

Willy’s Chocolate Experience: A Crisis Case Study

Crisis Overview

Background of Crisis:

On a weekend in February 2024, hundreds of families in Glasgow, Scotland, were left with a sour taste after purchasing individual tickets for £35—around \$45—to a falsely advertised Willy Wonka-themed event (Watson et al., 2024). House of Illuminati, the organizer behind Willy’s Chocolate Experience, promoted the event using exaggerated AI-generated imagery and descriptions of candy-filled lands. The contrasting reality between the promotional materials and the low-quality services offered angered parents, distressed children, and bewildered social media users around the world across various platforms. The scandal was covered by major agencies such as *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *Vanity Fair*, while also earning a place in pop culture history through its own *Wikipedia* page. Ultimately, each ticket was refunded and House of Illuminati dissolved on October 22, 2024 (GOV.UK, 2024).

 Left, how the Welcome to Willy's Chocolate Experience was marketed. Right: The actual event, which resulted in people demanding refunds. Composite: Willyschocolateexperience; SWNS	 Eva said it took her five minutes to walk through the whole event. Organisers had said it would last between 45 minutes and an hour
Screenshot courtesy of <i>The Guardian</i> (2024). https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/feb/27/glasgow-willy-wonka-experience-slammed-as-farce-as-tickets-refunded	Screenshot courtesy of <i>BBC</i> (2024). https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czrlr3dw2x3o

Background of House of Illuminati:

House of Illuminati was registered with the United Kingdom government by British national Billy Coull on November 20, 2023. On his now defunct digital portfolio, Coull touted himself as a “consultant, creator, and author” with a “Ph.d, Mpsy, PsyThD, [and] MBA.m” (Coull, 2021). His most notable venture, House of Illuminati—which was responsible for the creation and production of Willy’s Chocolate Experience, described itself as “a realm where fantasy and reality converge to create unparalleled immersive experiences” (House of Illuminati, 2024). Images on its website appeared to be AI-generated with vague explanations of what the company could accomplish for its clients. Following the repercussions from the unsuccessful Wonka event, House of Illuminati ceased operations, and Coull was registered as a sex offender for an assault he said he committed due to his mental health deteriorating after the event’s widespread backlash (BBC, 2024).

Timeline:

Much of the information about the event was deleted by the primary source, so internet archive captures and secondhand accounts will be used to craft an executive timeline for Willy’s Chocolate Experience. On House of Illuminati’s website, a sneak peek of Willy’s Chocolate Experience was teased in a blog post on December 12, 2023 (Admin_63bkwadr, 2023). According to Reddit user Prestigious_Try4610, House of Illuminati began advertising for Willy’s Chocolate Experience on Facebook as early as February 10, 2024 (Prestigious_Try4610, 2024). The event was held in “an abandoned, empty, warehouse” from February 24-25, 2024, but was canceled partway through its first day after police were called to the scene (Mckinnon, 2024). On February 26, 2024, Coull tearfully apologized on video about the situation (Loudon, 2024). By February 28, 2024, social media users were posting high-traction memes and event

staff began revealing what went on behind the scenes (Placido, 2024). A statement was shared by the company's Facebook account on March 1, 2024, apologizing for and explaining the crisis (Klee, 2024). Memes continued to circulate the internet for months, and the House of Illuminati—which never recovered—shut down on October 22, 2024.

Stakeholders and Spread of Crisis

Internal Stakeholders:

- Management – in House of Illuminati's case, Coull was the only registered officer. His title was listed as director.
- Employees – paid actors, performers, and other staff at the venue.
- Shareholders – those who invested money in the company or had financial interest. It is unclear if House of Illuminati had any private or public shareholders.

External Stakeholders:

- Suppliers – artists, third-party companies, and other manufacturers involved with the production of the event's goods and services but not affiliated with House of Illuminati.
- Customers – community members who purchased tickets to the experience.
- Government agencies – official entities that enforce local and national policies and laws. Businesses must comply with the applicable regulations or risk legal action.

Role of Social Media:

Upset customers turned to their social media accounts to expose the reality behind Willy's Chocolate Experience. These stakeholders were primarily responsible for distributing the story, which local and international news agencies picked up. Soon after, the topic trended on the greater internet sphere due to the accessibility of social media and the speed at which events can

spread. Memes and comparisons to other infamous events, like Fyre Festival, also quickly boosted the virality of the Wonka experience.

Emotions played a large role in spreading the crisis. Not only were parents left frustrated and furious, but children were frightened as well. Actors have since revealed that they were handed AI-generated scripts and told to improvise content that was not found in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Murphy, 2024). One of the new developments was the character called The Unknown, "an evil chocolate maker who lives in the walls" (Scott, 2024). This unnerving act scared and confused both attendees and social media users. In the grand scheme of life experiences, the crisis did not seem to cause irreparable trauma, but it did generate negative feelings that resonated with many individuals.

 The Glasgow event featured a character called "The Unknown" who is absent from the traditional Willy Wonka plotline	 12:09 PM · Feb 28, 2024 104.5K Reply Copy link to post Read 20 replies
Screenshot courtesy of BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-68458043	@putasinghonit on X. https://x.com/putasinghonit/status/1762902872755233093?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1762902872755233093%7Ctwgr%5Ee2f6a6b26d4027ff413a504a6c6e4fb4008c3e7a%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.indy100.com%2Fviral%2Fwilly-wonka-experience-glasgow-memes-2667395376

Crisis Response

Strategy:

House of Illuminati's crisis response strategy included multiple apologies, a little bit of denial, and corrective action. The first tearful apology occurred two days after the incident and was uploaded as a written interview and short video on STV News (Loudon, 2024). It was reactive and blamed shortcomings on postage delays; although, it did promise that tickets would be refunded. The second apology was posted on the company's Facebook page almost a week after the event (stars_doulikedem, 2024). While the organizer did take responsibility for the failed event and asked people not to share the faces of those who were hired to perform, he also contradicted the post by including a photo of one of the performers in his apology. Additionally, there were many typos and grammatical errors littered throughout the text. Coull also used the post to deny that his other ventures, specifically a nonprofit, and wedding would not financially gain from the ticket sales. Again, refunds were said to be returned to those who bought tickets. These apologies became inaccessible following the deletion of House of Illuminati's website, Facebook, and other digital accounts.

Effectiveness of Response:

Public sentiment regarding the apologies was not favorable. Many users on Reddit and other social platforms condemned the director for allegedly using AI to write the apology, did not think it was enough to rectify the situation, and were generally more confused after reading the statement. Users familiar with Coull's previous enterprises utilized social spaces to educate others about his shady past, further blocking any path to redemption. The deletion of the company's sites during the crisis also harmed the reputation of both the business and its management. The next section of this analysis will dive into some of the theory-based best

practices House of Illuminati should have incorporated into its crisis communications strategy to improve its response effectiveness.

Recommendations

Theory-based Strategies:

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits that organizations should identify the type of crises that occurred and develop a strategy based on the organization's level of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Under this model, the shortcomings of Willy's Chocolate Experience would be considered an organizational misdeed with no injuries to external stakeholders and a high level of organizational responsibility. These attributes call for a high level of care, corrective action, and full apology. While House of Illuminati did apologize and offer refunds, it lacked a well-written response and did not provide adequate information about where to inquire for refunds. Additionally, between the apology and the corrective action in the statement, a couple of paragraphs refuting rumors were included. Denial is a strategy to combat hearsay, but only for crises that have low-to-mid-levels of organizational responsibility. These allegations were not in the mainstream and therefore not as important to address compared to the apology and refund. The company should have reorganized the statement to prioritize the public's concerns. In this circumstance, an effective response should address the needs of the public and eliminate victimization of the company.

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SCCM) is another theory that can be applied to Willy's Chocolate Experience. SCCM studies how and where information is shared between audiences (Liu et al., 2011). The amount of international news coverage and the virality of memes that emerged from the event versus the scarce output of information House of Illuminati distributed led audiences to gather knowledge outside of the company. During the crisis, House of Illuminati could have leveraged viewership to address questions, turn customers towards

resources, and repair its reputation through relationship building. In an isolated study on a college campus, researchers found that young adult social media users utilize social media for entertainment and traditional media for education. While this may not be the exact case for House of Illuminati, knowing that different mediums and sources meet different needs for publics could help the company conduct research to improve its crisis messaging.

An additional theory Coull would have benefitted from is the Discourse of Renewal (DRT) framework. Instead of turning the crisis into an opportunity, Coull essentially hid his company from public eye by deleting all its accounts, websites, and terminating its business license. This could have been necessary due to financial reasons not privy to the public; however, Coull's personal reputation could have been spared from a lifetime of global mistrust if he showed genuine optimism for evolution in his business practices. DRT acknowledges that returning to the usual state of equilibrium is not realistic, but trust can be restored over time through systematic internal transformation (Seeger et al., 2024).

Personal Recommendations:

If I were managing public relations for House of Illuminati, I would have begun by making recommendations pre-crisis. For example, delivering the idea of an AI-generated image would be virtually impossible without huge financial support. I would have recommended against using AI to write and create descriptions and flyers. If AI were to be used by insistence of management, a disclaimer should be included. Additionally, I would have looked to see if the AI-generated content aligned with the source material. If the reasoning behind the event's lack of immersion was due to late shipments of essential technology, I would have recommended that the event be postponed or canceled with full refunds. Part of a good crisis strategy is ensuring that preventable crises are contained. If the crisis were to proceed like it did in real life, identifying

the type of crisis and the most effective way to mitigate conversation into opportunity would be a priority. Additionally, cleaning up any copy and educating the spokesperson on how to professionally conduct themselves would be critical in putting the organization's best foot forward. Ultimately, House of Illuminati made many detrimental mistakes when executing its crisis response, which makes for a good lesson in what not to do for other companies in similar situations.

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