Employees and suppliers receive direct compensation for the work, products, and services they produce for the organization. Live Nation also supports the non-profit Music Forward which gives back to the entertainment community through resource sharing, scholarships, and other opportunities (Live Nation). Artists are key to Live Nation's existence. They provide the talent that draws in customers to the organization's orbit. Governments and regulators establish the laws and rules from the organizational to the local

levels which Live Nation must follow to maintain legality, order, and safety among its stakeholders.

#### Secondary Stakeholders:

- Local law enforcement/security agencies
- Local internet providers
  - Increased online traffic due to venue entry by digital ticket and general phone use
- Communities
  - Business owners and residents who live near venues
- Competitors
  - AEG Presents
  - Another Planet Entertainment
  - Taylor Swift Touring
  - Frank Productions
  - National Shows 2
- The media
  - Traditional and digital

Live Nation events bring in thousands of concertgoers to cities across the nation. To prepare for the influx of people, the organization must ensure that an appropriate amount of security personnel will be available in and around the venue. Local law enforcement and emergency/health services may need to be present in addition to the venue's security guards. Other locals who may be affected by a Live Nation event include internet service providers and community members who live or work near the venue. Live Nation merged with Ticketmaster in 2010, and a popular feature of the service (and sometimes the only option) is its mobile entry. In addition to thousands of people in a concentrated area using their phones to send messages or post content, many will need to have a strong internet/cellular connection to open their mobile ticket. The large number of people will also affect vehicular traffic and foot traffic in the concert's host city. Local businesses may need to consider staffing logistics on concert days and residents might want to think about how the increased traffic will affect their commute. Live Nation's success in the entertainment industry also affects its competitors' actions and activities. While it is the largest entertainment organizer in the United States, Live Nation must remain

proactive in its strategies. Another entity that the organization must pay mind to is the media. The activity of large artists draws attention from journalists and influencers in entertainment media. For example, the Astroworld tragedy generated many articles and investigations due to the unexpected severity of the event. While Live Nation may not always be mentioned in articles involving its headliners, the Astroworld crisis brought the organization's name to the public through reports detailing the crisis.

### *Vulnerabilities*

Due to its expansive operations and services, Live Nation is subject to many vulnerabilities – especially from external sources as the company often serves members of the public. In its history, the company has already experienced crises relating to financial loss, injury and death, work safety violations, legal issues, and technological shortcomings. These are all related to Live Nation's involvement as an events promoter, concert organizer, and ticketing power. Any of the crises mentioned could occur again, so the company should continue to include them in its environmental scans, crisis communications plans, and crisis management strategies.

Some potential negative situations to look out for include:

- National or global health emergencies – epidemics, pandemics, etc.
- Injury or death occurring because of a lack of safety or improper security measures.
- Legal challenges like lawsuits, violations of local regulations, or federal investigations.
- Technical issues with Ticketmaster servers including cybersecurity breaches, lack of internet connection, and automated bots buying swathes of tickets.
- Issues with artists – artists promoting views that do not align with Live Nation's corporate values or the public's viewpoint, artists canceling shows with little to no

advance or reasoning, or artists inciting dangerous behavior from attendees during concerts.

- Bad weather – severe weather conditions affecting outdoor venues and events, environmental disasters occurring near a concert which prohibits access to the space or damages the venue.
- Leaders exhibiting unethical or scandalous behaviors or making poor financial decisions for the company.

### *Travis Scott, Astroworld and NRG Park*

Jacques Bermon Webster II, whose stage name is Travis Scott, is an award-winning musical artist and producer from Houston, Texas (Johnson, 2024). He was born on April 30, 1991, and grew up in the suburbs of the city (Apple Music). Scott has funded several initiatives in the Houston community including the Cactus Jack Foundation which has produced the Cactus Jack Gardens at Young Elementary School, the Sunnyside Basketball Court, the Cactus Design Center at THRX Labs, and the Fall Classic Celebrity Softball Game (Guerra, 2021). His large following on social media consists of 70.37 million listeners – 14<sup>th</sup> in the world as of April 2024 – on Spotify, 55.2 million followers on Instagram, 18 million subscribers on YouTube, 11.9 million followers on X, and 9.3 million followers on Facebook. He is affiliated with high profile musicians and celebrities like Ye West, Rihanna, Drake, and the Kardashians. Scott has two children with former girlfriend Kylie Jenner, whom he was dating during the Astroworld crisis (Eidell, 2024). In 2018, Scott created Astroworld Festival, also known as AstroFest, in conjunction with his third studio album, *ASTROWORLD* (Coleman, 2016). He performs as the main headliner of the show and organizes it to a degree but does not manage the promotional activities – that is Live Nation’s role.

The Astroworld music festival and album *ASTROWORLD* were named in homage to the theme park Six Flags AstroWorld in Houston (FOX 26 Houston Staff, 2018). Six Flags AstroWorld was shut down in 2005, but it still holds many memories for those who visited the park while it was in operation (ABC 13 Staff, 2020). AstroFest was held at NRG Park, which is an event complex near the location of the former Six Flags attraction. Theme park rides, food trucks, and stages were set up in one of the facility's parking lots. According to Houston Fire Chief Samuel Peña, "the venue could have had over 200,000 people if the fire code assembly occupancy formula was applied" (Sadeghi, 2021). However, occupancy permits are not required for outdoor events, so city officials made the executive decision to limit attendance to 50,000 people. If one quarter of the theoretical maximum still managed to cause a deadly crowd surge, then what went wrong?

### *Night of Crisis*

In the months leading up to the first day of the Astroworld festival, red flags were apparent. Tickets had sold out quickly – 100,000 in less than one hour and before the festival's line up was even announced (Mims, 2023). Before the festival officially began, the number of entrants was reduced to 50,000 for preemptive crowd control. Another factor was that COVID-19 restrictions had just begun lifting for large scale events, which heightened excitement and deviance amongst attendees. An additional shortcoming was that emergency officials on scene did not have direct radio communication with the concert promoter and other important internal festival contacts (Bumsted & Lozano, 2021). But one of the biggest issues during the pre-crisis stage was that officials were not given protocols to follow if a crowd surge were to occur. "A 56-page event operations plan" was made for other major threats, but it did not consider the risk of a mass crowd surge (Bumsted & Lozano, 2021).

On opening day, the gates opened at 11 a.m. Within minutes, social media videos show attendees trampling each other and rushing past security to get into the venue. Eyewitnesses said that at the merch table, chaos broke out as people were trying to steal merch and allegedly, the cash registers (KPRC 2 Click2Houston, 2022). While there were other artists performing throughout the day on the second stage, Scott was not set to appear on the main stage until 9 p.m. that night. ABC News reported that by 4 p.m., “at least 54 patients had been treated by medical staff, according to an activity log from the Houston Police Department that also noted dangerous crowd conditions” (ABC News, 2021).

Thirty minutes before Scott was scheduled to perform on stage, a timer appeared on the main stage screens. This reinvigorated attendees and contributed to one of the initial pushes towards the stage. By the time the last ten seconds were ticking on the timer, those in the front by the barricades were being crushed and helped over the metal blockades (ABC 18). This release in pressure caused more people to fill in the gaps and continue to surge. A guest in the thick of the melee detailed how hot and sweaty the air felt despite the temperature being 48 F. Videos on social media showed people screaming for help while lights and music were blasting from the stage. At 9:25 p.m., Scott stopped the concert for the first time to point out someone in need of help to authorities (ABC News, 2021). Scott halted the concert at least two more times in the following 20 minutes to let ambulances and medical personnel get where they needed to go. CPR was performed on several guests who were unresponsive, and hundreds had been injured at this point. Scott finished his set, and the concert ended with a surprise performance from the artist Drake.

By the conclusion of the concert, thousands were not even aware that multiple people died that night. Only the people in the vicinity of the critical crush zone knew something bad had happened. One attendee, Ayden Cruz, climbed up to the camera operator’s booth to try and get

them to stop the show, but he was unsuccessful (KPRC 2 Click2Houston, 2022). Videos online show guests in states of anger and confusion at Cruz's actions as they were not aware of the chaos happening on the other side of the venue. Out of the thousands in attendance, "roughly 300 people were injured and treated at the scene, and 25 were taken to hospitals" (Lozano, 2022). Once the crowds had completely dispersed from NRG Park, masses of abandoned personal items such as shoes, phones, and bags could be seen strewn across the parking lot. By 3 a.m., the rest of the festival weekend was canceled. The victims of that tragic night were John Hilgert, 14; Brianna Rodriguez, 16, girlfriend of Cruz; Jacob E. Jurinek, 20; Axel Acosta, 21; Franco Patino, 21; Madison Dubiski, 23; Rudy Peña, 23; and Danish Baig, 27. Bharti Shahani, 22, and Ezra Blount, 9, passed away in the hospital days after the concert (Heyward, 2021). All their deaths were ruled as accidental compressive asphyxiation (Lozano, 2022).

### *Story Break*

The crisis broke out on social media as many filmed and posted the mayhem – whether the chaos from the crowd surge was intentionally included or not. For example, Kylie Jenner posted several videos to her Instagram Story as she was at the event to support Scott (TMZ Staff, 2021). While she was placed in a roped off section on the opposite side of the crisis site, an ambulance trying to get to the injured could clearly be seen in one of her Stories. Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and X received live updates from attendees, and concerned citizens frantically called those who went to the concert to confirm that they were safe. Even reporters, journalists, and photographers who covered the event live did not know that there were deaths until 2 – 3 a.m. (ABC 13 Staff, 2021). Breaking news segments delivered the story early the next morning, and reporters promptly arrived on the scene.

### *Initial Responses from Organizations and Stakeholder Reaction*

Live Nation's initial response was on X and consisted of a black and white text-only image that read, "Heartbroken for those lost and impacted at Astroworld last night. We will continue working to provide as much information and assistance as possible to the local authorities as they investigate the situation." (Live Nation, 2021). The post was uploaded on November 6 at 3:05 p.m. Every reply under the post is either critical of the company, its practices, how it handled its security that night, or its response. Travis Scott also posted a similar image on X with the message, "I'm absolutely devastated by what took place last night. My prayers go out to the families and all those impacted by what happened at Astroworld Festival. Houston PD has my total support as they continue to look into the tragic loss of life. I am committed to working together with the Houston community to heal and support the families in need. Thank you to Houston PD, Fire Department, and NRG Park for their immediate response and support. Love You All" (Scott, 2021). His post went up a few hours before Live Nation's, with the timestamp reading 11:16 a.m. Scott's post has 33,000 replies and a mix of positive and negative reactions. Some of his fans defended him and argued that it was understandable that he could not hear the chaos coming from the site of the crisis while others demanded that he and Live Nation take accountability for their lack of action during and after the crisis. Scott also uploaded a series of videos to his Instagram Story on the evening of November 6. In these videos, he constantly rubbed his forehead and discussed how he never thought a situation like that could ever happen. After being uploaded to X by XXL Magazine, replies flooded the post criticizing Scott for portraying body language that was insincere (XXL Magazine, 2021). The initial responses from both parties were not very effective in mitigating questions and concerns. The public was reeling from the shock that was produced from the crisis, and the responses from Live Nation and Scott only added to the bewilderment instead of managing it.

### *Resolution*

As of April 2024, the crisis has largely concluded. Some lawsuits are still ongoing, but hundreds have been settled (Lozano, 2024). Scott and other individuals were not indicted on any criminal charges related to the crowd surge, but still face civil lawsuits (Weisfeldt et al., 2023). The artist did not perform much in the months following the crisis, but in 2023, he announced a North American tour – his first since Astroworld 2021 – for his new album, *UTOPIA* (Rosenbloom, 2023). Like Scott, Live Nation has also been shouldering lawsuits from affected parties. But according to the New York Post, first quarter 2022 “revenue at Live Nation, which runs music festivals like Lollapalooza and Governors Ball, jumped to \$1.8 billion, up from \$290 million in the year-earlier quarter” (Steigrad, 2022). Live Nation financially rebounded in the months following the crisis due to the resurgence and acceptance of live entertainment events post COVID-19 lockdown. As for Astroworld, the music festival has not publicly discussed another installment of the festival. Its website still displays information regarding the 2021 shows. The association of the word Astroworld with a crisis that took the lives of ten people will make safely bringing back the festival a complex puzzle.

### *Values and Ethical Questions*

The Astroworld crisis brought many ethical concerns to light. Live Nation did not completely prioritize guest safety when preparing for and during the festival. This is evident in the lack of security protocols and communication between authorities and festival organizers throughout the event. When officials declared the crowd surge to be a mass casualty event around 9:30 p.m. on the night of the tragedy, promoters agreed to end the concert early (ABC News, 2021). However, Scott was allegedly not made aware of this, and the show continued until the end of his set. No entity used the authority that they legally had to end the concert early, which is a violation of the ethical values of humanism and care. There is an argument that cutting the concert short could have caused mass riots, but the health and safety of those in immediate danger should have been

the focus of the organization's communications with officials and other attendees. Access to information was withheld from fellow concert goers as many claim they did not know anything bad was even occurring. The festival and its organizers failed the victims by not informing guests during the show about the dangers of packing themselves towards the front of the crowd and requesting everyone to take a few steps back. Acting in an ethical manner during crises is critical to preserving the wellbeing of those in the midst of the chaos.

Live Nation did not present a values-based or virtue ethics response in its first public reaction to the crisis. The organization did not offer support to victims besides the notion that they were "heartbroken" and working with authorities. Scott had a better approach as he wrote how he felt "devastated," offered his "support" to law enforcement, was "committed" to healing the community, and was thankful for emergency responders. This response gave his followers more insight into his values and showed that he cared about the situation. It is important for organizations and individuals to take into consideration how their responses can positively and negatively affect the public.

### *Suggestions and Counseling*

Several lessons that Live Nation should have learned from the Astroworld crisis are that it needs to have a robust plan for crowd control, to act with care during crises, to ensure it has open communication channels with officials managing health and safety, and to showcase empathy in its responses. The company can improve its safety measures by taking the advice of crowd control experts on the national and local scale, hiring vetted security guards for its events, and meeting with crisis professionals to prepare for unexpected disasters. Direct and integrated communications between promoter staff and emergency responders should be utilized for efficient transmissions as lack of precise communication was one of the pitfalls of Astroworld

2021. Lastly, in the event of a crisis, the company should respond with more care and empathy. Its initial responses to Astroworld are stilted, lack responsibility, and do not promote goodwill with its publics. As a leader in the live entertainment industry, Live Nation should assure fans that future concerts hosted by the company will be adequately secure, but they also must be able to follow through with the claim. Human safety should take precedence over profits and property damage.

One recommendation for Live Nation is to create a Crisis and Emergency Communications (CERC) Plan. Using the CERC framework, Live Nation should prepare responses for the potential crises mentioned in this assessment. These responses should be updated as needed. When a crisis inevitably occurs, the public, media, and critics of Live Nation will judge the content of its statements regarding the crisis, the speed at which the statements are released, and the accuracy of the communications. By preemptively preparing a crisis communications plan, the company will be equipped to respond to dire situations in an appropriate and timely manner. Additionally, it will alleviate some of the stress on the crisis mitigation team when crisis mode is in activation.

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