

## **Influencing a Disaster: The Fyre Festival**

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COMM 336: The Martin Scholars

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November 15, 2024

When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, more than half of Gen-Z answered ‘influencer.’ A new and rising career, influencing is a lucrative business. Free PR packages, brand deals, idyllic trips, a chance to become a household name, and best of all, getting paid to do what you love. Anyone can be an influencer, but it presents a whole new set of challenges when it comes to using them as a face of any brand or company. The role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and creating brand loyalty has become increasingly important, and putting this power into their hands requires a lot of trust and a few contracts. They have the ability to shape narratives that can align with a brand’s identity, and promise experiences with people, places or products that can bring in huge numbers of customers. However, this is a two way street. If brands fail to align their brand promise with their organizational reputation, the consequences can also fall back onto these influencers that promoted them, going down together with the ship.

The infamous Fyre Festival, a high-profile music festival that was heavily marketed as a luxurious, once-in-a-lifetime experience, serves as a textbook example of how influencer marketing can backfire disastrously. Promoted by celebrities such as Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid, and Emily Ratajkowski, the event was meant to be seen as an oasis of exclusivity and splendor; three days in the Bahamas dancing to Blink-182, eating food made by celebrity chefs, and staying in high-end accommodations. When people arrived and found dingy tents on the beach, limited access to water, cheese sandwiches and canceled events, they were less than impressed. The organizers and the influencers that promoted the festival were left facing severe backlash over the disastrous event. This case exemplifies the importance of authenticity in brand marketing, where the brand personality has to match its reputation, behavior and delivery. A company’s reputation is more than just public perception; it is the foundation on which its

promises are built and maintained. The Fyre Festival fiasco illustrates how misleading influencer marketing, inconsistent brand building, and ineffective crisis management can devastate a brand's reputation, turning a viral sensation into a public relations and legal nightmare.

The reason this case was selected is because it is a virtually perfect example of everything that could have gone wrong, going wrong. It provides a striking example of how influencer marketing can make or break a brand's reputation. Set to take place in April 2017, the Fyre Festival was heavily promoted by its creators and a group of highly influential social media celebrities as a new destination music and food festival. People flocked to the Bahamas after paying up to \$12,000 for a ticket, anticipating a weekend adventure that the organizers dubbed as a "Coachella in the Caribbean" (Burrough, 2017). When festivalgoers started arriving, they quickly learned that what they were promised was not reality. It was chaos; everyone was inebriated and confused, none of the staff knew what was going on, the private villas were water soaked tents with cots, and hundreds of people were stranded in paradise. The festival was a huge scam, falling drastically short in delivering its hype.

The influencers, including models Jenner, Hadid, and Ratajkowski, played a crucial role in building the festival's hype. With their massive social media followings, they helped spread the word to a target audience of affluent millennials looking for unique, Instagram-worthy experiences. Their posts about the event went viral, creating a buzz that led to widespread media attention and ticket sales. Although it is unclear if the influencers knew the event was a scam, their involvement in promoting the festival without fully vetting its legitimacy or clearly stating that their promotions were paid raised serious ethical concerns. These models were flown to the island to shoot promotional footage and share it with their followers—despite the fact that the festival had no confirmed musical acts, accommodations, or catering (Varghese, 2019). Their

influence juiced up the festival's appeal, creating hype well before the organizers had set up any of the actual infrastructure. This allowed the festival to gain visibility that would have been impossible through traditional advertising methods. When the festival ended in disaster, social media users quickly flocked to the same platforms used to promote the event to share the embarrassing reality, including images of less than luxurious accommodations and food, turning the fiasco into a trending topic. In examining the case, we can explore the significant failures in brand building, influencer marketing, and crisis management, as well as the crucial role of communication leaders in addressing such issues, which all ultimately led to the Fyre Festival's scandal.

The main source of shaping the public's perception of the event came from social media, majorly celebrity endorsements. With their large social media followings, celebrities like Jenner, Hadid, and Ratajkowski became the "face" of the festival, promoting it as a luxurious, exclusive experience. This influencer-driven marketing led many to believe that attending the event would be a dream vacation that even these celebrities were going on. However, the lack of transparency in their endorsements, such as not disclosing their paid partnerships with the festival organizers, highlighted a growing issue in influencer marketing. These influencers were not properly labeling their endorsements as paid advertisements, which can lead to a sense of false authenticity and create a more false positive brand sentiment (Gilliand, 2019). As consumers increasingly demand authenticity from brands, this lack of transparency undermined the trust between influencers and their followers. If these influencers did properly label their promotions—which they should have—they may have faced less scrutiny, and potential consumers would have known that they were being paid to post about the event, reducing the idea that these celebrities genuinely wanted to spread the word about it. The festival's failure

exposed how influencers can shape consumer expectations, but when the promises made are not met, it leads to significant backlash and brand damage.

This issue highlights the risks associated with influencers when transparency is compromised. Influencers now face heightened risk of backlash not only from consumers who expect greater honesty, but also from the Federal Trade Commission, which has been cracking down on influencers to make sure they are disclosing sponsored content (Plaugic, 2017). As the influencer marketing industry matures, it is evident that authentic, well-researched collaborations are necessary to building and sustaining brand credibility and trust.

The failure of the Fyre Festival highlights a serious breakdown in corporate communications, especially in terms of crisis management and transparency. The event's organizers, led by Billy McFarland and rapper Ja Rule, failed to plan any coherent crisis management strategy for when things began to fall apart. There was a lack of any kind of communications planning, or team, to back the festival. It seemed poorly thought through and planned for, with the organizers capitalizing on confusion and lack of knowledge from influencers, sponsors and consumers to push the event forward (Burrough, 2017). From the very beginning, there was a disconnect between the brand's promises and their reality. Rather than addressing these issues head-on with transparency and honesty, the festival's team continued to just hype the event, even as it was descending into chaos (Burrough, 2017). This lack of effective crisis communication made the fallout even worse, as the public was misled, and no official statements or actions were taken until the damage was already done. In the case of crisis communication, transparency and preparation is key to managing the situation before it worsens, and could have helped mitigate the fallout. Billy McFarland ignored this principle, which exacerbated the festival's failure.

In an ideal scenario, a Chief Communications Officer (CCO), should have been responsible for managing the brand's reputation, ensuring that the festival's image was aligned with the reality of what was being offered. A strong communication strategy could have helped reduce and prepare for the risks associated with the event. Realistically, there was an evident lack of strategic communication management. Instead of managing expectations and preparing for potential crises, the organizers and influencers focused entirely on creating hype (Hanson, 2019). This lack of thinking ahead ultimately led to the festival's collapse, which could have been avoided with more thorough planning and risk assessment.

The backlash from the Fyre Festival disaster for the influencers involved was severe. Celebrities like Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid, and Emily Ratajkowski were heavily scrutinized for promoting the event without disclosing their paid partnerships. These influencers who promoted the event actually did not even attend. Their involvement, despite the lack of verification of the event's legitimacy, led to a public loss of trust. The influencers became entangled in the scandal, facing public backlash for endorsing a scam. Bella Hadid took to Twitter to address the situation after everything happened, claiming she did not know about the behind-the-scenes preparations, and that it was something she could not stand by (Kingdon, 2017). According to research by Wired and The Verge, many of these influencers saw a dip in credibility and trust with their followers. This scenario demonstrates how, in influencer marketing, the responsibility for authenticity extends beyond the brand to the individual endorsers. By failing to fact check the festival or disclose sponsorships, the influencers took blows on their own reputations, facing mountains of criticism and scrutiny.

The Fyre Festival is a prime example of how influencer marketing, when poorly executed, can amplify corporate communications failures and leave lasting damage on both a

brand and its ambassadors. The festival's organizers, including Billy McFarland and Ja Rule, failed to deliver on the extravagant promises made to consumers, resulting in a disastrous event that was poorly managed and miscommunicated at every turn (Burrough, 2017). The festival's promotion by high-profile influencers, such as Kendall Jenner and Bella Hadid, further compounded the issue by building up false expectations among attendees (Varghese, 2019). These influencers, while crucial in generating buzz, also became a target for backlash when it became clear that they had failed to verify the festival's legitimacy, leading to a loss of trust among their followers (Gilliand, 2019).

The lack of transparency was a giant failure in the festival's seemingly poorly thought through communications strategy. Influencers did not disclose their paid partnerships, leading consumers to believe they were sharing an authentic recommendation when, in reality, they were marketing a scam (Plaugic, 2017). This lack of authenticity damaged the influencers' reputations and the brand's image, showing that without transparency, influencer marketing can quickly compromise consumer trust and loyalty. The festival's lack of crisis management made the situation worse, as no effective response was made in the crucial moments following the realization of the event's shortcomings (Burrough, 2017). If the communication had been swift and meaningful when the festival was happening, things may have turned out differently.

This specific case highlights the importance of making sure that a brand's messaging is backed by actual delivery and the need for thorough planning and transparency in influencer partnerships. The lack of strategic crisis communications and the festival's failure to act quickly left it with a tarnished reputation that could not be repaired (Hanson, 2019). Moving forward, it would be wise for the organizers to avoid hosting another festival and instead focus on rebuilding their brand's integrity by emphasizing honesty, clear communication, and vetting partnerships

more carefully. The Fyre Festival's downfall demonstrates the severe consequences of failing to live up to a brand promise, especially when influencers are used to promote it without proper accountability or transparency.



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