

**Fyre: A Case Study of How Followership in Organizations Is Influenced by Narcissistic
Leadership**

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PRST 5998: Professional Project

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July 31, 2020

Abstract

Followership informs effective leadership through followers' active involvement in organizational health. To simply follow is to do as one is told, but followership is taking an active role in providing intentional feedback to leaders so that organizations perform well. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) provides the framework for followership and leadership to interact based on the quality of their exchanges. For leadership to be effective; therefore, those with legitimate authority must be cognizant of the value of their followers' expertise authority. Narcissistic leadership, however, poses a threat to high-quality exchanges. A narcissist's emotionally volatile combination of self-importance, grandiosity and vulnerability poses a threat to effective followership. A case study of the infamous Fyre Festival was conducted to determine how followership is influenced when an organization is led by a narcissist. Through coded content analysis, the case study reveals that followership is, in many ways, adversely affected by narcissistic leadership.

Fyre: A Case Study of How Followership in Organizations Is Influenced by Narcissistic Leadership

As Americans endure a difficult year in 2020, it seems to represent a boiling point of the first two decades of the 21st Century in terms of leadership. The narcissistic behavior of President Donald Trump, for example, is a topic of public discourse (“Donald Trump,” n.d.; McAdams, 2016; O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020); and such behavior in leadership has become all too familiar to Americans. Other examples rest in the private sector, particularly in the technology industry, where leaders have also been criticized for their narcissistic behavior.

While an argument can be made that the innovation of the technology industry, which has been inspired, in part, by grandiose ideas, has contributed handsomely to the United States’ economic value, scholars have taken note of how the behavior and actions of leaders such as Apple’s Steve Jobs, Theranos’ Elizabeth Holmes, Uber’s Travis Kalanik and WeWork’s Adam Neuman have affected their followers (O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020). To investigate how the contributions of followers are influenced by the behaviors of narcissistic leaders, this case study examines Billy McFarland, the self-proclaimed technology entrepreneur and organizer of the failed 2017 Fyre Festival to which President Trump’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been ironically compared (Campbell, 2020).

Followership is part of organizational culture, and the way organizational culture has been influenced by ethics has been a focal point for at least these past two decades. Scandals at companies such as Enron, Tyco and WorldComm (Lussier & Achua, 2016) have created a demand for stronger ethics in leadership. Considering that organizational culture is influenced, in part, by the ethics of an organization’s members, leader-member exchanges have grown as a focal point. It should be noted that while a consistent definition of leadership can be the topic of

debate (Avery, 2015), it is certain that leaders have “interactive influence” on their organizations (Silva, 2016). That influence affects followers’ collective and individual behavior when one considers that organizations operate on the contributions of their followers. Therefore, this begs the question: What happens to followers’ contributions when leaders behave in the way that compromises both the harmony and productivity of the organization?

Still developing in leadership research is the role of followership. Followership is a critical component of an organization’s health as it consists of followers making conscious choices and utilizing specific skills and expertise to support leaders’ visions. Followership is a key component of the LMX which focuses on the quality of exchanges between leaders and followers in determining who are members of leaders’ in-groups or out-groups (Lussier & Achua, 2016). Effective followership is threatened when the leader’s behavior is counter to the best practices and principles of collaboration. Moreover, the impact of diversity on organizations has caused scholars and professionals to view leadership as a process that has become more influenced by followers than past research indicates (Avery, 2015). Chaleff (2003), Kellerman (2004) and Smith and Kirkman (2012) point to followership as an element of the leader-follower relationship that has gained more traction in the leadership body of research (Lussier & Achua, 2016).

According to the Narcissism Spectrum Model (NSM), narcissists behave on a continuum that consists of grandiosity, self-importance, and vulnerability (Krizan & Herlache, 2017). Additionally, there is a concern that narcissism has become an epidemic (Moritz & Roepke, 2018). With such a dynamic, we can argue that narcissism and followership become competing interests. Therefore, with the need to further investigate followership and considering the potentially harmful effects of narcissism on organizational health, the purpose of this study is to

examine how followership in organizations is influenced by narcissistic leadership. The study also provides thoughts for the practical application of effective followership in organizational settings where narcissistic leadership exists.

The study conducted focuses on the Fyre Festival. In 2017, Billy McFarland, the then-co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Fyre Media, hosted the ill-fated event which was billed as an exclusive music festival with top-tier music acts along with luxury lodging and amenities in The Bahamas. Targeting wealthy social media influencers, McFarland charged thousands of dollars per ticket for the event. Unfortunately, those who bought tickets arrived and saw nothing that the promotional materials promised. The attendees, instead, found themselves in a public health crisis with little food or water; and they were forced to spend the night in leftover Federal Emergency Management Agency tents on a gravel bluff instead of the luxury villas for which they paid. Using the NSM as a gauge, the study found that McFarland displayed signs of narcissism. His vision for the festival, while attractive to his target audience, was grandiose. McFarland also seemed entitled to have things go his way, and he came across as defensive when challenged by those with expertise authority (Martin, 2000). The case study provides data on followers' thoughts and attitudes about McFarland's leadership, including their attraction to him, followers' struggles during the planning process, and their post-event reactions.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

A determinant of an organization's health is the relationship between leaders and their followers, and the LMX theory focuses attention on the quality of the exchanges in leader-follower relationships. High-quality social exchanges are based on trust and likability while low-quality economic exchanges are transactional, relying solely on obligation such as an

employment contract (Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik & Haerem, 2012; Loi, Mao & Ngo, 2009; Wu, Tsui & Kinicki, 2010). In order for the LMX to work, leaders and followers must mutually agree that there is value in their exchanges, however, leaders have the advantage of resources to influence these exchanges. The onus, therefore, is on the leader to ensure that there is a healthy work environment. Still, followers also have influence. Followers who experience high-quality exchanges tend to be more motivated to perform their duties, they are retained by their respective organizations, and are most likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with their experiences (Lussier & Achua, 2016).

The leader-member exchange is influenced by an in-group which develops as a result of high-quality exchanges. Those in the in-group benefit from “better assignments, more freedom and greater opportunities to work with the leader” while earning a place as the leader’s assistant (Avery, 2015, p. 75). There is also an out-group which is comprised of followers who receive assignments that may not be as satisfactory, and do not experience the same quality of exchanges with leaders while being excluded from “important decisions or activities” (p. 75). Narcissism caters to high-quality exchanges because of the in-group dynamic where Campbell and Campbell (2009) argue that narcissists are likely to have their sense of grandiosity reinforced thanks to selectivity (Huang, Krasikova & Harms, 2017).

Followership

Followership is an active behavior in the context of organizational health. While followers are subordinates who do as they are told, followership is comprised of a series of choices that contribute to effective leadership based on the quality of the exchanges that followers have with their leaders. There are several types of followers that make up followership. On the high-quality exchange spectrum are conformist followers and effective

followers. On the low-quality end are passive followers and alienated followers. Conformist followers are highly involved; but they have a tendency to fall short on critical thinking, making them the “yes people” of organizations. Effective followers, however, are highly involved; and they are thoughtful in their words and actions. Passive followers are slightly involved, and they lack critical thinking skills. Alienated followers tend not to get involved; but, interestingly, can be high on the critical thinking end of the spectrum. There are also pragmatic followers who tend to be a mix of all types of followership. While some see them as opportunistic, others may see them as flexible as pragmatists adjust to the situation (Lussier & Achua, 2016, pp. 240-242). Ultimately, healthy followership leads to an organization’s ability to adapt (Avery, 2015).

There is also organizational culture’s relationship to followership. Organizational culture consists of the “beliefs, morals, customs, and practices” found among an organization’s members (Chih-Chung, C. & Baiyin, 2013; Lussier & Achua, 2016, p. 359). If followers find satisfaction in the culture, then the organization is likely to be a pleasant place for them to work (Tsai, 2011). While followers wield influence, the leader’s role is still essential. More importantly, the integrity of the leader matters. Van den Bos, Wilke and Lind (1998) argue that followers rarely have well-defined reasons for following leaders, so they have a tendency to “fill in the gaps” in terms of their logic for following certain leaders (Moorman & Grover, 2009). Nevertheless, followers’ ability to integrate their actions and decisions with their leaders’ ability to do so could prove highly beneficial for both the organizations and those individuals involved in the process (Küpers, 2007).

When the value of followership is ignored, it could adversely affect the organization. In followership, there is expertise authority which is followers’ expert knowledge of their respective fields or practices (Martin, 2000, p. 120). Along with such authority, followers

become standardbearers as they position themselves to appropriately judge situations that potentially affect the organization based on their knowledge (p. 122). Martin (2000) provides a key example of expertise authority's value in recounting the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Senior engineers at Morton Thiokol, the designer of Challenger's booster rockets, recommended against the launch due to concerns about the conditions of critical rubber gaskets combined with the temperature at Kennedy Space Center the day of the launch. Between managers at Morton Thiokol and a NASA official, the recommendation was both ignored and withheld from other NASA officials. There was also a preoccupation with public relations and pleasing Congress which eventually led to the tragedy. When their expertise is ignored or standards are violated, followers are forced to protect the integrity of their roles or the organization. Such violations, particularly where there are ethical or moral concerns, can compel followers to become whistleblowers (p. 139) as a way to battle leaders' self-interest (p. 148).

Leadership

Researchers have found that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of leadership. In fact, the leadership body of literature suggests that there are two primary findings in mental models of leadership. One finding is that leadership is perceived as a directive function by people who do not, or are unable to, place leadership in a specific context. The other finding is that vision is not necessarily part of the everyday person's "prototype" of leadership (Avery, 2015, p. 9). The latter finding would stand to reason when one considers Avery's argument that the paradigm of leadership has changed over time. The 21st Century paradigm of leadership, in the context of organizations, is Organic which is leadership distributed among followers. In this paradigm, power is not person-oriented but rather people-oriented with a focus on collaboration, follower expertise, and sharing. The Organic paradigm works well in settings where diversity is

prominent, organizations are agile, and followers have a high sense of responsibility and accountability. The Classical paradigm, which was prominent from antiquity until the 1970s, called for elements where command and control is centralized with one leader. There is no follower power and very little diversity with a rigid structure. Examples would include monarchies and totalitarian societies. From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, Transactional leadership was the prominent leadership approach. It calls for follower power, but the Transactional paradigm is based on a reward system with the leader consulting with selected followers on a limited basis. From the mid-1980s to the end of the millennium, Visionary leadership became the dominant perspective. While the role of followers is expanded, the focus is still on the leader albeit in a more collaborative form. Within this framework, in order for the leader to enact their vision, the leader needs an in-group that becomes accountable for implementing his or her vision. In this paradigm, the appetite for diversity is more forgiving with more organizational agility based on the pace of change and the level of inspiration the leader provides (pp. 39-40).

While there may not be a clear definition of leadership, there is a common understanding. Silva (2016) argues that the definition of leadership lies in “the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals.” Therefore, it is understood that leadership involves a process where someone has influence operating in a specific context. Leaders have traits that define their influence and guide them through the process. Zaccaro (2007) argues that there is a mixture of traits at work as opposed to one specific trait. He also explains that the traits are a mixture of personality, motives, skills, values, and expertise. Finally, Zaccaro asserts that a leader trait is flexibility,

giving the leader the ability to operate in a cross-functional manner while lending stability to each situation where leaders find themselves.

A final and critical consideration within the leadership body of literature leaders' is emotional intelligence. Yukl (1998) argues that a leader with high emotional intelligence is likely to have a higher tendency to form collaborative and cooperative relationship with their followers (Avery, 2015). Boytzis and Goleman (2001) assert that emotional intelligence consists of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and relationship management while also serving as a key trait of the agreeableness dimension of the Big Five Model of Personality (Lussier & Achua, 2016).

Narcissism

The root of the term “narcissism” is well established in literature. The term originates with the Greek mythological figure Narcissus (“Narcissus,” n.d.). Cursed with beauty, Narcissus drew the wrath of the gods when he rejected the love of others, particularly the nymph Echo or Ameinias as told in an earlier version of the myth. As a result, he fell in love with his own reflection until he perished. Jones (1913) and Waelder (1925) use the term narcissism to describe someone’s vanity, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy. Freud (1931/1955) points to “self-preservation” and Murray (1938) points to “hypersensitiveness.” Through the evolution, narcissism maintains its core characteristic of focus on “oneself” and a heightened sense of self-importance (Kritzan & Herlache, 2017).

Kritzan and Herlache (2017) introduced the Narcissism Spectrum Model considering three areas of narcissism—self-importance, grandiosity, and vulnerability. Visualizing the model as a gauge where the center is the focus, the dimension of the NSM that is most critical is self-importance. It is there that the narcissist’s sense of entitlement takes root and serves as a

common “ingredient” of grandiosity and vulnerability due to the consistent presence of arrogance, self-centeredness, and expectation of special treatment. Grandiosity is associated with hubris and exhibitionism on the spectrum while vulnerability is associated with defensiveness and resentment. Maccoby (2004) identified duality in narcissism, arguing that narcissistic qualities have also helped pioneering minds “shape the future.” It was Maccoby’s belief that some leaders have served as “productive narcissists.” While the literature points most often to a negative connotation of narcissism, narcissists’ ability to present a great vision and leave a legacy cannot be ignored. Such is the justification that narcissists are capable of advancing to leadership roles; they possess extraversion, strong social skills and are “interpersonally dominant,” along with a strong desire to step into leadership roles (Brunell, Gentry, Campbell, Hoffman, Kuhnert & DeMarree, 2008).

Still, narcissists’ emotions can be volatile, making narcissism a sometimes-dangerous personality trait. Narcissism can reach a point of mania caused by “elevated goal pursuit” with no regard of the input of others and “impulsivity” while consistently lacking empathy. When overlapped with bipolar disorder, narcissism frequently results in high levels of anger (Fulford, Johnson & Carver, 2008). Despite their extraversion, narcissists often express anger in ways that do not support organizations’ wellbeing. Some narcissists are aggressive, some suppress their anger, others are passive-aggressive, and others are violent (Hammond, 2019). While their pursuit of power may seem harmless, the real concern is their need to “shape the external world according to their own visions” while envying others “in an extreme manner.” Embedded in all of these traits is the tendency to manipulate others, especially followers. However, even calling behavioral challenges to a narcissist’s attention does not prove to be a source of shame; narcissists’ realization of their own failures is what shames them (Uygur & Öğretmenoğlu,

2018). It is also worth mentioning that some narcissists are covert in their behavior meaning that they are more very “sensitive to criticism,” perceiving “insults where others do not and are likely to become defensive easily” (Kandola, 2020).

While incidents concerning narcissistic leaders appear isolated, the literature provides another perspective. Studies conducted in western societies indicate that narcissism is an epidemic (Moritz & Roepke, 2018). Viewing narcissism as a “serious social and psychological problem,” Gray (2014) points to the administering of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) since the 1970s as an indication of the increase in narcissism. Gray discusses several speculations about the increase, favoring some experts’ argument that those raised within the time frame that the NPI was administered were pressured to be “the best” at everything—academics, athletics, college admissions, etc. He points out that researchers have also theorized that those who have taken the inventory have answered its questions more honestly over time in addition to the notion that parents have instilled a false sense of security in their children by telling them that they are “special” with no specific reasons for telling them so. As a result, people’s feelings of self-worth have increased, prompting subsequent increased narcissism. The NPI indicates that in 2014, 59% of American college freshmen rated themselves intellectually above average versus 39% in 1966 while the National Institutes of Health’s research indicates an increase in Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Shen, 2017). With society having shifted more towards individualism, there is a growing concern that leadership education itself may be focused too much on individualism, training the next generation to focus on attitudes of independence, to focus excessively on one’s own needs, to emphasize personal goals, and to weigh the cost benefit of relationships based on individual needs (Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk & Gelfand, 1995; Sowcik & Council, 2018).

Narcissistic Leadership and Followership

There are measurable organizational effects of narcissistic leadership. One is that when narcissistic leadership is particularly non-productive, as opposed to Maccoby's view of productive narcissism, employee turnover becomes a factor in addition to employees' commitments to their respective organizations (Boswell, Sansberry & Stout, 2019). Also, vulnerable followers in organizations need support networks in order to thrive. The toxic behavior of narcissists, therefore, tends to victimize these vulnerable followers (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Den Hartog & Belschak, 2018). Even followers who are not vulnerable can be adversely affected by narcissistic leadership. Narcissists are often oblivious to the wellbeing of others because of their hyper focus on themselves. This becomes particularly problematic as they pursue power and prestige. Interestingly, Braun (2017) suggests that narcissists may not be as problematic in team settings; however, teams' attraction to narcissists tend to erode over time. This view is supported by Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman and Akehurst (2014) who found that organizational members who were not acquainted with narcissistic leaders initially held them in high regard but later did not. Additionally, those who were acquainted with narcissistic leaders did not rate their narcissism high initially but later viewed their leaders' narcissism as negative. Ultimately, Braun argues, organizations have become havens for narcissistic behavior; but it becomes more challenging when narcissists advance to leadership positions.

Organizational culture suggests that every organization exhibits specific behaviors (Lussier & Achua, 2016). The Dependent Organization is one in which the culture is affected by a "distorted worldview" of its leadership, a view held by followers including those in management positions. For narcissistic leaders, there are advancement opportunities in such

organizations as the members await someone who will “step up to the plate.” In such a situation, there exists an attitude of apathy, indifference, a resistance to accept responsibility, and an overall attitude of mediocrity (Godkin & Allcorn, 2009). Such organizations have a “fixed mindset.” Similar to Dependent Organizations, fixed mindset organizations focus on the “stars,” making narcissists’ goals of advancing readily attainable (Canning, Murphy, Emerson, Chatman, Dweck & Kray, 2019; Dweck, 2010; Murphy & Dweck, 2010; O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020). Moreover, O’Reilly and Chatman (2020) argue that narcissists are attractive leadership prospects when there is uncertainty among followers as their confidence and bold nature can invite confidence among followers. When there is uncertainty among followers, narcissistic leaders gain the upper hand in negotiations leveraging power that has already been established (Lewicki, Saunders & Barry, 2011).

Research Questions

The research will attempt to answer two questions. First, what are the followership conditions that allow narcissists to advance into leadership roles? Second, how is productive followership affected by narcissistic leadership? To answer these questions, a case study of the 2017 Fyre Festival was conducted. The subject of two documentaries, Fyre Festival was promoted to social media influencers as a luxurious and exclusive cultural event set on an island in The Bahamas. The event did not live up to the expectations of the attendees, lacking all of the amenities and entertainment that they were promised. The events leading up to the festival and the crimes of its organizer, Billy McFarland, were captured in two documentaries. One documentary focuses on the influencer culture and features an interview with McFarland (Furst & Nason, 2019). The other focuses on the reactions of the followers—those who worked for McFarland’s company Fyre Media as well as Fyre Festival contractors (Smith, 2019). Alongside

the documentaries, the data utilized include a document review consisting of media reports, including reports from newspapers of record, and social media posts. Finally, the research introduces the Follower-Narcissist Competition Model which illustrates the competing interests of followership and narcissistic leadership.

Research Method

A single case study consisting of content analysis was implemented for the study. Yin (1994) calls for several case study research design components: the study's questions, its propositions, the unit(s) of analysis, the logic that links the data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings of the study. With the study questions having been posed, there are two propositions applied to the current study. One is that the study examines the thoughts, attitudes and reactions of the followers to narcissists in leadership roles. The other is that study examines the reactions of followers to narcissists in leadership roles when their disorder is introduced into processes. The unit of analysis is the dynamic of followership within Fyre Media. The logic linking the data to the propositions is the identification of the language throughout the content. Finally, the criterion used to interpret the findings is the identification of patterns in language. Craig and Amernic (2011) are used as a guide to identify patterns in narcissistic language.

One motivation for the case study was the observation of McFarland's behavior. Consistent with O'Reilly and Chatman's application of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (2020), the case study reveals that McFarland's behavior fits that of a narcissistic leader. It should be noted that McFarland's leadership extended beyond a single event. Besides being the co-founder and CEO of Fyre Media, McFarland was the founder and CEO of Magnises and later

created a project called NYC VIP Access. All of the entities are included in the study as data were collected from all of them. Leading up to the festival, employees and contractors experienced continuous stress; and documents reveal that McFarland has a history of fraudulent behavior.

Data Collection

A collection of documents (Table 1) provided data about McFarland, his relationship with employees, contractors, and event attendees. Twenty-four documents were reviewed including two documentaries, two articles from newspapers of record, additional media reports including an interview with the director of *Fyre*, an employee review of Fyre Media, an email, a social media post by one of the followers, and three podcasts that featured contractors. The documents were acquired through two streaming television services, the Tennessee State University library, the International Leadership Association database of journals, and internet searches. Content analysis was conducted to identify reference patterns among the documents (Leedy & Omrod, 2016).

Triangulation of the data was performed on the language extracted from the documents to capture the attitudes of followers toward narcissistic leadership. Coding was implemented to analyze references (Table 2). The data from the documents were entered into the NVivo qualitative analysis software. Codes were then created according to the data that were to be analyzed. The codes were grouped into three categories: pre-event planning follower experiences (Graph 1), planning process follower experiences (Graph 2) and post-event follower experiences (Graph 3).

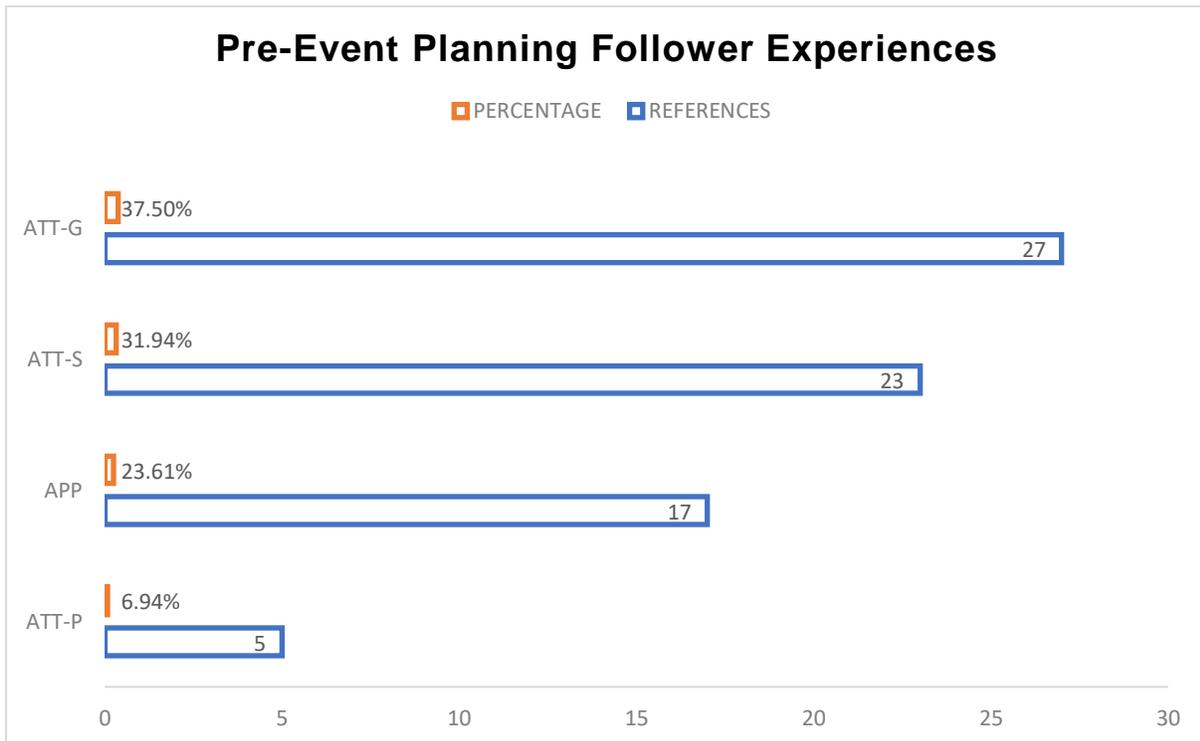
Table 1

| Documents Used for Data Collection | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Title | Accessed Via | Category |
| <i>Fyre</i> | Netflix | Pre/Planning/Post |
| <i>Fyre Fraud</i> | Hulu | Pre/Planning/Post |
| "Fyre Festival Employees Reveal Details Behind the Disaster" | <i>Variety</i> | Post |
| "Facing the Fyre" | E! | Post |
| "Meet the employee who moved abroad to start fresh after Fyre Festival" | Page Six | Post |
| Fyre Media's staff email to Billy | Reddit | Planning |
| "Fyre emails" | <i>Mic</i> | Planning |
| "I Worked at Fyre Festival." | <i>The Cut</i> | Post |
| "The founder of the disastrous Fyre Festival has a history of overpromising 'elite' access" | <i>The Washington Post</i> | Post |
| "How A Former Fyre Employee Is Finding Success in Streetwear" | GQ | Post |
| "Fyre Festival founder reveal to employees nobody's getting paid" | <i>Vice</i> | Planning |
| "Fyre Festival, a Luxury Music Weekend, Crumbles in the Bahamas" | <i>The New York Times</i> | Post |
| "Portland workers entangled in Fyre Festival mess" | KXTV-TV | Post |
| Fyre Media Overview | Glassdoor | Post |
| "Fyre Festival's lead designer talks about branding a scam" | <i>Fast Company</i> | Post |
| "Oren Aks: Atomic Milk Media, Jerry Media & Fyre Festival" | <i>The Founder Hour</i> | Post |
| "Burnout, Layoffs, and Fyre Fest" | <i>99u</i> | Post |
| "Fyre Festival Doc Director Talks Fest's Epic Failure, Employee PTSD" | <i>Rolling Stone</i> | Post |
| "The Company Behind Disastrous Fyre Festival Warned Staff Not to Come" | <i>Vice</i> | Planning/Post |
| "Fyre Festival employees are still getting screwed a year later" | <i>Vice</i> | Post |
| "How Fyre Festival Almost Ruined My Life, Twice" | <i>Vice</i> | Post |
| "FYRE Festival: What REALLY Happened" | <i>Mind Pump Podcast</i> | Post |
| "Andy King's NSFW Chat About That Famous Fyre Festival Scene" | <i>Triple M</i> | Post |
| You may know me as the Blow Job King of the World from #fyrefestival but there's more to me | @RealAndyKing | Post |

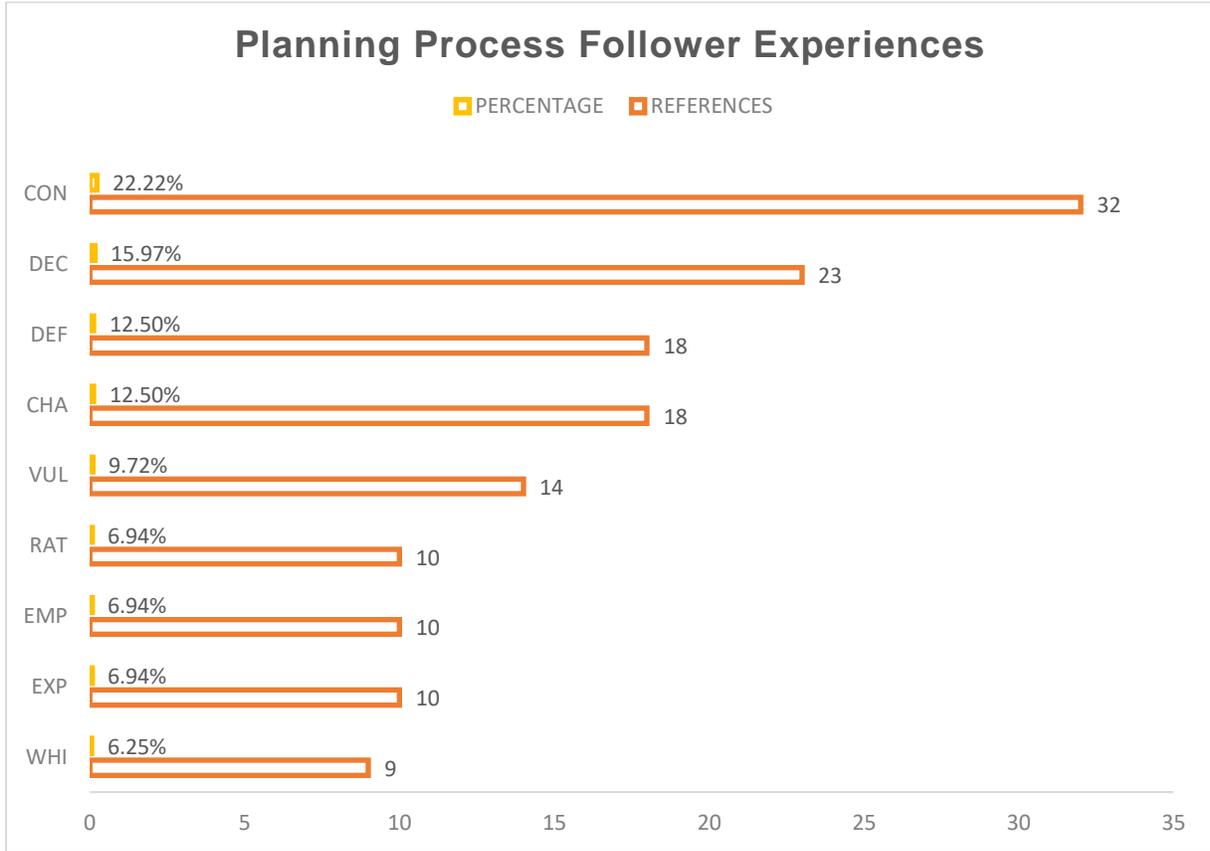
Table 2

| CODE | REFERENCE |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| APP | Apprehension |
| ATT-G | Attraction to Grandiosity/Vision |
| ATT-P | Personal Attraction |
| ATT-S | Attraction to Skills/Talent |
| CHA | Chaos/Disaster |
| CON | Confusion/Frustration |
| DEC | Leader Deception |
| DEF | Leader Defiance |
| DEJ | Dejection/Trauma |
| EMP | Leader Lack of Empathy |
| EXP | Leader Exploitation |
| RAT | Rationalization |
| RES | Resilience |
| VUL | Leader Vulnerability |
| WHI | Whistleblowers |

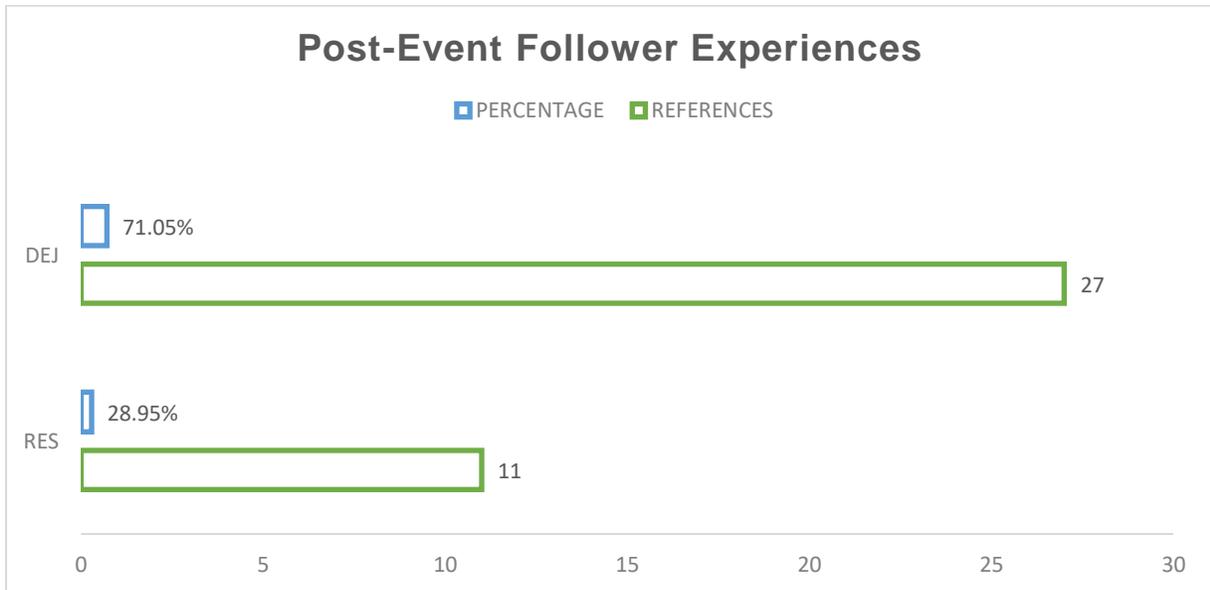
Graph 1



Graph 2



Graph 3



Findings and Analysis

It was necessary to establish that Billy McFarland is a narcissist in order to proceed with the case study and the data confirmed his behavior. Self-importance, of which entitlement is a key ingredient, serves as the anchor for the dimensions of grandiosity and vulnerability on the NSM (Krizan & Herlache, 2017). Grandiosity is where narcissists display hubris and exhibitionism as they are pre-occupied with image, status, and self-worth. At the same time, vulnerability is where narcissists are defensive and resentful. The evidence of McFarland's narcissism rests in the following references, starting with self-importance:

“As we kept moving with Magnises, he wanted to penetrate the New York upper class. He thought that the Maserati and flying to meetings in private jets were necessary in his pursuit of changing his external image and he thought that image would also be a serious driver for the company,” Martin Howell, Magnises and Fyre Media employee (Smith, 2019).

Grandiosity:

“We're taking the dream for your average person in America or wherever they are and saying, ‘For three days you can become Pablo Escobar,’” McFarland (Smith, 2019).

Vulnerability (exchange between a *Fyre Fraud* interviewer and McFarland):

Interviewer: “Has anyone ever called you a compulsive liar?”

McFarland: “I've been called a lot of things since the festival.”

Interviewer: “So, you don't believe that you have a compulsion to augment the truth?”

McFarland: “It's like you're calling me all these crazy things, man. Like, show me one thing that I said that's not true.”

Interviewer: “So, you're not a liar.”

McFarland: “Show me one thing that I said that's not true today. I'm ready. I'll sit here and wait” (Furst & Nason, 2019).

Research Question 1: What are the followership conditions that allow narcissists to advance into leadership roles?

The data collected for research question one pertained to followers' experiences with McFarland before the Fyre Festival planning process. Those data consisted of the following references: personal attraction to McFarland, attraction to McFarland's grandiosity/vision, attraction to McFarland's skills and talents, and apprehension expressed by followers about McFarland's vision. While narcissists' advancement is likely contingent on the vulnerability of followers (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Den Hartog & Belschak, 2018), the dependency of the organization (Godkin & Allcorn, 2009) or the organization having a "fixed mindset," (Canning, Murphy, Emerson, Chatman, Dweck & Kray, 2019; Dweck, 2010; Murphy & Dweck, 2010; O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020), that did not appear to be the case with either the employees of Magnises, Fyre Media or the Fyre Festival contractors.

The pre-event planning follower experiences indicate that the grandiosity of McFarland's vision was convincing to the followers. Of 72 total follower references, 27 (37.50%) were made to the grandiosity of McFarland's vision with three direct references to his vision making it the most frequent reference. Consistent with narcissistic language captured by Craig and Amernic (2011), the grandiosity of McFarland's vision is captured in the following examples of superlative language:

"This is going to be the biggest event in a decade, I promise you," McFarland.

"The most insane festival the world has ever seen," Bella Hadid, Fyre Festival model.

"We hope everybody comes and enjoys the cultural experience of the decade, Fyre Festival," Ja Rule, Magnises ambassador and Fyre Media co-founder (Smith, 2019).

The second most frequent reference pertained to McFarland's skills and talent—23 references (31.94%), most of which refer to his persuasiveness including his ability to recruit talent.

Examples include:

“They were hiring the best of the best in each category: best talent, best distribution, best social media company,” Brett Kincaid, Fyre Festival video director.

“Billy really is one of the world’s greatest salesmen. He can convince anyone of pretty much anything,” Howell.

“The word from people that knew Billy was that he was a magician fundraiser and he just kept pulling money in, somehow,” Marc Weinstein, Fyre Festival consultant (Smith, 2019).

The findings indicated that there was limited vulnerability in Fyre Media’s followership. Godkin and Allcorn (2009) argue that Dependent Organizations are suitable environments for narcissists to advance to leadership positions. It was also suggested that “fixed mindset” organizations are suitable, as well (Canning, Murphy, Emerson, Chatman, Dweck & Kray, 2019; Dweck, 2010; Murphy & Dweck, C.S., 2010; O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020). While those scenarios do not appear to apply to followers in the case study, both Magnises and Fyre Media were start-up organizations. An argument can be made that, by virtue of being involved with start-ups, the vulnerability of the followership lay in their not having an opportunity to firmly establish themselves as integral members of their respective organizations. Therefore, the followership conditions which allowed McFarland to advance were actually undeveloped followership.

Research Question 2: How is productive followership affected by narcissistic leadership?

The data indicate that followership tends to exist in a state of unrest under narcissistic leadership. Two sets of data were collected. One set consisted of references to followers’ attitudes during the planning process: confusion/frustration, rationalization, leader deception, whistleblowing, leader defiance, leader exploitation, direct references to chaos/disaster, the leader’s lack of empathy, and leader vulnerability. The second set consisted of references to followers’ post-event attitudes: dejection/trauma and resilience.

The planning and implementation process demonstrated that followership is adversely affected by narcissistic leadership. Of the 144 references made to the follower experience during the Fyre Festival planning process, 32 (22.22%) referred to followers expressing a level of confusion or frustration about the process making it the most frequent reference. Some references included:

“Frankly, we were standing on an empty gravel pit and no one had any idea how we were going to build a festival village from scratch” (Gordon, 2017).

"We all feel, on the product side, that everything to do with the festival just destroyed the product we've been working on very hard and is almost finished. Morale is very low. We're in this limbo state, like, hey, is this company even going to survive this?"
Anonymous Fyre Media employee (Pearson, 2017).

“It’s like you couldn’t differentiate what was true and what wasn’t true,” Mark Musters, Fyre Festival creative director (Smith, 2019).

The second most referenced terms referred to leader deception making up 23 (15.97%) of the references made. The following are examples from the documents:

“While McFarland has claimed that his staff was ‘naïve’ and ‘overwhelmed,’ two production professionals who worked with the festival during the month of March told Variety that the mogul and his team were warned ‘over and over’ that it would be impossible for the event to come off in the necessary time frame” (Aswad, 2017).

“Each influencer—and there were about 250 influencers—were promised, for a post—for one post—a one-bedroom, three-person villa on the beach that didn’t exist,” Weinstein (Smith, 2019).

“When we arrived, my initial reaction was ‘huh.’ This was not a model-filled private cay that was owned by Pablo Escobar” (Gordon, 2017).

The third reference consisted of both leader defiance and chaos/disaster, both at 18 (12.50%).

The following are examples of leader defiance:

“We said, ‘What you’ve promised [in statements and advertising promoting the festival] as opposed to what we’re even maybe capable of delivering in this amount of time is not

the same. You're going to destroy your brand if you try to have it on this date and don't deliver what you promised. If you push the date a year, people will be upset. But once you deliver what you promised, they'll get over it.' But it was like they didn't care: They literally kept saying, 'We're gonna be legends'" (Aswad, 2017).

"They were told not to use the word 'Pablo Escobar' and then they used that in the first social media tweets," Musters.

"The new owner saw the first video promotion and he kicked us off in one shot," J.R. Rolle, Fyre Festival contractor (Smith, 2019).

"I strongly recommended against the tents," Keith van der Linde, Fyre Festival logistics. "Keith raised a lot of concerns about these things and then I think he was asked to no longer be part of it," Howell.

"It's just Billy at some point told me, 'Listen, you need to step back. You know, we're going to go with different people and... Yeah, thanks for your help so far and, you know...'. I wasn't the only one that was changed out in February, March," van der Linde (Smith, 2019).

The references to chaos and disaster differ from other documented references in that the two specific terms were used to by followers in reference to the festival:

"I was briefly involved in the planning of the event and got a front-row seat to chaos." (Gordon, 2017).

"I noticed the people that were involved in going back and forth to The Bahamas in the planning, they were becoming growingly frustrated. So, they would come to me and like, 'What are you working on with the booking platform? I can't wait to get back on this side of the business because the festival stuff is just becoming chaotic.'" Michael Ciccarelli, Fyre Media employee (Smith, 2019).

"I mean, this was truly a disaster. And events always feel like a disaster. They always feel like everything's going wrong and you're putting out fires. The draw, the appeal was to be part of creating something that was special. And that desire overcame my inner wisdom, which was like, 'This is a mess.' The atmosphere that was cultivated there was that nobody, no matter what was able to cross them and tell them, 'No.'" Weinstein (Smith, 2019).

It should be noted, with the previous data point, that one theme that emerged was that of apprehension (Graph 1) throughout both the pre-event planning and event planning process.

Seventeen references (23.61%) were made to followers' second-guessing themselves, weakening their expertise authority or their role as standardbearers, thus weakening their followership.

While the other references were not as frequent, it is important to note two that were introduced at some point. There were 14 (9.72%) references to McFarland's vulnerability, still giving it a significant presence. While leader exploitation is not as frequently referenced, it is worth noting that *Fyre* (Smith, 2019) provided the most memorable example of McFarland's willingness to exploit followers, a notion that extends from the tendency to feel entitled to a sense of superiority over others in this example. A shipment of water that was needed for the festival was being held by The Bahamas Customs Department. Unable to pay for the water, McFarland asked Fyre Festival producer Andy King to perform oral sex on a customs official to get the water released. There were also references to whistleblowers, one on whom McFarland wanted to take legal action for threatening to release images of the unfinished event site to the public prior to the festival (Smith, 2019).

The post-event data consisted of two reference points, dejection/trauma and resilience. Dejection/trauma made 71.05% (27) of the 38 total references with resilience making up 28.95% (11) of the references. The following are examples of data that represented dejection/trauma:

"Every day we met, every day, we would talk about, 'Okay, should we pull the plug, or should we keep this thing going?' And every day, Billy would say, 'We can't pull the plug. We've got to keep this thing going,'...And I would step outside, right after each meeting, literally go out on the porch and burst into tears," King (Smith, 2019).

"Were Fyre employees reluctant to speak on-camera, or were they immediately willing to open up?

"Most of them didn't want to go back to Fyre, especially when we first approached them. One of the things that would be surprising to a lot of people is that it was actually a fairly traumatic experience for a lot of the people that worked on it," Chris Smith, *Fyre* director (Newman, 2019).

"I knew Billy, but I never knew he was capable of doing something like that. This guy

really made me feel like he was part of my family. I invited him to dinners with my family, and for him to do what he did, you know, I lost that judge of character in people that I thought, you know, I had and that was really difficult for me,” Krost (Smith, 2019).

While it made up the minority in references, resilience emerged as a theme. Despite his infamous story and becoming the subject of social media memes, Andy King has indicated that he has taken the memes in stride (King, 2019; Triple M, 2019) while even voicing support for McFarland (Bricker, 2019). Oren Aks, the graphic designer whose work played a significant role in the festival’s promotion, began to acknowledge that he has seen the positive side of his experience even though he was anxious about the release of the documentary in which he was featured (Ludolph, 2019). Most notable is an email that the Fyre Media staff sent to McFarland after the event. In it, the staff both scolded McFarland and demanded that he terminate an employee who was part of McFarland’s in-group. The excerpt below, however, illustrates how determined the staff was to move forward despite the event’s failure and McFarland’s negligent leadership:

“Fyre Festival was a disaster, and damages to the brand and company are still being assessed. It was apparent to many of us that failures in festival planning and decision making were far-reaching and systemic. The universal consensus is that the festival’s failures are not just a referendum on Grant, but on a way of doing business that we do not abide by.

“This entire team loves the product and fully believes in its ability for success. As news has spread, because of this festival, we are sure we will have more competitors soon. We need to focus, rally and get realistic.

“We look forward to your answers and actions. Please let us know if we can help at all” (Psonico, 2017).

The findings for research question two indicate that, while followership is adversely affected by narcissistic leadership, resilience can serve as an important factor.

Confusion/frustration was referenced the most during the planning and implementation stage of

the Fyre Festival; and out of 254 total references (Graph 4), confusion/frustration was referenced most frequently at 12.60% (32 times). Kohles, Bligh and Carsten (2012) argue that followers desire to be partners (Lussier & Achua, 2016). Moorman and Grover (2009) point out that followers desire integrity, communication and partnership from leaders. Avery (2015) argues that followers want to share their expertise and knowledge. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993/1995), Morris and Feldman (1996), Fineman (2002) and George (2000) argue that emotions play a role in how people make decisions (Küpers, 2007). It could be argued, therefore, that one adverse effect of narcissistic leadership is that it dilutes followership through lack of clarity and lack of active involvement from followers, particularly if those followers do not cater to the narcissist's penchant for focusing on him or herself.

The case study findings also indicate that a sense of dejection/trauma is a significant factor in followership under narcissistic leadership. Overall, dejection/trauma was one of the second most frequent references throughout the data collected at 10.63% (27 times). Such a result indicates that a significant threat to followership is personal to followers. It, therefore, begs the question: How do followers engage with their organizations after being managed by a narcissistic leader and will how they engage with any other organization going forward? It is worth repeating, however, that the followers in the case study showed resilience, particularly the Fyre Media staff in their attempt to hold McFarland accountable. Another follower experience to be noted from the case study is that of deception on the part of the leader, which is one of the third most frequent references at 9.06% (23 times). With the importance of leader integrity to followers, it is likely difficult for followership to take root if their desire for integrity is betrayed.

Ultimately, the case study demonstrates that followership and narcissistic leadership are competing interests that can damage organizations unless the two sides can work together

intentionally to advance the organization's vision (Figure 1). That collaboration, however, would depend on high-quality exchanges. A follower, therefore, would have to be a conformist, heavily involved yet low in critical thinking, or, ironically, alienated, high in critical thinking yet not very involved although it is reasonable to assume that such a follower could be difficult for a narcissistic leader. The compromise for followership and narcissistic leadership to co-exist, is the presence of pragmatic followers, those who incorporate some combination of all follower types (Lussier & Achua, 2016).

Limitations

There are several limitations and delimitations to the study. One limitation is the potential for bias particularly due to the researcher's professional encounters with narcissistic leadership. Also, a qualitative single case study with document review was performed, depending on a narrative about narcissistic leadership on one situation without empirical evidence. Additionally, with the inability to administer the NPI, identifying McFarland as a narcissist could be viewed as speculative. The same would apply to lack of direct access to the leader and followers.

Several steps were taken to mitigate the impact of study limitations. Bias was tempered with literature that present an alternative view of narcissism (Braun, 2017; Maccoby, 2004). Also, the focus of the study was followership taking attention off of narcissism. Finally, the robust body of work on narcissism provides reliable guidelines for determining McFarland's narcissism. The NSM also serves as a determinant of behavior.

Graph 4

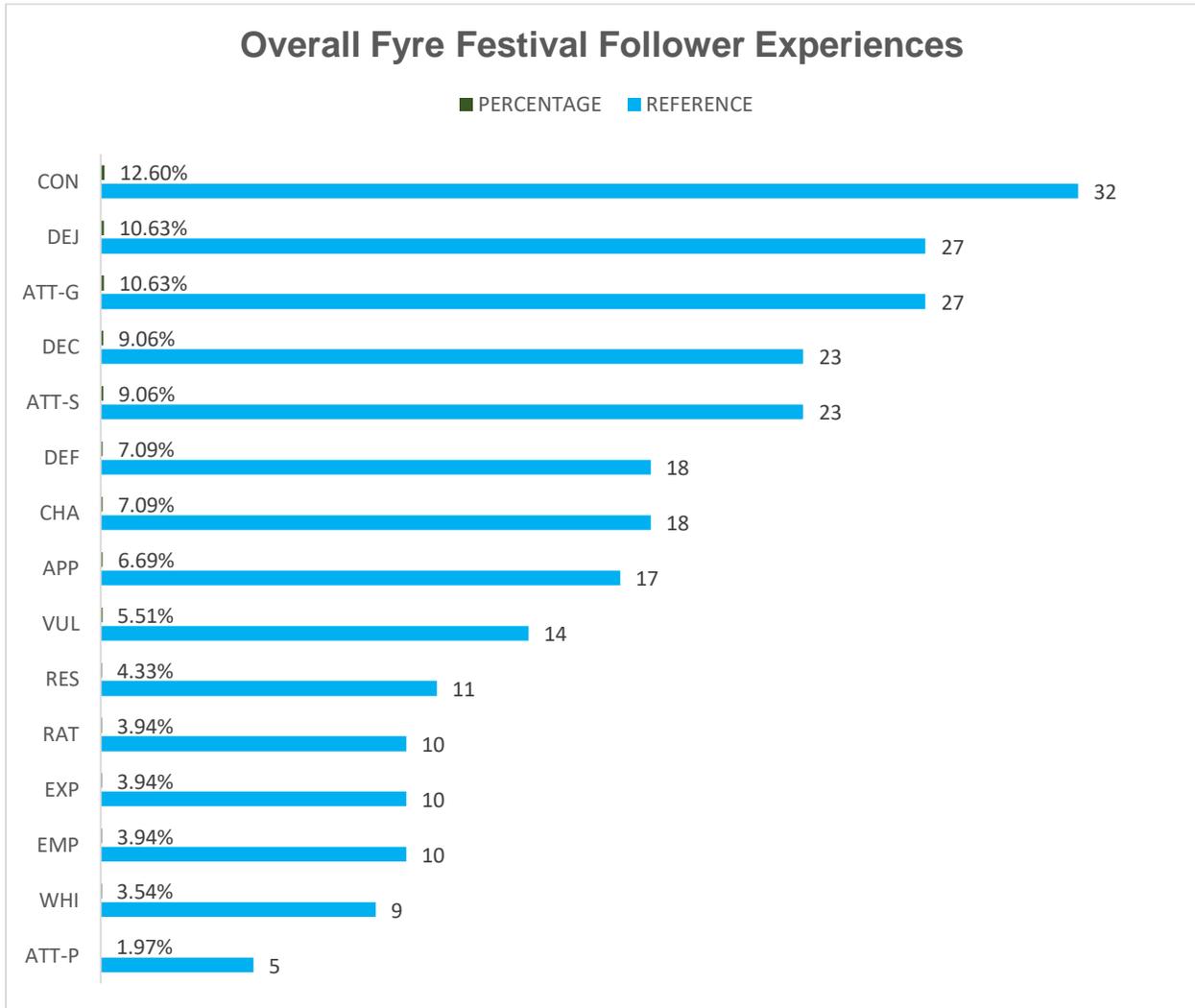


Figure 1

| Follower-Narcissist Competition Model | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Followership Interests | Shared Interest | Narcissistic Leadership Interests |
| Leader Integrity | Vision | Entitlement Grandiosity Attention (tied to vulnerability) |
| Communication | | |
| Partnership | | |
| Expertise (use of) | | |
| Empathy | | |

Policy Implications

The literature and case study show that narcissism or NPD is a condition that should be taken seriously in organizational leadership. Researchers and clinicians share concerns that narcissism has become an epidemic. Because leadership has evolved, particularly with the growth of diversity in organizations and communities, the need for effective followership is even more vital to the health of organizations and communities. Even before his highly controversial presidency, for example, Donald Trump's psychological health was the topic of public discourse (McAdams, 2016). Although casual and non-scientific, citizens' calls for psychological evaluations of potential leaders have grown, particularly in light of President Trump's documented questionable behavior during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which some view as the greatest public health crisis that the United States has seen in over a century. O'Reilly and Chapman (2020) call for measures to evaluate for narcissism in potential leaders on an organizational level. To prevent narcissists from advancing, they suggest gathering information from candidates' networks and administering behavioral interviews to gauge behaviors such as "grandiosity, entitlement, risk taking, integrity, and hostility." Specifically, O'Reilly and Chapman suggest asking explicit questions that would reveal whether or not narcissistic leaders have contributed to their followers' development. It is also important to listen for indicators that narcissistic leaders take credit for others' success. Should candidates for positions of leadership become defensive or angry, interviewers will know that there is a chance that they would be allowing a narcissistic leader to advance in their respective organizations.

Conclusion

Followership is more important than ever with leadership models having evolved and diversity having increased in organizations. With that being the case, there are two

recommendations for further research. One is to investigate followers' ability to recognize narcissistic leaders and their potential to damage organizations. The other is to investigate followership resilience in the wake of disastrous events. The case study demonstrates that narcissistic leadership is highly influential because of narcissists' ability to use grandiosity and/or visionary leadership to attract followers. It also demonstrates that young organizations, such as start-up companies, provide opportunities for narcissistic leaders to advance due to undeveloped followership. The case study also shows that effective followership is compromised by narcissistic leaders' penchant for focusing on their own interests, competing with the elements needed for effective followership. In these cases, follower expertise is rendered ineffective, their desire for integrity is betrayed, the communication process suffers, empathy is not extended, and followers do not view themselves as partners in carrying out the organizational vision. Ultimately, narcissistic leadership and followership have competing interests, compromising the health of the organization. However, the damage can be mitigated, and maybe even prevented, if followers understand their influence and importance, and work together in the best interest of the organization.

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