

University of California

Santa Barbara

Coachella and the Negotiation of Authenticity: Music, Culture, and Commercialization in the
Digital Age

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY OF PUBLIC POLICY AND LAW

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March 2026

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
An Introduction to American Music Festivals.....	7
From Punk to Pilgrimage: Coachella’s Early Years.....	11
Authenticity Under Pressure: The Reconfiguration of Coachella	27
The Politics of Being Seen: Influencers, Branding, and Festival Culture	39
A Festival Seen Around the World: Re-Defining Authenticity	52
Conclusion	67
Bibliography	69

Introduction

By the third Monday of the month, streams of No Doubt’s music had leaped by 85% – 2.6 million people became weekly listeners of the band, a million figure difference from the week before. The band did not release a new album. There was no newsworthy controversy. No Doubt had simply taken the stage at Coachella. No Doubt took the stage on April 13, 2024, and one week later, this seeming statistical anomaly occurred. However, it is no anomaly; it is what the industry calls the “Coachella effect”. No Doubt is not the first or the last group to experience this, as year after year, Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival assumes its place as one of the most culturally influential music events across the globe. Playing in front of tens of thousands of people in Indio, California, and millions of livestream viewers allowed this to happen.¹ The “Coachella effect” is deeply relevant as it reveals how Coachella is not just a festival, but a powerful media ecosystem that is capable of transforming not just artists’ careers, but the audience experiencing the festival.

This thesis traces how Coachella became a powerful cultural force in popular culture and examines the tensions that have emerged along the way. The thesis answers questions such as: how did an alternative music festival transform into a global phenomenon? What happened to the communal ethos of the festival when commercialization and influencer culture surged? What do these transitions reveal about what an “authentic” festival experience means for attendees? By tracing Coachella’s evolution, this thesis argues that the festival is a fragmented cultural space where authenticity is consistently negotiated between physical attendees, online fans, brands, and artists.

¹ Denis, Kyle, Jason Lipshutz, and Andrew Unterberger. “The Coachella Bump: Gains for Headliners, Reunions, Rising Pop Stars & More.” *Billboard*, April 17, 2024. <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/coachella-streaming-gains-headliners-lana-del-rey-no-doubt-1235658946/>.

I became interested in this topic because I grew up watching social media influencers' YouTube videos at Coachella. As a young child, I was transfixed by the image of palm trees, flower crowns, and music being shown on my screen. As I got older, I got more invested in alternative music, which shifted my perspective on Coachella. I thought that it was a sell-out, incapable of producing the same levels of authenticity I could experience in smaller rock shows. However, as I have researched and written this paper, I have grown to understand that authenticity can exist in a multitude of different ways and has different meanings for attendees.

To answer the questions for this thesis, I gathered a wide range of source material to draw an original story of Coachella. I gathered evidence from blog posts, Reddit threads, message boards, and social media posts. This source collection allows for the voice of average festival goers to be traced throughout time, illuminating the story of the festival's reception. Although these sources are usually the opinion of a singular person, when examined in conversation with one another, they offer the ability to trace the attitudes of the Coachella audience. This is vital to showcase an on-the-ground look into a massive event that has become deeply ingrained in modern popular culture, shifting away from the capability of corporations to craft narratives. I also gathered evidence from newspapers to get an idea of what was being reported on throughout the festival's evolution. To frame these primary sources, I drew on scholarly journals and articles that allowed me to connect the patterns I was finding to broader academic discourse. Finally, I had the unique opportunity to interview nine long-time festival attendees, found from Reddit forums, to analyze their perspectives as Coachella fans, which illuminated many contradictions to media representations of the festival that I will discuss throughout the thesis.²

This thesis will discuss the concept of authenticity in depth, which necessitates an explanation of its definition. As authenticity is used throughout this thesis, the concept is deeply

² Per mutual agreement, all interviewees will remain confidential and be referred to by their ages and gender.

ties to countercultural values such as individuality, integrity, and the absence of commercialization. Authenticity in the context of music festivals is perceived through the choice of artists, performance styles, artistic credibility, and audience participation. In this sense, a festival that has niche genres, immersive communal experiences, or completely abandons commercialization may be viewed as more authentic to a mainstream festival. This thesis will explore how authenticity is consistently socially constructed and its meaning changed based on the environment, while also providing a way in which attendees evaluate their festival experience. Therefore, claims to authenticity, although rooted in countercultural values, are flexible depending on audience interpretation.

There are several theoretical frameworks that aim to understand this standard and its proliferation in popular culture. Firstly, the concept of “collective effervescence”, defined by prominent sociologist Émile Durkheim, describes the unique, intense feelings of joy or unity that come through shared experiences in group settings.³ Durkheim believed that this feeling was central to group behavior and allowed people to cope with life’s hardships. Music festivals are just one example of a contemporary site of “collective effervescence” as crowd energy and live music dissolve individual’s boundaries and create temporary communities centered around collective experience. This concept helps ground the appeal of Coachella and the longing that attendees have to experience this feeling.

Further, the concept of commodification refers to the process by which cultural symbols, practices, or items are turned into goods to be marketed. This is reflected in Coachella’s history as branding, sponsorships, and experiential marketing growing presence result in the

³ Durkheim, Émile, Carol Cosman, and Mark Sydney Cladis. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford University Press, 2001. <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0723/2001021705-b.html>.in understanding how authenticity is restructured throughout Coachella’s

commodification of alternative culture. This is not a process unique to Coachella and refers to numerous shifts throughout history. Importantly, counterculture was often commodified during its era of popularity. For example, icons such as the smiley face, peace sign, or tie-dye were co-opted by corporations to aid in advertisements. Commodification is a central theme in understanding how authenticity is restructured throughout Coachella's evolution.



Example of counterculture commodification in 1969.
<https://electrickoolaidblogtest.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/psychedelic-pepsi.jpg?w=297>

Malcolm Gladwell's essay "The Coolhunt" provides a useful framework that deepens the concept of commodification within the fashion industry. Gladwell describes how cultural trends emerge organically within subcultures before being identified, packaged, and marketed by corporations seeking to capitalize on what feels authentic. As the documentary *The Merchants of Cool* similarly argues, this process involves focus groups, branding agencies, and professional "coolhunters" tasked with extracting underground aesthetics for mass consumption. Central to this framework is what Gladwell calls the "paradox of cool hunting: It kills what it finds." Once authenticity is identified and commodified, it loses the very oppositional energy that made it desirable. This occurred with aspects of the counterculture movement, and I argue, parts of Coachella's culture.

Combined, these theoretical frameworks provide the basis for analyzing how Coachella has become a site where authenticity is consistently created and re-negotiated. The thesis is organized into four chapters that will trace Coachella's cultural evolution. The first chapter examines the punk origins of Coachella's founding company and the formation of an authentic,

community-driven event driven by the prioritization of the live music experience. Chapter two analyzes Coachella between 2010 and 2015, when the fashion industry and corporate sponsorships generated tension between the original ethos of the festival. Next, chapter three discusses the last five years of the decade, when the proliferation of social media influencers and brand activations created a fragmented audience and reshaped Coachella's cultural meaning. Finally, chapter four discusses the pandemic era of the festival, focusing on how the livestream of the event generated new communities, critiques, and new cultural negotiations through globalization. Together, all of these chapters illustrate that Coachella is a complex cultural site where authenticity is constantly re-negotiated.

An Introduction to American Music Festivals

To understand the trajectory of Coachella, it is vital to situate it within the necessary historical context that created the conditions under which the festival was founded. The basis of music festivals can be traced to early outdoor religious revivals that took place during the Second Great Awakening, called camp meetings. These were multi-day, outdoor gatherings that brought thousands of people together for singing, preaching, and conversion. The effects of these events were profound, with Nathan Hatch, the author of *The Democratization of American Christianity*, stating, “[they] were awesome spectacles indeed, conjuring up feelings of supernatural awe in some.”⁴ The description of these events creating emotions of “supernatural awe” directly correlates to Durkheim’s concept of “collective effervescence”. Camp meetings had a unique impact as they were founded on the unity of people in a single space for a collective purpose. This set the stage for the profound impact that music festivals would later have on American culture.

Just a decade later, Central Park in New York would host free outdoor concerts in the sprawling green. Victorian-Era concert bands would perform patriotic marches, polkas, and classical arrangements to hundreds of city dwellers who looked for entertainment on the weekends. The concerts, as The Parks’ Supervisor of Music stated, “[were] capable of becoming a powerful civilizing influence, promoting the musical development and taste of the community, and bringing about the most desirable conditions for awakening and stimulating the latent musical talent of the people.”⁵ This sentiment encapsulated the progressive outlook at the time

⁴ Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. Yale University Press, 1989. Pg. 55.

⁵ “History of Concerts in Parks : NYC Parks.” Accessed April 23, 2026.
<https://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/concerts>.

that people should be taught how to be civilized through acquiring taste associated with the higher classes. The outdoor and free nature democratized high class music for all kinds of people living in New York City, mirroring the influence of camp meetings in democratizing religion. Despite the era's focus on civilizing the masses, music still had the power to unify masses, illustrating the unique prospect that music festivals have in generating cultural meaning. Central Park would continue to host free, outdoor concerts for decades to follow, but the re-invention of these kinds of concerts began with the turn of the century.

During World War I and leading into the Great Depression, there was a revival of folk music in America. This revival was centered around the preservation of traditional, rural music while connecting it to the social and political problems that America was facing at the time. Folk songs featured simple melodies and frontier style instruments such as the banjo, while simultaneously addressing themes such as labor struggles, migration, and social inequalities.⁶ Robert Cantwell, the author of *When We Were Good: Folk Revival* argues that the interest in folk music stemmed from listeners craving of authenticity when conformity seemed like the only route in mass culture.⁷ By the 1950s and 1960s, the revival found a home in coffee houses in urban areas, such as Greenwich Village in New York. Stemming from Cold War tensions, folk music artists took to coffee houses to perform political songs and distance themselves from commercialized music. It was in these coffee houses that the line between audience and performer was blurred as audience members often participated in the songs being performed. This allowed for a new kind of music scene and would be mirrored at festivals to come.

The largest culmination of the folk music revival came with the Newport Folk festival which was first held in 1959. Put on in Rhode Island, the Newport Folk Festival was born out of

⁶ Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

⁷ Ibid.

the Newport Jazz festival after the founder realized the success of folk music and the potential it could have in a festival setting. Among the founders was popular folk artist Pete Seeger, one of the largest artists that was a part of the folk revival. The Newport Folk Festival has deep connections to the political movements of the time such as Civil Rights and the Anti-War Movement. Folk artists came to the Newport Folk Festival not just to further their careers, but as a place to make leftist statement through their songs. In this sense, the music festival at its inception was largely political and entrenched in leftist values. One of the most notable performances to come from the festival was Bob Dylan's in 1965. This specific performance sparked controversy because Dylan featured an electric band to back his performance. This was seen to some as betraying the ethos of folk music, however, to others it was a progressive form of expression. In fact, this performance became a turning point away from folk music and into rock.⁸

This turning point connected the foundations of folk music into the growing popularity of rock music. It allowed for political expressions in rock music and entrenched rock music with leftist values. Rock music allowed for a break away from the acoustics of folk with the proliferation of electric instruments. Further, it allowed for the festival atmosphere that was generated through the Newport Folk Festival to be translated into the rock music scene.

The contemporary rock musical festival has its origins in the 1960s with the countercultural movement. This movement, born out of discontent with the Vietnam War, rejected conventions and promoted ideas of “peace, love, social justice, and revolution”, creating alternative ways of life such as communal living or embracing recreational drug use.⁹

⁸ “Newport Folk Festival | Bob Dylan, Music, & History | Britannica.” Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Newport-Folk-Festival>.

⁹ “1960s Counterculture | Definition, Hippies, Music, Protests, & Facts | Britannica.” February 6, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/1960s-counterculture>.

Counterculture was a powerful force among the youth, and music played a large part in furthering the ideologies of the movement. One of the ways this was done was at the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967, the event credited as being the first contemporary rock festival, born out of the folk music festival circuit. However, the music festival that defined the countercultural movement was called Woodstock which took place in 1969. The festival took place in upstate New York and was not just a festival, but a peaceful political act. The festival featured rock music that honored the ideologies of counterculture, heavily protesting the Vietnam War and raising awareness for social equality. The festival became a defining event of the counterculture generation that rejected conformity, authority, and materialism while embracing peace, community, and the transformative power of live music. Many music festivals have attempted to recreate the ambiance of Woodstock, while others use the foundation provided to generate new meanings out of festivals such as Lollapalooza in Chicago or Glastonbury in England. The countercultural origins of Woodstock set the foundation for subsequent festivals such as Coachella where authenticity would become negotiated.

From Punk to Pilgrimage: Coachella's Early Years

In the early morning of a seemingly normal March day in 1991, Goldenvoice founder and punk concert promoter Gary Tovar's door was busted down by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Right after he was arrested, he was unable to post bail and immediately signed over his company, Goldenvoice, to his younger protegés, Paul Tollett and Rick Van Santen. Tovar would ultimately be charged with crimes relating to running California's largest marijuana trafficking operations and subsequently serve seven years in federal prison. Unbeknownst to Tovar at the time, but Goldenvoice would later run one of the most successful music festivals in the United States: Coachella Valley Arts and Music Festival.

This anecdote of the transference of power from Tovar to his protégé's due to Tovar's criminal history perfectly lays the foundation of the counter-cultural roots of Coachella. Gary Tovar was not only running one of the largest marijuana trafficking operations before his arrest, but he was also running a successful concert promotion company that was incredibly based in the punk rock music scene in California. Goldenvoice, Tovar's company, dominated the punk rock scene in California in the 1980s. He hosted his first show in 1981 in Santa Barbara, providing a platform for punks in the Southern California region to openly express their dedication to a subculture of music. These shows were the total encapsulation of punk, featuring no sponsorships, hardcore music, plenty of mosh pits, and even the occasional police riot. Tovar was actually able to pay for all of these events, including the damages that would occur to venues, without sponsorships due to his marijuana business, illustrating the deep-rooted connection between Goldenvoice and punk.¹⁰ Even further, the name Goldenvoice is actually a certain strain

¹⁰ My Warped Life Podcast. *Ep. 13 "The Birth of Goldenvoice"* | *My Warped Life Podcast*. 2021. 31:55 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwfliWgFvww>.

of marijuana that Tovar was selling, suggesting that Goldenvoice existed purely outside of mainstream cultural values and was deeply situated in the countercultural scene.

Goldenvoice kept growing under Tovar's leadership, eventually hosting punk shows all across California. The company was able to book and promote some of the most prolific punk and punk-inspired bands of the time, including Black Flag, Social Distortion, The Damned, and even promoted early shows of The Red Hot Chili Peppers. This success did not come without hardship, not just financial, but pressure from governments and law enforcement impacted the growth of Tovar's business. Importantly, law enforcement was deeply concerned with the activities of punks at this time, fearing their violent styles of dancing and potential drug use, all while promoting rebellion against social inequality, capitalism, conformity, and authority. It was no secret to Tovar that the government and law enforcement alike would have liked to see punk culture completely eradicated, especially during President Reagan's "Just Say No" presidency between 1981 and 1989.¹¹ However, punks were unable to be defeated and continued with their rebellious attitudes, allowing Tovar to continue hosting huge events for the community to participate in and revel in the messages that punk bands were bringing to the movement through music.

However, this all came to a head when he was arrested in 1991 for his marijuana-related crimes. Goldenvoice would continue under the leadership of Paul Tollet and Rick Van Santen in the 1990s, who still promoted punk shows, but led the company more inclusively to also promote alternative music, which was less connected to the rebellious attitudes of punks. Without the money pouring in from Tovar's marijuana operation, Tollett and Van Santen were left with many

¹¹ Bruce Fessier. "Goldenvoice Founder Gary Tovar Sold Pot and Got Society Ready for Coachella." The Desert Sun. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/life/entertainment/music/coachella/2017/04/27/goldenvoice-founder-gary-tovar-sold-pot-and-got-society-ready-coachella/306033001/>.

challenges to figure out. Tollett led Goldenvoice to promote concerts in much larger venues and was able to put on hundreds of shows per year. However, one show in 1993 would hold a certain significance. Goldenvoice was able to book Pearl Jam, a grunge rock band that was actively protesting Ticketmaster's monopoly on venues and excessive service fees, at the Empire Polo Fields in Indio, California. The show was booked for 1993 and would be one of Goldenvoice's largest events, yet still deeply tethered to the countercultural value of protest against capitalism due to Pearl Jam's ongoing boycott that Goldenvoice supported.¹²

So, when Tollett came up with the idea to host a music festival in California after attending festivals across the country and Europe, he was in search of a venue. The Empire Polo Fields came to mind following the successful event in 1994, with Pearl Jam. The fields are located in Indio, California, and encompass the classic California archetype of green grass and palm trees - the perfect location for a California festival. Tollett is credited with coming up with all of the ideas for Coachella, and Goldenvoice entirely backed him. The company was eager to put on a potentially groundbreaking festival for alternative music lovers, and all of its resources went to putting on the first festival. After working with the city of Indio, Tollett was able to convince them to host the festival on the Polo Fields and began finding artists who would be willing to join the lineup. Luckily for Goldenvoice, they had established close relationships with many bands that valued their smaller company and were able to book large bands such as Rage Against the Machine, Morrissey, Beck, and others. However, the financial toll of the festival was enormous. Goldenvoice relied on its relationships with talent agents and the bands themselves since it did not have the financial ability to pay them on time.¹³ Tickets went on sale just weeks

¹² "Paul Tollett, Goldenvoice Team on the Struggle - And Ultimate Success - of Creating Coachella | Billboard." April 7, 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170407213846/http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/touring/1083099/paul-tollett-goldenvoice-team-on-the-struggle-and-ultimate-success>.

¹³ Ibid

after Woodstock 1999, a festival held in upstate New York that was a total disaster, filled with overpriced goods and inadequate sanitation facilities that resulted in riots, arson, and looting.¹⁴ This event drastically impacted the ticket sales of the first Coachella as it was seen as close to impossible to host a peaceful, large scale music festival after Woodstock '99s failure.

Still, the inaugural Coachella was held on Empire Polo Fields on October 9th and 10th, 1999. The event hosted around 18,000 attendees over the two days, who were willing to convene on the Polo fields located around 2 hours away from Los Angeles. Rolling Stones Magazine reviewed the festival and nicknamed it a “Musical Oasis in the California Desert”, promoting the musical credibility of the lineup and the overall atmosphere of the event.¹⁵ Water was inexpensive, the grass provided an area for attendees to relax, and there were no riots or violence. Importantly, the artistry of the lineup was appreciated and created a “collective cool” since high radio play was not the driver of bands on the lineup.¹⁶ This authenticity was the driver of Coachella’s initial success and allowed the festival to be remembered in a positive way after its end on Sunday night. Mark Healy, a Rolling Stones journalist, stated, “The first annual Coachella resulted in no deaths, few arrests, and no serious injuries. It was two days of good vibes and good music that came to a peaceful end and that, hopefully, will start a new festival tradition.”¹⁷ This sentiment reveals the community focus of the event, reinforcing Coachella as an authentic cultural space. The focus on “good vibes and good music” echoes that of its countercultural predecessors such as the original Woodstock and solidifies Coachella as an event rooted in shared experiences.

¹⁴ EBSCO. “Woodstock 1999 Ends in Violence | History | Research Starters | EBSCO Research.” Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.ebsco.com>.

¹⁵ Steven Mirkin and Marlene Goldman. “Coachella: Musical Oasis in the California Desert.” *Rolling Stone*, October 11, 1999. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/coachella-musical-oasis-in-the-california-desert-75503/>.

¹⁶ Mark Healy. "Coachella Music and Arts Festival." *Rolling Stone*, Nov 25, 38. <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/coachella-music-arts-festival/docview/2549064967/se-2>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Unfortunately, despite the perceived success of the festival, the financial toll was too much for Goldenvoice. They were simply unable to pay for the festival. The company had to ask bands for their fees back and promised to pay them once it got more money, which was enabled by their friendships to have this level of trust with the bands.¹⁸ Tickets were not sold at the level Tollett was hoping for. In total, the festival was quoted to have lost Goldenvoice around a million dollars, per Tollett's own admission. To keep the company afloat, Tollett had to go so far as to sell his home and car.¹⁹ The future of Goldenvoice and Coachella was looking bleak, with no festival hosted in 2000.

However, a life raft was given to the company by Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG). After AEG opened the Staples Center, a huge venue in Los Angeles, they were looking for companies to book events, and they looked to Goldenvoice. AEG offered to buy Goldenvoice, which would provide a complete fresh start to the company that was deeply in debt. Paul Tollett was able to keep ownership of Coachella while still allowing the AEG buyout to occur. Luckily enough, AEG loved the idea of Coachella and encouraged Tollett to continue with the venture since they had financial viability as a company. This partnership introduced tension between corporate sponsorship and Coachella's authentic identity. Tollett remained committed to providing a festival experience devoid of sponsorship and maintaining artistic integrity, despite AEG's financial backing. By maintaining this independence and prioritizing the musical aspect of the festival, Coachella was able to resist corporatization in its early years, allowing for an alternative, community-driven event to be held.

¹⁸ "On This Day In Music: The First Coachella Festival Took Place In The California Desert | GRAMMY.Com." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://grammy.com/news/first-coachella-valley-music-festival-1999>.

¹⁹ John Seabrook. "The Mastermind Behind Coachella." Dept. of Music. *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/the-mastermind-behind-coachella>.

It was the spring of 2001, and Coachella made a triumphant return to the Empire Polo Fields. Now that the festival had come back, the era that I argue encapsulates the early years of Coachella began, ending in 2009. The early years of Coachella functioned as an authentic, community-driven event that was rooted in alternative values, where meaning was created through live music, collective identity, and limited corporate influence.

During this era, Coachella still prided itself on the vast array of musical acts, spanning numerous genres, which allowed fans to revel in the experience of live music. Daily attendance of the festival across these years was harder to predict, largely driven by the fan excitement over the headliners, yet it still showed steady growth. Furthermore, Goldenvoice would still lose money each year, despite its partnership with AEG; however, these figures were nowhere close to the financial failures of the first festival. The 1999 festival had daily attendance of around 18,000, and by 2004, the festival had sold out for the first time, with 55,000 people attending each day of the two-day affair. The 2004 festival was a turning point for the event, as it was critically acclaimed, featuring major headliners such as Radiohead and The Cure.

Furthermore, Daft Punk's set in 2006 completely changed how electronic dance music (EDM) would be performed for generations to come,

with their electronic pyramid set creating a genre-defining moment at Coachella.



Daft Punk Pyramid Set at Coachella 2006.
https://beatforbeat.com.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/vegoose_2007_daft_punk_by_ryan_olbrysh_WEB-1536x1024.jpg

Despite this early success, fans still felt like the festival was an indie music lover's prime destination, where they could connect with like-minded fans under the desert sun. The event was authentically about music and artistry, allowing meaningful connections to be forged. One fan simply wrote in a popular blog's comments, "Coachella innovates, not regurgitates", proving how fans identified with the artistry being brought to the festival and Coachella being viewed as being at the forefront of the live music experience.²⁰ Further, another fan wrote looking back on the 2006 festival and stated, "...seeing Massive Attack and Daft Punk, not knowing anything about either of those acts, introduced me to electronic music, forever shaping my music tastes."²¹ This fan's experience showcases how Coachella allowed people to experience permanent musical self-discovery by seeing live acts they may have never seen. The festival was becoming a site of pilgrimage for its dedicated fans as it was not just a concert, but a place for transformative experiences. Finally, another fan wrote in their personal blog, "Nightfall and Radiohead had transformed Coachella from an overcrowded desert county fair to a transcendent, cosmically aligned music festival. This shared feeling... that's what we'd hoped festivals were all about."²² It is extremely clear in these excerpts that the shared experience of music, in this case Radiohead's headlining performance, was the driver of the festival's excellence. The festival is described in spiritual terms as being "cosmically aligned" and "transcendent", illustrating the devotion of fans to this experience. The festival was not like any other concert; it had become a site of spiritual transformation worthy of unwavering devotion. As Gina Arnold puts forth in her book, *Half A Million Strong: Crowds and Power from Woodstock to Coachella*, this kind of

²⁰ "Brooklynvegan: Coachella 2009 Will Be April 17, 18 & 19." December 10, 2008. https://web.archive.org/web/20081210022015/http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2008/10/coachella_2009.html.

²¹ Idontknowhoiam143. "People Who Attended Coachella Back in the 00's." Reddit Post. R/Coachella, March 9, 2025. https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/1j7jhn/people_who_attended_coachella_back_in_the_00s/.

²² DJ MVK. "Coachella 2004, Chapters 7 & 8." Substack newsletter. *Coachella Musings*, April 3, 2025. <https://coachellamusings.substack.com/p/coachella-2004-chapters-7-and-8>.

sentiment is the ideal of collective unity being sold to fans, as the aspiration of this particular blog poster is seen through the statement, “that’s what we’d hoped festivals were all about.”²³

The ideal of festivals fostering collective unity has been carefully constructed since Woodstock to represent countercultural attitudes of togetherness in a world focused on individuality. As this blog poster states, Coachella was actively fulfilling that desire through the music and sense of community in the crowd.

Another key factor of the collective identity fostered by the early years of Coachella was its own online message board. Located at coachella.com, the online message board was easy to locate for anyone with internet access interested in the festival or looking to purchase tickets. With boards such as “rumours/gossip”, “past experiences”, and “questions”, fans could connect about the festival year-round in a direct way. Fans would discuss their favorite headliners, predict line-ups, and plan meet-ups for festival weekend. As one fan wrote:

My words will never truly capture the tenderness I felt while singing along with Thom York[e] for the first time, ... but I am compelled to put my fingers to this keyboard again and again, and try anyway. I take an equally great joy at hearing, looking at and reliving all of your experiences. The humanity in all of us demands the retelling of our tales.²⁴

The desire to share experiences and revel in the connection that music brought is central to the online message board community that was fostered on Coachella.com. Instead of the internet drawing divisions, it was used to build a community of exclusivity centered around the joy of being at the festival. As this user writes, the desire to share and revel in others' experiences is described as being equal to the festival itself, proving just how important the community of

²³ Gina Arnold. *Half a Million Strong: Crowds and Power from Woodstock to Coachella*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018.

²⁴ Dr. Herbalist. “Coachella 2004 - Wwww.Ezboard.Com.” March 9, 2005. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050309020830/http://p073.ezboard.com/fgoldenoicefrm11.showMessage?topicID=177.topic>.

Coachella was to the festival's culture. Additionally, a message board user reflecting on their participation in the forum wrote, "I first started[ed] posting there in 2004, and if it wasn't for the people I've met and made friends with, I likely would have never found my way to my first Coachella in 2005."²⁵ This is demonstrable proof that the message board was vital to connecting like-minded fans and eventually bringing more people to the festival. This fan writes that it was literally the community they made on the message board that was the reason for attending Coachella. The opportunity and open availability to build community were a major driving force in the attendees' experiences at the festival. As Diane Cormany, a professor of communications and media journalism, put it in her article entitled, "Coachella Fans, Online and Translocal", "This particular subset of Coachella fans maintains their relationship to the festival and to one another through the online message board and interpellate Coachella as a site of annual pilgrimage, worthy of unquestioning dedication."²⁶ Through year-round access to the Coachella-fan community, the event became memorialized and highly anticipated, establishing the festival as a ritual for dedicated fans.

While the Coachella message board provided the opportunity for viewers to extend the festival experience beyond the physical event, their participation was rooted in their physical attendance. Fans could revisit and relive their favorite performances while connecting to other people who had attended the festival with them. However, as digital technology improved, Coachella was able to capitalize on this and extend people's experience of the real-time event. The introduction of livestreaming technology signaled a shift in online engagement from one of anecdotal experiences to real-time as the event was unfolding.

²⁵ feedmenik, "New Coachella Message Board up and Running at [Https://Forum.Themojavetent.Com](https://Forum.Themojavetent.Com)." Reddit, December 29, 2018.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/aana6x/new_coachella_message_board_up_and_running_at/.

²⁶ Diane L Cormany. "Coachella Fans, Online and Translocal." *Journal of Popular Music Studies (Wiley-Blackwell)* 27, no. 2 (2015): 184–98. 103002183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12120>.

Notably early to festival livestreaming, Coachella first webcasted parts of the festival on an old streaming platform hosted by AT&T called AOL blueroom in 2006. Dedicated fans could locate the broadcast through the Coachella website, which directed them to AOL. However, the footage was extremely limited, advertising for the broadcast was minimal, and the production value was to be expected of a 2006 stream – less than ideal, but still revolutionary for the time.²⁷

Despite this technological advancement, the Coachella livestream on AOL Blueroom did not disrupt the festival's claims to authentic alternative culture. Since the broadcast had limited accessibility and low production value, the stream was largely confined to those already invested in Coachella's culture. The livestream was still an extension of the Coachella community and allowed fans to participate beyond the physical grounds of the festival, much like the online message boards. In this sense, Coachella was able to maintain its emphasis on music and collectivity, as it had not reached the global scale where participation would be contested and the level of cultural visibility that would attract significant corporate involvement. As such, Coachella was able to maintain an absence of corporate influence and brand partnerships.

However, following the financial failure of the first festival, Goldenvoice had every reason to engage with brand partnerships. But, for many years, Coachella maintained its brand independence. Speaking of the importance of this independence, Paul Tollett, Goldenvoice's owner, states:

We controlled every aspect of it. Usually, if you're starting a festival, you go to a food-and-beverage company and say, 'Give me half a million in advance, and you can run the concessions.' ... But you have to control it. I wouldn't let sponsors' logos on the

²⁷ "Coachella - Webcast," May 4, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100504111125/http://www.coachella.com/broadcast/webcast>.

stages. I feel like when the band is playing it should be you and the band, and it's a sacred moment.²⁸

There was a clear financial incentive to involve branding at the festival, but the desire to create an authentic, uncorporatized experience was paramount for the organizers. Tollet expresses a commitment to create a “sacred” site while bands are playing, automatically entangling the existence of spirituality at the festival with the absence of corporate logos. Importantly, during the second festival, there were only two branded booths on the festival grounds. One for Virgin Megastores, a store to buy CDs, records, or other physical music forms, and for the Sony PlayStation. It is important to note that there was not an absence of corporate sponsorship with these small inclusions, yet their involvement was carefully managed to uphold the authentic vision upon which the festival was founded.

Limited corporate and brand influence had an impact on how festival-goers presented themselves. Without major fashion sponsors, social media influencers, or intense media coverage, fashion at Coachella was largely unstructured and without the pressure of meeting cultural expectations. Rather, Coachella fashion served as an extension of musical taste, an expression of subcultural belonging, or practical comfort.

At its beginning, Coachella was the site of alternative culture, entirely devoid of fashion industry sponsors, allowing for an authentic expression of personal fashion sense or simply dressing for the weather. During the early years of the festival, ranging from 1999 to 2009, the fashion culture was rooted in the alternative subculture and practical dressing for the desert heat. A picture of the crowd taken in 2005 shows women dressed in t-shirts or tank tops of varying styles and colors. As for the men, they are wearing almost the same as the women, t-shirts of

²⁸ John Seabrook, “The Mastermind Behind Coachella,” Dept. of Music, *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/the-mastermind-behind-coachella>.

varying styles. These casual, or even basic styles, illustrate the authenticity of the event at its beginning. People were not focused on appearances, but on their comfort in over one-hundred-degree weather. Varying t-shirts allowed for the display of personal style or musical preferences. For

example, one man located in the center right is wearing a black t-shirt with the word “hardcore” in large white text. This signifies the alternative



Photo of Coachella Crowd in 2005.
<https://www.alamy.com/april-30-2005-indio-ca-usa-crowd-shot-during-day-one-the-2005-coachella-valley-music-and-arts-festival-credit-image-vaughn-youtzzumapresscom-image664155310.html>

subculture of hardcore music within the punk music sphere. The festival allowed for the authentic portrayal of musical tastes through fashion, illustrating the freedom of expression present at the festival. Furthermore, Coachella was completely devoid of any fashion industry sponsors, and little information was ever published referencing the fashion of the event. In fact, an article reviewing the festival in 2001 only included one piece of information regarding the dress of the attendees: “A ...bathing-suited crowd”.²⁹ This small inclusion in an article fully focused on the logistics and performances of the festival illustrates that there was no mainstream interest in the clothing, only the music. There was no competition for the most fashionable outfit as the personal style and comfort of festival-goers remained of the utmost importance. The alternative described in the

²⁹ “Coachella’s Music, Fans Overcome Festival Troubles.” ABC News. Accessed January 24, 2026.
<https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=105760&page=1>.

“Coolhunt” was consistently present at Coachella, a new music festival for lovers of a vast array of subgenres of all kinds of rock music, primed for discovery by larger audiences.

The first small shift in the perception of festival fashion during the time Coachella was running was the attendance of celebrities at numerous large festivals. Models, socialites, artists, and actors would attend various festivals and be photographed, massively spreading the



Kate Moss at Glastonbury in 2005.
<https://cdn.mos.cms.futurecdn.net/X5bXWiDfDM Px3L4jNuJ4F7-1000-80.jpg>

alternative culture to much broader audiences. For instance, Kate Moss, a world-famous supermodel, was pictured at Glastonbury in England during the 2005 festival wearing a gold sheer dress with a belt draped across her waist and black rainboots, creating an effortlessly chic look. The outfit generated interest in festival fashion almost immediately, as Moss’s stylist said, reflecting on the photograph, “It became like an instant, iconic moment. It was like this sort of yellow dress moment. Literally iconic overnight, a picture that’s always gonna be ingrained in everyone’s memory.”³⁰ A Vogue article even writes, “The supermodel single-handedly

invented festival fashion.”³¹ This iconic outfit and Kate Moss’s appearance at festivals legitimized them in the eyes of the mass media. Her experimentation with fashion at an event like Glastonbury, along with being internationally recognizable, gained the attention of the fashion industry on the potential of festival culture.

³⁰ Maddy Mussen. “How Kate Moss Put Together Her Most Iconic Glastonbury Look.” The Standard, June 21, 2023.
<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/kate-moss-glastonbury-outfits-gold-dress-2005-pete-doherty-belt-b1089041.html>.

³¹ Kerry McDermott. “12 Kate Moss Glastonbury Looks That Defined Festival Fashion.” Vogue, June 21, 2022.
<https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/12-kate-moss-glastonbury-looks-that-defined-festival-fashion>.

Furthermore, this influence was brought to America soon after, with celebrities of similar status beginning to attend Glastonbury's sunnier counterpart in America – Coachella. By 2007, Paris Hilton, later known as one of the 'Queens of Coachella', was photographed on the grounds of the festival in a green paisley sundress, sporting a casual, but fashionable look.³² This dress signaled a shift to the motifs shared by the countercultural movement, with the paisley design being described by the BBC as “a firm rock ‘n’ roll favourite, resonating with its early Eastern symbolism, its progressive, 19th Century boho aura and its unruly 1960s free-love connotations.”³³ This simple fashion choice, intentionally or not, reflects a history of rock n’ roll and counterculture through the paisley design, beckoning a new idea for what clothing could illustrate at Coachella. Of course, Hilton borrows from the countercultural icons that preceded her popularity, however, her fashion choice illustrates a nod to the past. By Hilton wearing and being photographed in this design, she aided in ushering a resurgence of bohemian, countercultural style to modern music festivals. Of course, Hilton is just a single person, but her cultural reach to mass audiences during this time created a curated image in the minds of consumers and the industry of what festival fashion could become – an homage to counterculture.



Paris Hilton in Paisley Dress at Coachella 2007.
https://akns-images.eonline.com/eol_images/Entire_Site/2019317/rs_634x1024-190417105401-634.5paris-hilton-coachella.jpg?fit=around%7C776:1254&output-quality=90&crop=776:1254:center,top

³² E! Online. “Paris Hilton’s Outrageous Coachella Looks Through the Years.” April 19, 2019.
<https://www.eonline.com/news/1033893/paris-hilton-s-outrageous-coachella-looks-through-the-years>.

³³ “Paisley: The Story of a Classic Bohemian Print.” November 6, 2017.
<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20151021-paisley-behind-rocks-favourite-fashion>.

Just a few years later, dozens of celebrities and everyday festival goers began to follow this blueprint – paying homage to the bohemian, free-love movements that came before. The trend largely remained at the grassroots level, with only a few stepping out in outfits that connoted this meaning, and the majority of attendees still focused on comfort.³⁴ Yet still, clothing brands began to take notice of this, potentially by participating in the “coolhunt” of festival fashion trends that were beginning to take shape. In 2008, a clothing brand called LNA hosted a party for the socially connected at Coachella and featured their line of elevated basics, not grasping the growing trend of bohemian-inspired clothing, and instead catering to the average attendee who chose comfort. However, just a year later, Diesel, a denim company that “resonated with a young and rebellious audience”, held their first party during the Coachella weekend.³⁵ Some attendees at this party are pictured in gladiator sandals, long necklaces reminiscent of hippie love beads, and tribal patterns.³⁶ This fusion of tribal, bohemian, and countercultural motifs came to represent the bohemian chic style that would later dominate the festival at its cultural peak due to its connotation of non-conformity. Diesel, being a brand that captured the attention of the alternative youth, was the perfect setting for festival fashion trends to proliferate to a much broader audience while still maintaining countercultural roots.

The early years of Coachella tell a story of authenticity, rooted in musical credibility, honoring counterculture, and communal experience. Emerging from Goldenvoice’s ties to the punk rock scene, Coachella was established on a foundation of prioritizing the live music experience. However, Goldenvoice's partnership with AEG was the beginning of corporate influence on the punk origins of the company, beginning Coachella’s negotiations with

³⁴ “132 Coachella Festival Goers 2008 Photos & High Res Pictures - Getty Images.” Accessed January 24, 2026. <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/coachella-2012?page=2>.

³⁵ Shania. “How Diesel Rebranded and Became an Iconic Fashion Brand.” *Medium*, June 2, 2023. <https://nandii.medium.com/how-diesel-rebranded-and-became-an-iconic-fashion-brand-11568b3fb820>. sandals,

³⁶ Lindsay. “Diesel Coachella Party.” *Lindsay’s Diet*, April 18, 2009. <https://lindsaydiet.com/photos/diesel-20090418/>.

authenticity within corporate structures. Still, fans were able to experience the festival as a pilgrimage, discover new music, and witness collective transformation. Online message boards and the early livestream allowed Coachella devotees to prolong the festival experience and participate in the event, despite not being physically present. Further, the lack of true corporate branding allowed for authentic expressions of fashion to take place. What defined the early years of Coachella was a music-centered cultural space where alternative expression was able to thrive in a communal setting.

Authenticity Under Pressure: The Reconfiguration of Coachella

The first five years of the new decade began a new era of Coachella, serving as a pivotal turning point in the festival's place in popular culture. As the last chapter outlines, Coachella began as a community-driven, alternative expression of culture, which would soon be changed as the festival expanded into a globally visible event. As digital technology expanded the experience of the festival far beyond the limitations of the desert, Coachella was now accessible to mass audiences, allowing it to produce cultural moments. Simultaneously, this expansion introduced new forms of commercialization through fashion, branding, and corporate partnerships. This chapter argues that while all of these expansions dramatically impacted the festival's place in popular culture, they also introduced challenges to the original motivations of the festival, which generated tension between claims to authenticity and commercialization.

In these years, Coachella completely transformed and cemented its place as a popular cultural event. 2010 was the first year where completely mainstream artists were the headliners, instead of rock group reunions or classic rock stars, which had been the formula for headliners in previous years. Jay-Z and The Gorillaz were the headliners, the first time hip-hop stars got the slot on the main stage. This illustrates how the festival was beginning to shift to appeal to a broader set of fan interests besides simply alternative music. Additionally, attendance skyrocketed between 2009 and 2010 from 51,000 attendees a day to 75,000, illustrating the event's mainstream appeal. Due to such high demand for tickets and quick sell-outs, the event expanded into two identical weekends in 2012. This meant there would be identical lineups for two weekends in a row. By 2015, the festival was hosting almost 100,000 people each day of the 3-day weekend. Clearly, new fans were being introduced to the Coachella experience,

dramatically impacting how the meaning of the festival was constructed. Consequently, this growth also produced a major uptick in the prices for Coachella tickets. Prices for tickets had gone up incrementally over the early years, at most raising ten dollars between festivals, with single-day tickets always being available for a lesser cost. However, 2010 was the first year fans were forced to buy a three-day admission for around two hundred and seventy dollars, and by 2015, it would cost three hundred and seventy-five dollars to attend.³⁷ As these figures illustrate, Coachella rapidly expanded in these five years, as increasing accessibility and mainstream appeal began to reshape its meaning. As prices and attendance increased, the festival objectively lost part of its countercultural roots, yet its cultural meaning would still be debated despite increased visibility and expansion.

With this expansion, Coachella's audience was no longer geographically contained to the Empire Polo Fields as livestreaming became a tool for access. I argue that the livestream became a mechanism for structuring how the festival was experienced. Unlike the limited broadcasting capabilities of the earlier AOL streaming platform, new digital partnerships introduced a level of standardization that shaped the viewing experience of a global audience. Through this development, livestreaming did not just recreate the Coachella experience; it reconfigured it, enabling shared moments to create community far beyond the desert and into the homes of millions of people.

Through a partnership with Facebook and 5Gum in 2010, Coachella was now hosted on one of the largest social media sites of the time, generating new interest in the festival's performances. The only thing necessary was following 5Gum's Facebook page; otherwise, the content was free to stream. Importantly, only one performance could be viewed at once, creating

³⁷ "The Evolution Of The Coachella Lineup | iHeart." Accessed March 22, 2026. <https://www.iheart.com/content/2019-01-05-evolution-of-the-coachella-lineup/>.

a uniform broadcasting experience.³⁸ The expansion onto Facebook was just a test run for the partnership that Goldenvoice acquired just one year later. In 2011, Coachella partnered with YouTube, bringing the production of the livestream to entirely new levels. The livestream was now capable of hosting three different channels, each of a different stage on the festival grounds, allowing for internet users to create their own at-home Coachella schedule. By allowing at-home viewers to stream the festival at no cost, Goldenvoice democratized the festival experience, bringing in four million viewers.³⁹ They were simultaneously able to advertise to brand new audiences by showing the artistry taking place in Indio, hoping viewers would eventually become ticket buyers.

Even this early in the livestream's presence online, early loyalty to the media platform was established due to its technical achievements and uniqueness. When writing about the livestreaming event in 2011 on a music-dedicated blog, Paige Parsons relayed, "What really struck me about the online access this year was the reliability..., the multiple channels ..., the production value (there were multiple live cameras being mixed for each video feed), and ubiquity (I had at least a dozen Twitter friends live commenting on the feed)."⁴⁰ Parsons points out two major aspects of the livestream that illustrate its quality - the technology behind production and the social belonging that comes with communal experience. Despite being online, viewers of the livestream are simultaneously watching the same thing, allowing for the formation of a temporary community. Although done in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a study conducted by communication scholars in Amsterdam found that viewing a livestreamed concert

³⁸"How the Coachella Webcast Changed the Music Biz - CBS News," April 20, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-the-coachella-webcast-changed-the-music-biz-costz/>.

³⁹ Daniel Terdiman, "How YouTube's Coachella Webcast Changed the World," CNET, April 20, 2011, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/how-youtubes-coachella-webcast-changed-the-world/>.

⁴⁰ Paige Parsons, *Coachella 2011 via Palo Alto*, April 18, 2011, <https://thecolorawesome.com/2011/04/18/coachella-2011-via-palo-alto/>.

created higher levels of social presence rather than simply watching a recorded version.⁴¹ This communicates the same message as Parsons regarding the Coachella stream: new social connections are able to be made by communally experiencing a live event virtually as well as physically. As the creative director for the band Nine Inch Nails stated, “Coachella also recognized that recordings of live performances aren't a scarcity, but the event of everyone watching it in real time *is*. The thing that made it exciting, aside from the excellent implementation, was feeling like you were part of something as it was happening.”⁴² Despite not attending the event in Indio, massive numbers of people were able to create their own online community centered around the discussion of performances as they were happening in real time.

Importantly, the expansion of the livestream format did not just create social connections, but it also produced new loyalty to the Coachella brand through the technology Parsons described. In fact, it has even been proven in another study, done by Business Administration researchers, that the quality of a livestreamed event has a positive relationship with the production of fan loyalty.⁴³ Through Parsons' specific noting of the quality of the stream, the potential for mass fan loyalty to Coachella's new media presence was established. This loyalty only solidified the livestream's place as part of Coachella's brand and allowed for the influx of millions of people to participate in the online community of the stream. By the conclusion of 2011, the livestream was not only technologically successful but also able to create a new online audience equally capable of generating cultural significance.

⁴¹ Sophie T. Kulla et al., “The Role of Social Presence in Live and Recorded Concert Viewing: Effects on Enjoyment and Emotional Well-Being,” *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 14 (May 2024): 100409, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100409>

⁴² “How the Coachella Webcast Changed the Music Biz - CBS News,”

⁴³ Jose Andres Areiza-Padilla and Tatiana Galindo-Becerra, “The Importance of E-Service Quality in the Livestreaming Music Concert Business,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2051791, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2051791>.

Just a year later, viewership of the livestream tripled, with 11.8 million people tuning into the first weekend of the festival.⁴⁴ While the online audience was expanding, the livestream became a new mechanism to create collective memory. For example, during their headlining slot at Coachella 2012, rappers Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre brought out a “holographic” Tupac, delivering one of the most shocking guest appearances. In an interview, a 27-year-old male spoke of this performance, “The 1st Coachella live stream that I was so enamored with was the one where Snoop Dogg and Dre brought out



Tupac Hologram with Snoop Dogg in 2012.
<https://www.nydailynews.com/2012/04/16/rapper-tupac-shakur-hits-stage-at-coachella-with-the-help-of-3-d-technology/>

Tupac.... that was ... the 1st big viral moment from Coachella that I remember is just that Tupac hologram.”⁴⁵ Importantly, he was able to view the cultural moment on the livestream, even noting that it was the first one he tuned into. This illustrates how the livestream had democratized the festival by allowing more people to be privy to the cultural moments being produced on the ground in Coachella. The livestream was able to drive a specific collective memory of the event, as this attendee notes he was “enamored” with the livestream’s coverage of this popular culture moment. He even remarks that this was the “1st viral moment”, connecting the livestream to the festival’s virality, therefore illustrating the livestream's newfound capability of establishing Coachella’s global presence. It was not just this festival goer who perceived this to be a historical moment; it was reported on massively in the news, sparked debates about ethics

⁴⁴ The festival expanded into two-weekends in 2012, however only the first weekend was livestreamed. This would change in 2019 when both weekends were broadcast.

⁴⁵ 27 year-old male (Performer in 2014, on/off festival goer since 2017, and Coachella Valley Local) In conversation with author February 6, 2026.

and Tupac's legacy, and introduced a new generation to his music. Today, it is looked at as one of the most iconic moments in the festival's history.⁴⁶ Although this performance is just one of these moments, the livestream enabled the ability to witness cultural moments in real-time with other online users, which drove global interest in the festival.

As livestreaming expanded Coachella's global audience, it transformed the event into a highly visible cultural moment. It was no longer confined to the desert as Coachella became a site where performances, appearances, and aesthetics could be continuously viewed by people around the world. This heightened visibility generated attention beyond just music and created new opportunities for fashion and branding to become part of the festival's expanding identity. In this sense, the festival was not only a place to experience musical performance, but also a visible display where image and marketability began to have an impact on how the festival was understood.

In this visible cultural environment, fashion at Coachella shifted from a personal or subcultural expression into a mediated performance to signal cultural belonging. This new era saw the intense adoption of bohemian chic in the festival setting. It was no longer the celebrities or the select few attendees who donned this style that is described as nostalgic of another era. This perfectly follows a commonly believed theory developed by James Laver in his book *Taste and Fashion* known as Laver's Law that states, "the same styles will be perceived differently as time passes, moving from *in- decent* before a fashion's time, to *smart* when it is at its peak, to *hideous* when it becomes passé, then ultimately around again to *beautiful* after enough time passes."⁴⁷ The bohemian trend, strictly inspired by the countercultural hippies, was now beautiful

⁴⁶ Zach Schonfeld, "9 Legendary Moments in Coachella History," HISTORY, April 8, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/iconic-moments-coachella-festival>.

⁴⁷ Lorynn Divita. "3 Days of Peace & Music & Fashion : A History of Festival Dress from Woodstock to Coachella."

and romantic and very much in style. Images from Coachella 2011 and 2012 show attendees wearing flower crowns, crochet, fringe, and tribal print. Some even partake in the culturally appropriative choice of wearing Native American headdresses that were ignorantly a part of the bohemian trend, illustrating a lack of cultural respect. Despite this offensive choice, it is impossible to ignore that bohemian styles had become the cool thing to wear to Coachella.

During the early 2010s, the fashion industry capitalized on its knowledge of festival goers' outfits and attempted to influence consumers with mass marketing of a uniform festival aesthetic, explaining the industry's ability to make alternative culture mainstream. Most importantly, Coachella's connection to major fast-fashion label H&M solidified the adoption of bohemian chic as a festival uniform to be co-opted. By 2011, H&M developed a partnership with Coachella that allowed them to have a booth at the festival, one of the first brand activations. One of the largest producers of fast fashion was now on the grounds of the festival, constantly observing attendees' style choices and noting the bohemian trend. In 2012, H&M returned with a booth focused on donating to a non-profit to help the AIDS epidemic; the campaign was called "Kiss for a Cause". Attendees who interacted with the activation were instructed to take photos of themselves kissing and post them with a hashtag on social media. Inside a TV also rotated photos of the new "Kiss for a Cause" collection that would go on sale after the festival ended.⁴⁸ Despite being an interactive experience, attendees were still effectively encouraged to promote the brand by plastering photos on social media. The booth subtly entangled the festival experience with promoting a branded aesthetic, illustrating the beginning of the co-optation of festival culture.

⁴⁸ Bernadette Matroka. "How H&M's Kiss For a Cause for Fashion Against AIDS at Coachella Symbolized an Excellent Brand X Non-Profit Collaboration and Awareness Campaign – Label Networks". n.d. Accessed January 24, 2026. <https://www.labelnetworks.com/how-hms-kiss-for-a-cause-for-fashion-against-aids-at-coachella-symbolized-an-excellent-brand-x-non-profit-collaboration-and-awareness-campaign/>.

H&M continued to sponsor the festival, being labeled a partner by Coachella, which connotes a reciprocal relationship. Even furthering this partnership, H&M released a fashion line with Coachella called “H&M loves Coachella” in 2015. The collection includes every aspect of bohemian chic – crochet, long necklaces, tribal print, flower crowns, fringe, large sunglasses – and features the Coachella logo on a few items.⁴⁹ The bohemian trend that was reminiscent of Woodstockians was now being repackaged as a uniform for Coachella festival goers, complete with logos. This illustrates an intense deviation from the alternative culture site the festival once was. Coachella’s logo was now plastered across H&M stores worldwide, and H&M was able to advertise directly to festival goers eager to partake in the trend. This kind of marketing creates a passivity in the audience, as their choice in clothing is being consistently pushed in one direction, wherever they turn. Despite outwardly participating in the reinvigoration of politically charged, alternative fashion, all meaning is lost by the participation of mainstream corporate America. The trend was no longer at the grassroots level, but entirely a part of the mainstream. By deeply involving itself with the fashion industry, Coachella has diluted the festival’s original focus on music, with Marybeth Schmitt, the head of communications for H&M North America, stating in 2015, “Coachella is known for its fashion as much at this point as it’s known for music.”⁵⁰

It was now impossible to untangle Coachella with the concept of festival fashion; it was the cultural symbol of it. Articles invaded the newstream weeks before the festival with how-to guides on putting together the perfectly bohemian outfit, celebrities racked up millions of likes on social media in their flower crowns, and parodies of this superficial homage to hippies were written by mainstream comedians.⁵¹ More and more brands began to be involved in the

⁴⁹ Hawley Dunbar. *H&M Loves Coachella 2015 Full Lookbook* | *Sidewalk Hustle*. February 6, 2015. <https://sidewalkhustle.com/hm-loves-coachella-2015-lookbook/>.

⁵⁰ Alexandra Cheney. “How Fashion Co-Opted Coachella.” *Culture*. *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/04/how-the-fashion-industry-co-opted-coachella/390843/>.

⁵¹ Lorynn Divita. “3 Days of Peace & Music & Fashion : A History of Festival Dress from Woodstock to Coachella.”

ever-growing festival fashion trend and expanded the idea of what branded events could signify. And just like was forecasted in “The Coolhunt”, the trend of bohemian chic was soon killed.

Additionally, a large part of Coachella culture in this era was showing off festival outfits on social media and showcasing the aesthetic of the experience in the desert. As one article wrote, “It wasn’t just a music festival anymore — it was an entire ecosystem of fashion, tech, marketing, and vibes”, illustrating the way that Coachella was becoming a cultural center.⁵² However, there were still devoted Coachella fans who had been attending the festival since the early years, who were much more focused on the community of music lovers they were able to build, perhaps still contributing to the Coachella message boards. Therefore, this era had a mass influx of people with differing motivations for attending, either being aesthetically or spiritually driven.

As fashion and commercialization became an expanding part of the Coachella experience, the festival's identity began to shift in ways that generated tension within its audience. A space that was defined by communal experience and musical discovery was now also a site of visibility and consumption. This transformation created discourse among fans who sought an authentic experience and those who were transfixed with Coachella’s cultural status. Subsequently, Coachella became a contested space where its meaning and purpose were often debated.

The early 2010s represented an era when Coachella attendees had to grapple with the tensions of its growing popularity while still trying to create the authentic community that was fostered in the early years. Since fans had differing motivations for attending the festival, the tensions between fan responses to how Coachella was handling its popularity while maintaining

⁵² Christine Lorelie. “The History of Coachella: How a Desert Concert Became a Global Festival Phenomenon.” *Medium*, April 7, 2025. <https://christinelorelie.medium.com/what-is-the-history-behind-coachella-1243c2139abe>.

a community centered around music were ever-present in online discourse. Many fans still had a spiritual, transformative experience at the festival, able to ignore its growing popularity and crowded grounds. One attendee wrote after the 2013 festival, “The festival is magical: from the oversized Ferris wheel to the millions of glow sticks, from rainbow palm trees to strings of glowing balloons lighting the sky, from whimsical outfits to the endless supply of live music.”⁵³ Terms like “magical” and “whimsical” connote a fantastical, otherworldly experience where fans are able to immerse themselves completely, much further than just music itself was capable of. This mirrors the experience that fans had in the early years of the festival, allowing Coachella to maintain its status as a transformative experience for some. However, there were still whispers of the festival becoming less of a destination for an authentic live music experience. As another fan wrote in the comment section of a *Brooklyn Vegan* blog post, “Weak crowd, weak bands, and weak photos add up to one hell of a festival I regret missing.”⁵⁴ This kind of contradictory sentiment is representative of the logic that was fueling responses to the festival. Despite the content of the festival being lackluster, this fan still illustrates a longing to attend. The music itself was not enough to keep this fan loyal; it was a larger phenomenon of being a part of an event that had become cemented in popular culture. Some fans could easily overlook flaws if it meant holding a ticket to the “enormo-festival.”⁵⁵ Additionally, some fans could still connect with each other on the message board, which had garnered over a million posts by this era, allowing relationships to build and contribute to the authentic aspect of the festival’s culture. Despite its supposed flaws, many fans still had a deep connection to the festival, either built on

⁵³ Mic. “Coachella 2013: 4 Invaluable Pieces Of Advice For Coachella Weekend 2.” April 18, 2013.

<https://www.mic.com/articles/36097/coachella-2013-4-invaluable-pieces-of-advice-for-coachella-weekend-2>.

⁵⁴ “Coachella 2011 Day 1 in Pics (Chemical Brothers, Black Keys, Robyn, Interpol, Cee Lo, Crystal Castles, Sleigh Bells & More).” April 19, 2011.

https://web.archive.org/web/20110419094403/http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2011/04/coachella_2011_3.html.

⁵⁵ Ian Cohen. “Coachella 2011 | Pitchfork.” Accessed March 20, 2026.

<https://pitchfork.com/features/article/7955-coachella-2011/>.

nostalgia, music, communal identity, participation in a culturally significant event, or a combination of all.

Still, there were many fans who became disillusioned with the promise of authenticity and critiqued the popularity of the festival. Many fans expected that with its growing relevance, the experience of the festival would be even more transformative. As one fan put it in 2010, “I live for unifying moments at Coachella, mind you, and expected more of them this year because the heightened attendance.”⁵⁶ The community built at music festivals is something difficult to re-create, as this fan states that they “live” for those moments at Coachella specifically. However, expectations fell flat despite the event having the most people in attendance ever. Therefore, it can be deduced that the addition of more people diluted the communal ethos centered around authentic music that the festival was able to foster in previous years. Furthermore, a review of the 2012 festival stated:

When I got there... I realized that, for many, Coachella is just another California party. Whereas I was going to surround myself with music and people who loved music, ...many here were at Coachella, to, well, be at Coachella ... the Coachella experience definitely wasn't all my pubescent dreams had longed for.⁵⁷

This review points out the difference in the motivations for attending the festival. While of course there are people going to purely experience the music, this fan relays that the festival felt more like a “party” rather than a large-scale concert. Interestingly, the comment also touches on the trend of attending the festival by stating that “many [people] were at Coachella, to, well, be at Coachella”. This illustrates that the festival had now become a social status symbol; attendees

⁵⁶ Ben Wener. “Coachella 2010: So ... Was It Really the Best Ever? – Orange County Register.” Accessed March 20, 2026. <https://www.ocregister.com/2010/04/21/coachella-2010-so-was-it-really-the-best-ever/>.

⁵⁷ “Festival Review: CoS at Coachella 2012.” Festival Reviews. *Consequence*, April 17, 2012. <https://consequence.net/2012/04/festival-review-cos-at-coachella-2012/>.

did not have to enjoy the music, but simply had to attend to gain social capital amongst their own circles. Further, this comment relays a similar message about the expectations held surrounding the festival. Many people had high expectations to have a spiritual and collective experience, yet were often let down by the perceived loss of communal values. As a writer at Pitchfork Magazine put it in 2012, “One thing is clear: Buying a pass to Coachella is something akin to investing in the ability for music to still deliver something close to a monoculture. It's winning framed as being too stubborn to lose.”⁵⁸ This reviewer encapsulates the tensions that were being felt among fans. Many refuse to give up the opportunity of the festival to still cultivate a “monoculture” centered around music. Despite the festival becoming commercialized and highly attended, fans still clung to the expectation or potential to share in a transcendent musical experience with like-minded people, even if those expectations sometimes fell short in reality.

Ultimately, the first five years of the new decade were a transformative moment in Coachella’s identity as livestreaming, fashion, and commercialization transformed the event into a global phenomenon. While these developments cemented Coachella as a recognizable popular culture event, they also fractured the communal experience and authenticity that had defined the early years. The festival was no longer solely a site for musical discovery and collectivity, but also a space shaped by visibility, commercialization, and differing forms of participation. This tension between authenticity and commercialization will continue to define the festival as it moves further into the digital age.

⁵⁸ Ian Cohen. “Coachella 2012.” Pitchfork, April 16, 2012. <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/8807-coachella-2012/>.

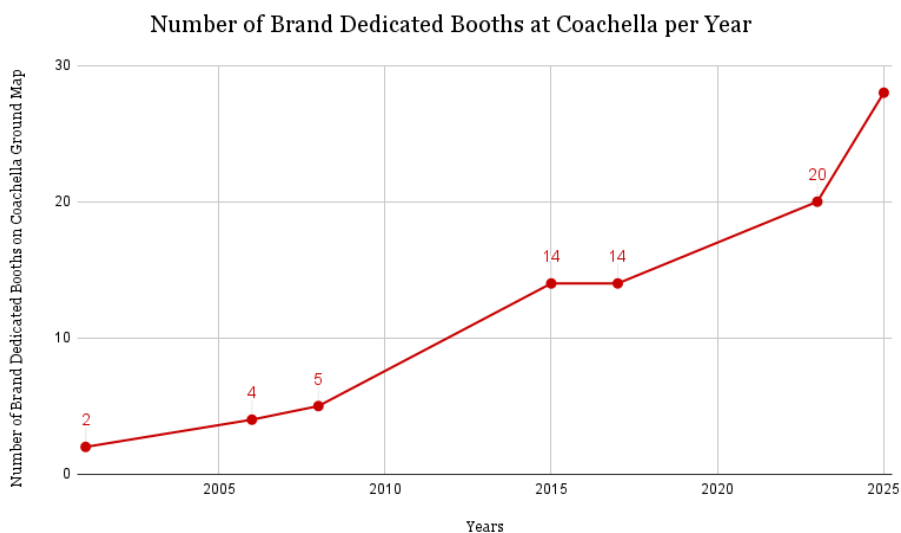
The Politics of Being Seen: Influencers, Branding, and Festival Culture

In the late 2010s, Coachella reached a new level of cultural prominence, cementing its position as a dominant site of popular culture. Expansion in scale, visibility, and economic influence created significant shifts in how the festival was structured, experienced, and consumed. This transformation generated new tension between the countercultural origins of the festival and its viability as a corporate spectacle. While these changes reshaped the festival, they did not uniformly determine how individuals experienced it as the site became increasingly fragmented. This chapter argues that the late 2010s reconfigured Coachella's claims to authenticity. By examining brand activations, influencer fashion culture, and varying fan responses, this chapter will illustrate how Coachella's meaning continues to be negotiated between its original communal ethos, commercialization, and cultural capital.

In the second half of the decade, the event hit its peak and remained at the top of the festival circuit for years. Tickets sold out almost every year, and attendance continued to expand with the largest jump between 2016 and 2017. By 2017, around 125,000 people were attending the festival each day. Coachella was a place for artists to perform concerts that could be defining moments of their careers, showcasing how the festival rewarded spectacle and high production value instead of intimate experiences. As demand rose, the price for the festival increased dramatically. Tickets now cost just over four hundred dollars to attend, further alienating many attendees who could no longer afford this high price. The people who were able to attend the festival now had to be more affluent, upper-middle class, due to the cost of tickets, food, and a

place to stay. Even further, the popularization of social media sites like TikTok further solidified the festival as a destination for influencers, weakening the communal aspects of the festival. During this time, the festival was a multi-dimensional, commercialized representation of popular culture that celebrated social hierarchies.

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Coachella was originally very resistant to corporate brand presence at the festival. As Tollett himself stated in 2003 about marketing, “I hate it when you go to shows and are bombarded with all this advertising... It just shows a lack of respect for your audience and the music.”⁵⁹ But, as the festival has expanded into a globally viewed event, Tollett’s attitude has seemed to change. This shift does not suggest that Tollett abandoned respect for the audience; rather, the pressures of maintaining a globally recognized festival disrupted the ethos on which Coachella was founded. Tollett’s shift in attitude is specifically seen by the sheer number of booths on the festival grounds that are dedicated to brands. The figure below illustrates the steep increase in branded booths gathered from festival maps, illustrating how corporate involvement was structurally integrated into the festival.



⁵⁹ Robert Hilburn. “Independent in Vision, Spirit and Musical Lineup.” Los Angeles Times, April 28, 2003. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-apr-28-et-hilburn28-story.html>

Important to note, most of these booths do not directly sell their products to consumers. Advertising is done in a much more inconspicuous manner by Coachella, promoting the concept of brand activations. This is an experiential marketing strategy done by various companies that create total immersive experiences for festival goers to interact with while walking between stages on the festival grounds. As found in a study by economists that focused on luxury hotel marketing, “a coherent multisensory marketing strategy has enormous potential to induce a memorable brand experience that further creates customer perceived value and brand strength”.⁶⁰ Coachella is the haven for multisensory marketing techniques and took in stride the ability for brands to add to the experience, instead of creating noise.⁶¹

Among some of the most notable brand activations at Coachella, there is the [HP Antarctic Dome](#), which was first presented in 2017.⁶² The dome was massive, and inside was a total immersive experience with cinematic content projecting on the walls, surround sound, and the ability to print custom art pieces using HP printers. The dome became so ingrained in the festival that popular DJ, RÜFÜS DU SOL, performed one year inside the dome with an intense audio-visual experience. AEG even reported one year that the dome received over “50,000 festival attendees.... a huge number of social media impressions (400,000 Instagram, 1.3 million Facebook, 250,000 Twitter), as well a variety of high-profile articles from major press outlets”.⁶³ Additionally, to offer more recent examples, dozens of brands offer similar, yet different experiences such as Pinterest’s collage-inspired booth for photo opportunities, Sol de Janiero’s

⁶⁰ Klaus-Peter Wiedmann, Franziska Labenz, Janina Haase, and Nadine Hennigs. “The Power of Experiential Marketing: Exploring the Causal Relationships among Multisensory Marketing, Brand Experience, Customer Perceived Value and Brand Strength.” *Journal of Brand Management* 25, no. 2 (2018): 101–18. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-017-0061-5>.

⁶¹ Zach Phillips. “The Marketing Tactics of Coachella | M&P Creative Agency.” *M&P Creative Marketing Agency*, June 25, 2025. <https://mcmillanphillips.com/podcast/the-marketing-of-coachella/>.

⁶² *The Antarctic Dome at Coachella 2017*. 2017. <https://vimeo.com/220669947>.

⁶³ “HP Coachella Experience Case Study | AEG Worldwide.” Accessed January 22, 2026. <https://aegworldwide.com/case-study/hp-coachella-experience-case-study>.

scent portals, International Delight’s coffee mixing station, or the exclusive American Express space with personalized merch and photobooths.⁶⁴ These brand experiences at Coachella perfectly follow the idea that multi-sensory marketing will increase the value of the brand for consumers. Whether purposefully or accidentally, Coachella’s rule for brands needing to add to the experience of the festival opened a brand new world of experiential marketing strategies that attempt to make long-lasting impressions on attendees.



Brand Activations at Coachella.

https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/645b0c3de9482b7aad951a6572fb0dadd4196d7399fe_Inner-image-4.jpeg
https://img.perfumerflavorist.com/files/base/allured/all-image/2025/04/Sol_De_Janeiro_Social_Day_One_1.676l6aae95b89.png?auto=format%2Ccompress&q=70&rect=0%2C550%2C8192%2C4608&u=700
<https://experimence.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Pinterest-Coachella-2025-2.png>
<https://inspiramarketing.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/6k5a7230-enhanced-rr-scaled.jpg>

This increased commercialization has an impact on the meaning of Coachella itself. As George McCay summarized in his work entitled “The Pop Music Festival: History, Music, Media, and Culture”, “rather than being heirs to a countercultural heritage, contemporary music festivals may be examined as consumer commodities and spectacles.”⁶⁵ In turn, McCay speaks of

⁶⁴ BizBash. “Coachella 2025: The Most Talked-About Brand Moments and VIP Happenings.” Accessed January 22, 2026.

<https://www.bizbash.com/experiential-marketing/coachella-2025-the-most-talked-about-brand-moments-and-vip-happenings>.

⁶⁵ George McCay. *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pg 209.

the influence this has on the experience of festival-goers when he argues, “[They] may actually be more passive than active in such situations, while truly creative, self-directed and participatory experience may be restricted.”⁶⁶ This argument suggests that contemporary festivals may restrict attendees’ ability to have a self-directed experience and positions them as consumers of spectacle rather than active participants. This raises the question of whether Coachella attendees are passive consumers or simply exist in a capitalistic world that necessitates corporate spectacle.

This question is increasingly difficult to answer as people’s experiences at the festival and their interactions with branded booths differ dramatically. Throughout the interviews I conducted, almost every single participant stated that the commercialization of the festival had little impact on their overall experience. As one interviewee stated, “I will say I don't really go out of my way to seek out those brand experiences because I'm so busy hopping from stage to stage, seeing so many artists that I want to see.”⁶⁷ This response, which was very similar to that of other interviewees, indicates that branded activations remain peripheral to the focus of experiencing live music. Attendees are able to actively prioritize other aspects of the festival, rather than being absorbed into corporate branding, illustrating the power of individual agency to generate meaning from the event. In this way, Coachella does not just create passive consumers, unable to rid themselves of branding, yet it illustrates a complex experience where commercialization coexists with self-directed participation. Although Coachella has let in more corporate sponsors and branding, the experience is now contingent on how the attendees choose to engage with it. Rather than disproving McCay’s argument, the interviews complicate it,

⁶⁶ George McKay. *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture*. Pg 210.

⁶⁷ 35 year old male located in Southern California (festival goer since 2012) in discussion with the author, February 16, 2025.

suggesting that attendees are not uniformly passive, but have agency to navigate increasing commercialization.

Despite the agency that individuals have while attending the event, the broader representation of Coachella has been increasingly influenced by a commercial ecosystem. This ecosystem is driven through curated events, social media influencer networks, digital visibility, and widespread circulation. During this time, Coachella's branding exists beyond physical interaction with branded booths on site and into the digital realm with the proliferation of social media influencers. In this context, the commercialization of festival fashion illustrates how corporate sponsorship has begun to structure how the event is represented and consumed by audiences on a much larger scale.

By 2017, a fast-fashion brand, Revolve, that was already involved in promoting the bohemian festival fashion look, put on its own event during Coachella weekend: The Revolve Festival. The Revolve Festival was an invite-only experience outside of the festival grounds for

celebrities, influencers, and the socially connected that had its own musical performances, experiences, and advertisements.

Revolve provides influencers with clothing to wear to their own festival and at Coachella



Revolve Festival Grounds.
<https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/rockcms/2022-04/revolve-fest-kb-2x1-220419-3ff79.jpg>

itself, illustrating the standardization of festival clothing and increased attention to brands within the festival context.⁶⁸ Despite having interactive experiences, the festival is a marketing event

⁶⁸ “What’s the Difference Between Revolve Festival and Coachella?” Accessed March 21, 2026.
<https://wwd.com/pop-culture/celebrity-news/feature/coachella-revolve-festival-difference-1235615506/>.

with the explicit purpose of promoting the company's clothing. Important to the marketing strategy is Revolve's inclusion of social media influencers such as the Kardashians and, eventually, many TikTokers. In 2017, it was reported that influencer marketing made up 70 percent of Revolve's sales, illustrating the effectiveness of this strategy not just financially, but culturally.⁶⁹ Social media influencers were able to portray the aesthetic of Coachella by simply attending an event like the Revolve Festival to show their millions of followers, ready to purchase whatever they were showcasing. In this sense, influencers worked as the partners of Revolve who capitalized on the established festival fashion industry that was created at Coachella. Countless brands followed in Revolve's footsteps by hosting parties, get-ready sessions, and photo-ops, all craving brand visibility under the guise of festival participation.

Presently, dozens of brands sponsor influencers to attend Coachella, effectively making them stakeholders in the promotion of festival wear instead of average attendees, illustrating the blurred boundaries of the sponsorship model. Social media influencers across platforms such as Instagram and TikTok get their entire Coachella experience and outfits gifted to them by brands who are, in turn, promised promotion. For example, an Australian fashion brand, Peppermayo, sponsored a group of influencers to attend the festival in 2025 and garnered over 5 million views on TikTok alone for their festival content.⁷⁰ Not only are these influencers promoting trends over social media, but their presence at the festival itself creates a walking and talking advertisement. As extensions of the brand, influencers turn the entire festival, not just the activations, into a marketplace for fashion trends to be manufactured. Visibility at Coachella and online becomes a commodity to be traded. Inherently, when influencers have such a vast cultural reach, festival

⁶⁹ Rachel Strugatz. "Revolve's Michael Mente and Mike Karanikolas on Profitability, Influencers." *WWD*, October 26, 2017.

<https://wwd.com/business-news/technology/feature/revolves-michael-mente-and-mike-karanikolas-11035360/>.

⁷⁰ TikTok. "PEPPERMAYO (@peppermayo)." Accessed March 21, 2026.

<https://www.tiktok.com/@peppermayo?lang=en>.

fashion becomes even more standardized, making self-expression much harder to achieve. This new kind of advertising illustrates the cultural co-optation of festival fashion, transitioning from a site of self-expression to one that values visibility as a promotional tool of manufactured trends designed for profit.

Ultimately, the fashion industry is just one of the industries that participated in the process of coolhunting that resulted in the co-optation of festival fashion. While this process is particularly visible in the fashion industry, it was replicated across industries with food and beverage companies, lifestyle brands, and technology corporations following suit. The alternative culture that was ever-present on the festival grounds in Indio was co-opted by brands looking for a new, cool audience. Whether it be brand activations, off-site parties, or sponsored influencers, Coachella is now full of advertising schemes meant to inspire consumerism in festival goers. The original spirit that can be credited for giving Coachella its cultural status has now been transformed into an aesthetic for commercial consumption and controlled by corporations that dictate its value, illustrating the result of cultural co-optation.

Therefore, as Coachella began to become increasingly commercialized, audiences have noticed the impacts of this on the festival. While the festival continued to grow, branding, influencer culture, and increasing prices started to shape how audiences understood the festival. Commercialization was not just a structural change, but one that influenced fans' perceptions of the festival, generating new critique, disillusionment, stratification, and ongoing debates of Coachella's meaning.

To begin, the complaints surrounding the pricing exhibit discontent with the increasing commercialization to cater to the supposed hype of the event. It seemed to fans that the musical artistry of the festival was no longer enough to justify the increasing costs. Emma Chamberlain,

a popular YouTuber who was perceived to be unconventional and brutally authentic at this time, posted a video entitled “The Truth About Coachella (everyone else is lying to you)” after the 2018 event. In this video, she stated, “If you're going just for the music, I would say don't go because it's so much money, and you're probably not even gonna see everybody you want.”⁷¹ Importantly, the music, which once was the driving force for attendance, is now being described as not being worth it. This marks a significant shift in how the festival was perceived, as music was no longer seen as sufficient to justify attendance. The fact that some attendees now can let go of the importance of music due to the increase in commercialization illustrates how commodification can diminish people’s connection to live music. Below the video, there are many comments agreeing with Chamberlain's position, with one person writing, “Coachella is an overhyped festival that they overcharge you for because they know it's a trend to go.”⁷² This fan uses the word “overhyped” signalling that the festival has become too rewarded culturally, so that the reality of the festival is no longer able to meet expectations. As Marshall Fishwick, a scholar who played an instrumental role in the creation of popular culture studies, writes in *Popular Culture in a New Age*, “hype promises hope but often delivers only despair.”⁷³ This sentiment captures the way that Coachella was now failing to meet the expectations of fans due to its permanence as a “trend” in popular culture. Not only this, but the “hype” of the event was capitalized on by its creators by increasing prices. Both Chamberlain and the fan commenting recognize that the price for attendance does not match the quality of the event, and instead reflects its “hype”. This trendiness has now become a motivating factor for people to attend, shifting away from the festival’s roots of communal ethos and music.

⁷¹ Emma Chamberlain. *The Truth about Coachella (Everyone Else Is Lying to You)*. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqMV2whnNjg>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Marshall Fishwick. *Popular Culture in a New Age*. Routledge, 2014. Pg 96.

Some of the people who capitalized on this trend were social media influencers. Coachella was a job site for these individuals – an influencer’s playground. Not only was it a trend, but the aesthetics of the festival were ideal for the backdrop of posts. Whether it was flower crowns, rainbow towers, bohemian chic outfits, or seeing some of the biggest names in music, the entire event was perfect to capture the attention of social media users at home. Not only would influencers post vlogs (video blogs) on YouTube after the event, which captured an idealistic, heavily edited view of the festival, they would also post in real time on platforms such as Twitter. Although this is a largely text-based platform, trends can skyrocket with the use of hashtags and post impressions. As one influencer tweeted after the 2017 festival, “Coachella was the best thing to happen to my insta feed.”⁷⁴ This sentiment reflects the oversaturation of content that was provided to viewers after the festival. This tweet illustrates how attendees were devoted to the opportunity to post on social media to prove their presence at the festival. Coachella was a main talking point to showcase a certain social status. Uniquely, influencers were able to showcase their wealth and “cool” simply by posting pictures of themselves at Coachella.

For many, this superficiality ruined the festival since it was now impossibly intertwined with influencers’ boasting. As a fan who has attended the festival for 15 years wrote on Reddit, “Over time it became evident that the emergence of ‘influencers’ and non-music people negatively affected the energy and atmosphere of Coachella.”⁷⁵ Another Reddit user writes, “[20]15 + [20]16 felt like the crowd was disconnected from what drew people to Coachella initially and felt like it was more of a status thing to be there.”⁷⁶ Both of these users draw upon

⁷⁴ laurDIY. “Coachella Was the Best Thing to Happen to My Insta Feed.” Tweet. Twitter, April 24, 2017. <https://x.com/laurDIY/status/856338139039891456>.

⁷⁵ bluwurld, “Help!! Coachella Opinions Wanted!!!!” Reddit, November 21, 2025. https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/1p2k0x1/help_coachella_opinions_wanted/.

⁷⁶ Ok-Context-3911, “Help!! Coachella Opinions Wanted!!!!” Reddit, November 21, 2025. https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/1p2k0x1/help_coachella_opinions_wanted/.

similar reflections - the crowd was now motivated by participation in cultural trends. Additionally, they both recognize that the proliferation of influencers at the event has significantly affected the communal ethos of the original event. These critiques argue that influencer presence altered the festival experience, transforming it into a site for the exchange of social currency instead of building community or discovering musical artists. The late 2010s cemented the festival as a place of spectacle, whether it was high production performances or the deluge of social media posts; the communal ethos that made up the festival in its origins was perceived to be gone.

While conducting interviews, there was a clear pattern of stratification that began to emerge while discussing the presence of social media influencers at the festival between weekends. Interviewees reported that they felt as though Weekend 1 of the festival was for influencers to be seen, and Weekend 2 was for the music lovers. One interviewee put it as, “In my experience, a lot of the crowd that goes weekend one wants to be there to take pictures and be seen... This is the weekend where all the influencers go, we live in LA, we have an influencer culture.”⁷⁷ This illustrates that the experience of Coachella has become segmented between weekends, demonstrating distinct modes of participation even within a corporate structure. Weekend One has become associated with visibility, personal branding, and performance, while Weekend Two serves as a return to Coachella’s music-driven roots. This has even been noticed by the bands that are playing at the festival. The same interviewee stated that bands have announced on stage that Weekend Two audiences, “you guys bring it” or “you guys are the real music lovers”.⁷⁸ The difference between weekends is noticeable enough that bands have responded to the segmentation of audiences. This stratification occurs under the conditions that

⁷⁷ 43 year old male located in Southern California (festival goer since 2005) in discussion with the author, February 7, 2025.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

commercialization has created, generating a difference in attendees. Coachella became a space where authenticity and spectacle both coexist in tension under the intense pressures of increased branding. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that commercialization does not produce a uniform experience, but instead creates a layered and often contradictory cultural space in which authenticity, spectacle, and consumerism coexist.

Even further fragmenting the community of Coachella festival goers, the message board that was located on the Coachella website was shut down in 2018. Devoted, long-term fans seeking a community no longer had a uniform platform to share knowledge, make plans, forge friendships, or simply connect. The social media age saw an end to message boards, and the one located on Coachella.com was no different and difficult to replicate. As Diane Cormany put it, “Unlike broader social networks such as Twitter or Facebook, the Coachella message board has a feeling of exclusivity.”⁷⁹ This feeling of exclusivity was forged through the universal connection all of the users had to the festival. When entering the message board, users knew they would have at least one shared interest. This is something that other social media sites cannot replicate, as there are millions of users across the globe seeking a vast array of content. Some message board users attempted to recreate this community on sites such as Reddit, which allows for boards to be created, but it cannot be forgotten that the original community was literally deleted by Goldenvoice, illustrating a disregard for its community-driven fanbase. The community cannot be replicated as it once was, as its uniform home is impossible to re-establish. There are now multiple Reddit boards, fragmenting the community that was once whole. The late 2010s saw the dissolution of communal values or spaces, paired with inflating prices, which highly impacted fan responses to the festival.

⁷⁹ Diane L Cormany. “Coachella Fans, Online and Translocal.”

Overall, the later years of the decade marked another critical cultural shift in Coachella's transformation. While corporatization, influencer culture, and visibility reshaped how the event was consumed, it did not necessarily always change how it was experienced. Instead, Coachella continued to be a space where authenticity and spectacle coexisted in tension. While some attendees continued to find meaning in music, others experienced the festival as a site to perform status and consumption. The dissolution of community spaces, fragmentation of audiences, and the rise of influencer culture illustrate that Coachella does not have a singular meaning as it is constantly being negotiated. Therefore, Coachella has not entirely lost its original ethos, but it has been deprioritized, allowing for the emergence of a complex cultural site where meaning is generated through individual experience.

A Festival Seen Around the World: Re-Defining Authenticity

The start of the new decade did not begin most joyfully, as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the entire world's functioning. Coachella was clearly affected by this as the festival was cancelled in 2020 and 2021. This cancellation forced audiences to reconsider the true definition of participation – shifting to a broader acceptance of digital attendance. This chapter argues that Coachella's livestream capitalized on this shift and completely regenerated the meaning of participation. By examining pre-pandemic nostalgia, the “Couchella” community, and the shift in artist performances, the chapter demonstrates how authenticity is now negotiated through the physical attendees and global digital circulation.

To begin, the cancellation of the festival in 2020 and 2021 was met with mixed reactions from attendees; however, the majority of fans were left feeling nostalgic about past festival experiences. Following the festival's cancellation in 2020, some social media users began participating in a trend to make Coachella at home. Numerous YouTube videos were posted, entitled things such as “*INSANE* Coachella 2020 at Home” or “I Recreated Coachella at Home and Here's What Happened”⁸⁰, both garnering tens of thousands of views. It was not just these videos fueling the nostalgia response; hundreds of Instagram posts were made with throwback pictures, and some users even went as far as to photoshop themselves into Coachella backdrops. Despite there being major criticism of the festival in the previous era, fans seemed to long for the days they were able to attend the event, even going as far as to re-create it

⁸⁰ Morgan Yates. *I Recreated Coachella at Home & Here's What Happened...* 2020. 16:59.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuOUcUtkoKA>.

Roja Kumar. **INSANE* COACHELLA 2020 AT HOME*. 2020. 14:55.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPtygSBdh_s.

themselves. However, nostalgia was a persistent trend of the pandemic era, affecting people's minds far beyond just Coachella. This response aligns with research by psychologists Tim Wildschut and Constantine Sedikides, who found that nostalgia was used as a coping mechanism during the pandemic, meant to preserve people's well-being by attempting to maintain social ties and optimism.⁸¹ This logic can be applied to attendees' nostalgia-fueled responses to the festival's cancellation to illustrate that it was inspired by the potential to create social connection. In Coachella's case, nostalgia reflected a desire to reconnect with the festival's earlier promise of community.

When the festival actually returned in 2022, nostalgia-driven idealizations of the event were quickly diminished when the reality of steep prices, superficiality, and increased commercialization set in. Their sentiments quickly began to echo what they once had been, with a long-time attendee stating, "It's depressing to see how Coachella has evolved. I went over a decade ago when it was still an authentic platform for indie talent and real music lovers. Now it feels completely corporate and shallow. It's lost its soul."⁸² Even popular music artist Tyler the Creator, who has played the festival numerous times, posted a billboard en route to the festival grounds ahead of the 2024 event, "I would love to see y'all faces, not your phone lights."⁸³ His critique illustrates a broader shift in audience behavior where the live experience is often mediated through screens and documentation, rather than direct engagement. This tension reveals that Coachella's cultural influence did not depend on being physically present in Indio. Even in its absence during the pandemic, fans continued to recreate and remain connected to the

⁸¹ Tim Wildschut and Constantine Sedikides. *Nostalgia and Protection of Psychological Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197615133.003.0028>.

⁸² Cityla. "Coachella 2025: Fans Frustrated as Influencer Culture Overshadows Music Festival's Roots." May 9, 2025.

<https://www.cityla.co/post/coachella-2025-fans-frustrated-as-influencer-culture-overshadows-music-festival-s-roots>.

⁸³ consequencedaily. Threads, April 3, 2024. <https://www.threads.com/@consequencedaily/post/C5Texjnr0aX>.

festival, generating the conditions in which livestreaming and other mediated forms of participation became more central to Coachella's identity.

While the live experience of the festival became increasingly done on digital platforms, the boundaries for participation expanded. The livestream, as discussed in previous chapters, initially served to broaden the festival's global reach; however, its role has since evolved alongside changing audience expectations. In the post-pandemic era, not only were digital ways of participation more common, but Coachella's livestream has allowed it to be a central mode of participation, raising questions about why audiences choose to join the event from a distance.

While experiencing cultural moments like Tupac's Coachella "appearance" is one motivation for attending the livestream, there are numerous other motivations for why audiences tune in. For some, practical constraints such as cost and geographic distance make in-person attendance unfeasible. Following the expansion of the livestream throughout the late 2010s and 2020s, internet users began to dub the time spent at home watching the festival "Couchella". Couchella became its own kind of ritual for people, as they would tune in alone, invite friends over, or even dress up in festival gear. Therefore, it seems that, increasingly, many opted to join the livestream and participate in the parallel but distinctive form of community "Couchella" fostered. This community is structured through shared rituals as they tune in for certain sets, discuss performances in live chats, and create their own livestreaming schedules. Even more so, people often return to the same message boards and reconnect with people they had interacted with on previous livestreams. As one person wrote on a Reddit board meant for people livestreaming to communicate in real-time about the performances, "Had so much fun at couchella again this year and [thank you so much] for hanging out, see you next year."⁸⁴ This

⁸⁴ floofyhae, "COUCHELLA 2024 W2 LIVESTREAM SUNDAY CHAT THREAD (STREAM STARTS AT 4 PDT!)," Reddit, April 21, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/1c9sqf1/couchella_2024_w2_livestream_sunday_chat_thread/.

user reflects the sentiments of many others in the Reddit forum, a sense of community among the other livestream watchers. This illustrates that Coachella functions as a recurring, community-driven experience, rather than passive consumption. Therefore, the livestream not only fosters engagement with the festival but also a loyalty to the participatory, communal experience that exists in the digital space.

Livestream users, however, would continue to cite practical reasons for attending online, such as the high cost of the festival, especially given the distance of travel required to get to Indio. One Reddit user stated, “payment plan or not, it’s still a luxury that might not be feasible for people who have other priorities they need to budget for.”⁸⁵ Another user echoed a similar message, “Coachella is one of my favorite times of year!!!! I would love to go in person but the logistics of the whole thing seems expensive as hell and exhausting at my age.”⁸⁶ Neither of these livestream watchers thinks that the experience of attending the festival in person is feasible for their lives. This illustrates that despite their love for the festival, Coachella is a luxury experience that is simply unattainable to some people. In this sense, the livestream became a democratizing alternate experience with its own audience that is much larger than the physical festival. Distance is another factor, with a Reddit user stating, “I live in another continent and have nowhere near the income to afford flights, accommodation [sic], and tickets. The live stream is the best I'll get in this lifetime.”⁸⁷ The livestream catapulted Coachella into the living rooms of people around the world, generating worldwide interest in the festival and increasing its

⁸⁵ bitchesneedbitches, “If you’re enjoying watching the livestream these two weekends and have never gone to Coachella...please go to Coachella.” Reddit, April 19, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/1k2nvwz/if_youre_enjoying_watching_the_livestream_these/.

⁸⁶ imcrappinyounegative, “If you’re enjoying watching the livestream these two weekends and have never gone to Coachella...please go to Coachella.”

⁸⁷ Pristine-Ninja-7709, “If you’re enjoying watching the livestream these two weekends and have never gone to Coachella...please go to Coachella.”

viability as a popular culture festival. This illustrates the globalization of Coachella as people are able to experience the festival when it may have otherwise been impossible.

Importantly, Couchella's appeal is not simply for those unable to attend in Indio. For some, the livestream creates the ability to view more music than is possible while moving from stage to stage in person. As the same 27-year-old male spoke about the livestream, he stated, "When we're getting ready in the morning, I like to put on the live streams and just catch the things that I didn't see. It kind of keeps you in that mode, you know? Like, I'm still hyped up."⁸⁸ Here, this festival attendee still tunes into the livestream, despite being present at the festival. Although this may seem excessive, the desire to witness all aspects of the music present at Coachella drives his watching of the broadcast. Despite these varied motivations, the livestream's central appeal remains access to live music performances, illustrating Coachella's ability to democratize live music and generate a new audience that is experiencing the festival in a different, yet still meaningful way. This larger audience resulted in not just the creation of a global media platform, but more eyes on the festival, ready to unabashedly share their opinions.

The democratization of the Coachella experience had unintended consequences, as illustrated by the influx of new viewers who often act as critics of not just the festival, but also of crowd behavior. Seeing as the livestream created a temporary online community watching Coachella take place in real-time, the livestream chat is often littered with criticisms of the festival. However, this is not unique to the Coachella livestream, as the internet breeds critique. This phenomenon is known as the online disinhibition effect, in which people express themselves more freely, recklessly, or intensely, often due to the anonymity and lack of

⁸⁸ 27-year-old male (Performer in 2014, on/off festival goer since 2017, and Coachella Valley Local) In conversation with author February 6, 2026

accountability the internet provides.⁸⁹ This changes the way people talk about the festival since harsher judgments are encouraged on platforms such as the livestream. Every aspect of the festival becomes part of the spectacle viewers are witnessing from home, allowing harsher judgments to quickly spread in real-time communities. Although the livestream chats cannot be viewed after the streaming event concludes, users on Reddit frequently host their own live chats, and people often discuss the overall tone of comments that are being made on the real-time chats, which, in turn, produces further analysis and critiques of the performances.

It is important to view the comments about the livestream since it illustrates the unique criticism that arises from a purely online platform. Firstly, the crowd becomes another part of the spectacle of the livestream, and their behavior gets policed on the stream. One Reddit user wrote, “You literally can't go to a single set on YouTube and scroll through the comments without finding ‘CROWD SUCKS’ or ‘man if I was there I'd be going so nuts!’”⁹⁰ This user illustrates the sheer pervasiveness of critiques about the crowd in livestream chat boxes. Regardless of the performer, music genre, or demographics of the crowd, the crowd is inevitably being criticized online. This demonstrates a transformation of the perception of the festival since its attendees are now part of the performance in a sense. This is further illustrated by a Reddit user's post, “Crowds look boring. I'll go if people actually start dancing again instead of standing still and filming the whole show with their phones.”⁹¹ While not all of the messaging about the crowd is negative, with many livestream watchers talking about which crowds look the most excited, there is no doubt that the crowd is being policed by livestream viewers for their behavior.

⁸⁹ John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” *Cyberpsychology & Behavior: The Impact of the Internet, Multimedia and Virtual Reality on Behavior and Society* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26, <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>.

⁹⁰ crynarr, “Regarding ‘stiff crowds’ on livestreams.,” Reddit, April 18, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Coachella/comments/8d1h5b/regarding_stiff_crowds_on_livestreams/.

⁹¹ forever-punk, “If you’re enjoying watching the livestream these two weekends and have never gone to Coachella...please go to Coachella.”

Livestream watchers have a clear expectation of what an engaged crowd should look like: dancing, singing along, and not on their phones. In part due to the disinhibition phenomenon, the critics are often much harsher when their expectations of the crowd are not met, amplifying negative perceptions of the festival. This negative interpretation creates tension among the online viewers and those who are on the ground experiencing the festival themselves. In an interview with a longtime festival attendee, he stated, “We were all kind of exhausted by the end, and people on the live stream [...] in the comments were saying this crowd was absolutely dead. I kind of always tell people it's the end of a very long day in the desert, in the heat, and exposed to the sun.”⁹² The practicalities of the festival taking place in the desert become lost on the viewers from home. There is a lack of empathy for the conditions of Coachella and the energy required to attend an all-day, 3-day festival. The outlook from this attendee illustrates how the crowd has to assume defenses to the criticisms of the online crowd. This tension and slight division of fans could only have existed with the livestream’s prevalence. To further illustrate this point, *LA Magazine* published an article entitled, “Why the Coachella Livestream Was Better Than Being There” in which the author wrote, “It was hard not to feel vindicated watching Coachella from the cool comfort of our couch on YouTube this weekend, especially as reports came in about the endless lines and waits, the \$100 meals, and the blistering heat.”⁹³ The journalist is creating a clear divide between the online and in-person experience, with the online viewing being superior. The author's use of “vindicated” illustrates a pre-existing debate about the worthiness of the festival experience. All parts of the festival that could be criticized are used as reasoning for the livestream’s superiority, further amplifying the perceived negative receptions of the festival. Additionally, the proliferation of this belief, not just on Reddit boards or in live chats, but in

⁹² 35 year-old male (festival goer since 2012). In conversation with author February 16, 2026.

⁹³ Lina Lecaro, “Why the Coachella Livestream Was Better Than Being There,” *LAmag*, April 14, 2025, <https://lamag.com/arts-and-entertainment/why-the-coachella-livestream-was-better-than-being-there/>.

mainstream media, demonstrates the rapid growth of pre-existing Coachella criticism as it is cemented in the mainstream.

The criticisms from online viewers go beyond just the crowd and extend into all aspects of the festival, as one fan posted on Twitter, “Not the technical difficulties again Coachella. #couchella.”⁹⁴ The hashtag “couchella” illustrates that the fan is participating in the community built during the livestream event. This fan illustrates a brand-new kind of criticism, one that stems from the reliability of the livestream. As discussed previously, the technical prowess of the livestream is extremely important to viewers and can impact their loyalty to the event. The seamlessness of the stream is required for at-home viewers to lose their sense of reality and be transported into the desert. When this does not fulfill their expectations, even if those expectations are extremely high, the disinhibition effect almost ensures that there will be commentary regarding the IT teams’ faults. The design of the internet allows for all opinions to be heard and shared, even when users may be responding more harshly, illustrating that the perception of the festival has become more convoluted with the livestream's evolution into a global media product.

Ultimately, the livestream has created a new set of active participants who shape the festival's meaning. While community and musical celebration are parts of this, livestream viewers often surveil and critique. They often impose expectations on the crowd and artists, creating an idealized version of what they believe the festival should look like while maintaining a veil of digital anonymity. Therefore, the democratization of the festival does not just expand participation, but it also reconstructs it. Meaning Coachella is a site where behavior is evaluated, authenticity is negotiated, and cultural legitimacy is constructed in real time. Rather than

⁹⁴ ✂ D ∇ I S Y ✂ [@daisalvrz], “Not the technical difficulties again coachella. #couchella #COACHELLA2023,” Tweet, Twitter, April 22, 2023, <https://x.com/daisalvrz/status/1649565460734803968>.

unifying Coachella attendees, the livestream often fragments online and physical attendees, revealing how digitization has reshaped how the festival is viewed.

Since audiences have the power to observe and create meaning from the festival in real time, their influence has also begun to shape how Coachella's performances are structured. The heightened expectations of online and physical attendees places new pressure on artists to deliver high-quality, culturally relevant, and dramatic performances. Therefore, the festival has become a global stage where performances are also crafted for the millions watching online, transforming a live music event into a form of mass-produced culture.

As the livestream audience continues to grow, the shift in the performances that artists are bringing to Coachella illustrates how audiences have the power to shape the production of cultural products. In recent years, the in-person attendance of the festival has plateaued as the physical space of the grounds has its own limitations. However, the livestream audience has continued to set records of total viewership. In its early years, 4 million people were reported to have attended the livestream, and reports now illustrate that over 41 million people now tune in.⁹⁵ With these millions of viewers, it is understandable that the production value is increasingly high. Some of the most well-received performances were ones that included an impressive surprise guest, had mind-blowing visuals, or brought something entirely new to the stage, illustrating how the crowd and online audience have responded well to higher production quality. This, in turn, has shaped how performers decide to choreograph their Coachella performances, especially headliners, and the ever-increasing production value of the YouTube livestream. In fact, Paul Tollett, the owner of GoldenVoice, stated, "We are committed to making the Coachella

⁹⁵ Daniel Terdiman, "How YouTube's Coachella Webcast Changed the World," IMDb. "Beyoncé Leads YouTube To Record-Setting 41 Million Viewers On Coachella Streams." Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni62008066/>.

livestream a cinematic experience unlike any other live concert broadcast.”⁹⁶ Tollett’s statement illustrates Coachella’s direct mission regarding the livestream and its commitment to fulfilling fans’ desires of a “cinematic experience.” Livestream viewers have commented on this phenomenon with one writing, “What struck me most is that *performance* seems to be more important than *music* for most of the big stage artists.”⁹⁷ This encapsulates the shift of performers committing themselves to produce a cultural performance moment rather than simply performing their music, which is due, in part, to the influence of the livestream’s focus on production quality and its millions of viewers.

Beyoncé was one of the first headliners to create a performance at Coachella with deep cultural influences, telling a cohesive story throughout her set on the main stage in 2018. In what has been coined as “Beychella”, Beyoncé became the first Black woman to headline the festival, an accomplishment in itself. However, she transformed the stage into an Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) homecoming, including marching bands, step dancers, nods to Black cultural icons such as Malcolm X and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and a Destiny’s Child reunion. The nod to HBCU’s was particularly potent as they are deeply



Beyoncé at Coachella in 2018.
<https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/b60413088531532f01425cf3fd9e47>

⁹⁶ “ARRI and Goldenvoice Elevate Coachella’s Main Stage Experience with ALEXA 35 Live Camera Systems.” Accessed March 22, 2026.
<https://www.arri.com/en/company/press/press-releases-2025/arri-and-goldenvoice-elevate-coachella-s-main-stage-experience-with-alexa-35-live-camera-systems>.

⁹⁷ Beige240d, “Coachella as the zeitgeist to understand modern music,” Reddit, April 16, 2025,
https://www.reddit.com/r/LetsTalkMusic/comments/1k0dozn/coachella_as_the_zeitgeist_to_understand_modern/.

important to the cultural expression, and historically recognized for prioritizing the higher education of, Black people. The performance was a celebration of Black culture in America and generated conversation about the impact that musical performances could have. Speaking of her performance, Beyoncé stated, “When I decided to do Coachella, instead of me pulling out my flower crown [laughs] it was more important that I brought our culture to Coachella.”⁹⁸ Poking fun at the fashion culture of the festival, Beyoncé was able to create a cultural moment instead of remaining within the stereotypes of festival culture. Importantly, the livestream was instrumental in shaping the performance’s cultural relevance as it increased the number of people who were able to witness the performance in real time. Mankaprr Conteh, a Black journalist at Rolling Stone, recalled her experience hearing about the performance:

When I rolled into consciousness at 6:45 AM on Sunday and immediately found my timeline marveling at how Beyoncé claimed Coachella for Black folks with HBCU-style pageantry and diasporic nods and swag surfing, I was devastated that I had forgotten to stay up and watch. Once I retrieved a now-disabled link to her performance, I slapped the thigh of my friend asleep beside me. 'Neicy, wake up!' I whisper-screamed. 'WE HAVE TO WATCH BEYONCE!'⁹⁹

Conteh recalls her social media being filled with people who had watched the livestream and began talking about Beyoncé’s performance. In fact, this performance set the record at the time for the most concurrent viewers on the Coachella livestream. Additionally, Conteh speaks of her dismay at missing the livestream, illustrating how large an impact the livestream was able to generate in just 12 hours after it had been streamed. Being a part of watching Beyoncé’s

⁹⁸ “8 Takeaways From Beyoncé’s Netflix Documentary Homecoming | TIME,” accessed February 11, 2026, <https://time.com/5572478/beyonce-homecoming-documentary/>.

⁹⁹ “How Beyoncé’s Coachella Performance Changed the Game Forever - Melissa Harris Perry on Beychella,” accessed February 11, 2026, <https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a19832093/beyonce-coachella-performance-why-it-matter-melissa-harris-perry/>.

performance live became a claim to cultural capital and exponentially increased cultural conversations about Black culture in America. If it were not for the livestream, millions of people would not have been able to see the performance for themselves and witness the beauty of Black culture that Beyoncé brought to Coachella.

Beyoncé was not the only headliner to generate cultural conversation about their Coachella performance. BLACKPINK, a K-pop girl group, headlined the festival in 2023 and generated millions of viewers for the livestream. In fact, the livestream is part of the reason that BLACKPINK was asked to headline the performance. Speaking in 2020, three years before BLACKPINK's headlining show, Tollett stated, "People all around the world are watching it on live stream, so it would make sense that we would bring some artists from around the world."¹⁰⁰ This was not a singular occurrence, as an interviewee who has attended the festival since 2005 stated that the festival's lineup has increasingly globalized with Indian, Latinx, and other K-pop artists featured.¹⁰¹ This further illustrates the power that the at-home audience has in shaping the festival. The livestream allowed people to view Coachella all around the world, creating a global audience with increased musical diversity. It is argued among Beyoncé and BLACKPINK fans which of the artists had the most livestream viewers, yet it still shows that global music acts can be hugely successful because of the democratization of Coachella that the livestream enabled.

Finally, Lady Gaga's headlining performance during the 2025 music festival further illustrates the power of the at-home audience in shaping the production of the festival. Lady Gaga's performance featured gothic elements such as skeletons and a sandpit graveyard, thematically meant to represent the life and death of Lady Gaga's stage persona and her true

¹⁰⁰ Bruce Fessier, "Breaking the Sound Barrier | Palm Springs Life," March 27, 2020, <https://www.palmspringslife.com/arts-culture/paul-tollett/festival's>.

¹⁰¹ 43 year old male located in Southern California (festival goer since 2005) in discussion with the author, February 7, 2025.

self.¹⁰² From the same article, “Why the Coachella Livestream Was Better Than Being There”, the author wrote, “It’s telling that most of the clips from festival goers show the giant screens that flanked the main stage (...), which gave fans there the same show we got at home.”¹⁰³ In



Lady Gaga at Coachella in 2025.
<https://consequence.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Lady-Gaga-at-Coachella.jpeg?quality=80>

most of the online postings of people who were at the festival, the large screens showing the camera work and up-close theatricality of the performance were what was filmed. This illustrates that even people at the

festival are experiencing the cinematic production quality that the livestream produced, demonstrating how the livestream’s popularity helped create a different festival experience. Although the consensus was that the performance was witnessed better in person, due to the crowd’s atmosphere and general connectivity of live music, the *LA Magazine* article still stated, “Lady Gaga’s epic set was best watched with a cinematic perspective planned for home viewers.”¹⁰⁴ Despite physical festival goers having a different sentiment, the fact that livestream viewers can even claim to have had a better experience at home illustrates how much the streaming experience has improved and how Coachella prioritizes the experience of at-home viewers as well.

Each of these artists’ performances demonstrates how the livestream has shifted the experience of the physical festival while also exponentially increasing a performance's ability to

¹⁰² “Lady Gaga Proves She’s Music’s Greatest Kook in Campy Coachella Thriller - Los Angeles Times,” accessed February 19, 2026,

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2025-04-12/coachella-2025-lady-gaga-review>.

¹⁰³ Lina Lecaro, “Why the Coachella Livestream Was Better Than Being There.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

become a cultural talking point and increase the globalization of the festival. Artists now plan for Coachella to deliver high-quality, conceptual performances, much like the Super Bowl halftime show, largely in part to the millions of people watching. As one 30-year-old male festival goer put it in an interview, “artists feel the pressure to create a cultural moment.”¹⁰⁵ This explicates how performers have changed their approach to performing at Coachella by prioritizing creating a cultural moment. The livestream produced new audiences able to experience higher production value and witness performances live, therefore creating cultural capital in experiencing Coachella performances.

To conclude, the livestream had an enormous impact on not just the technological capabilities of recording a live event, but it redefined the conditions of how the festival operates. A festival goer who has been attending since 2007 stated in an interview, “The live stream is ultimately what globalized Coachella. ...Putting this festival for free in people's living rooms, people who either don't have the ability to go or don't live remotely close, it turns something that happens once a year into a global brand, and I think that the live stream was the driver of that.”¹⁰⁶ This sentiment encapsulates the power of the livestream by democratizing the Coachella experience, transforming it from a site-specific festival into a global media sensation. Despite the criticisms that the festival faces when increasing its audience, and the tension that has arisen between physical and online attendees, it is impossible to ignore the cultural conversations that were able to take place within these new conditions. Ultimately, the livestream launched Coachella onto the global stage by redefining what an authentic festival experience is, allowing it to be structured around spectacle, circulation, and creation of cultural moments.

¹⁰⁵ 30 year old male located in Southern California (festival goer since 2012) in discussion with the author, February 12, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ 43 year old male located in Southern California (festival goer since 2007) in discussion with the author, February 7, 2025.

To conclude, Coachella's livestream was much more than simply expanding access to the festival. It is a clear expression of broader cultural debates regarding the power of digital audiences. Older ideals of live music centered around in-person attendance and total immersion with like-minded music lovers. However, younger generations increasingly accept the power of digital platforms to document, circulate, and create meaning from live music experiences. The livestream does not diminish the old form of participation; however, it re-situates it within a digitized society, allowing for new tensions to become amplified. Therefore, authenticity does not have a fixed definition as it is produced through competing forms of participation. Hence, the livestream solidifies the idea that Coachella is a fragmented cultural space where meaning is constantly negotiated rather than uniformly experienced.

CONCLUSION

Coachella's transformation from its founding to the present is not linear or simplistic, rather it is incredibly layered and contested. At its origination, the festival was a site of pilgrimage where attendees connected over musical discovery and spiritual transformation – an authentic portrayal of collective effervescence. However, the festival has shifted into a global cultural phenomenon shaped by commercialization, influencer culture, and digital mediation. While Coachella's embodied collective effervescence generated a more uniform experience in its early years, its expansion illustrates how those conditions were altered.

The increasing presence of corporations, social media influencers, and online platforms destabilized the festival's claims to authenticity. The festival's communal ethos became entangled with branding and visibility. However, authenticity did not simply disappear. It was re-negotiated based on how individuals chose to engage with it. For some attendees, the festival became a symbol of late-stage capitalism, superficiality, and commodification. But for others, the festival remained a meaningful cultural site for musical engagement and community. This fragmentation of experience illustrates that authenticity at Coachella is constantly being redefined by the individuals who experience it.

Furthermore, participation in the festival was altered with the proliferation of livestreaming, expanding the audience past the confines of the Empire Polo Fields. The livestream has redefined the meaning of attendance, allowing for new communities, critiques, and policing of behavior to occur. As millions of people engage with the site from afar, the boundaries of in-person audience and online spectator become increasingly blurred. These changes have contributed to the spectacle that is Coachella. Performances are not designed solely

for the physical audience, but also for digital viewers. This prioritizes higher production values, the creation of cultural moments, and opportunities for visibility. In fact, attendees become part of this spectacle as their engagement and behavior are subject to online critique. This illustrates how Coachella is also about participating in a larger online cultural ecosystem.

Despite these shifts, Coachella has not entirely lost its original ethos. Authentic communities and valuable experiences are still occurring every year that the festival takes place, just under renegotiated terms. Fans still find new songs to add to their playlists or meet lifelong friends, proving that authenticity can still exist alongside commercialization. Although these experiences may not be guaranteed, it is within the power of individuals to seek authenticity and meaning within the festival grounds.

Ultimately, Coachella is a complex cultural event, one that produces a vast array of experiences, critiques, and opinions. However, it is not just a corporate sell-out, but a dynamic site where authenticity, spectacle, and commodification coexist in tension. This festival reflects broader tensions throughout the abundance of popular culture, where meaning is generated not just through lived experience, but digital representation. Coachella represents the reconfiguration of authenticity, which shifts from a socially guaranteed condition to a product of individualized pursuit.

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