Duke’s White Lotus Response Squandered an Opportunity

This season of The White Lotus is a fever dream of power, pills, and moral collapse, and right in the middle of it, one of the most powerful brands in sports and education—Duke University—made an uninvited cameo.

Duke’s reactionary complaint unfolded across headlines, begging an existential question in marketing: Can you control how your brand manifests in culture, or do you have to choose between control and relevance? And depending on your answer, how do you protect yourself?

It’s adjacent to many of the brand safety conversations being had elsewhere, seemingly at the same time, demonstrating the inherent friction between brand control and cultural relevance. Because brands don’t just live in controlled environments like websites, ads, shelves, and strip malls—they live in stories on the internet; they live as ‘“extras” in the backdrop of public scandals; they live amid the chaos of culture, which moves at pace and shifts while it takes shape.

The Duke drama has brought to the fore something marketers have grappled with since internet-native consumers came into their power: striving for brands to reach “escape velocity” in culture, then struggling to navigate the dynamics when they do. Brands that manage this become synonymous with the zeitgeist of the moment. And while these change over time—and some have greater longevity than others—the frequency and fervor with which marketers cite and celebrate them is ever strong.

What they don’t always tell you is that not all brands, teams, and businesses are ready, built, or fit for escape velocity. Unfortunately, Duke wasn’t.

The closest comparison I can think of to a brand’s viral moment is a grease fire. As a brand, you have three options:

1. Let instinct take over and throw water on it—public condemnation, lawyers, etc.
2. Leave it to the professionals—PR, brand, and ad agencies, all of which have a different set of gear for this designed for management, participation, and value creation.
3. Do nothing—starve it of the oxygen it needs to spread.

The only strategic choices are two and three. Duke chose option one, and when you throw water on a grease fire, it can blow up in your face.

For the subset of brands fortunate enough to reach escape velocity, it’s a matter of seizing the moment and mastering that elusive equation to maintain and grow cultural relevance. It’s about management, not control—nudging, not pushing.

Those who fight culture find themselves wishing they hadn’t. Those who embrace it win. Case in point: that Taylor Swift “seemingly ranch” moment of happenstance virality.

To be fair, to say the subject matter in which Duke’s brand showed up in The White Lotus—against a backdrop of suicide and possible homicide—is at once sensitive and challenging to navigate is a strong understatement. They had their work cut out for them and there were no simple paths. It’s easy for me to analyze from the sidelines, but sometimes the sidelines afford the clearest view.

The reality is that a brand gets to choose if, how, and when they respond. And when they do, they get to shape the context.

There was more than one angle in which the Duke brand showed up: Wealth, travel, and death were a few of them. Duke's reaction ensured that the primary focus was on the last one.

While I'd argue death was the most challenging angle to navigate, I understand why they chose it. I struggle, however, with how they squandered the moment and the platform they were given. This could have been an opportunity to stoke student activism at Duke, focused on getting Mike White, Max, and people around the country to help fund suicide prevention efforts on behalf of all universities in the U.S. A serious topic deserves serious support.

Duke could have played a major role in this issue rather than distancing itself from it. And they could have done so credibly, considering Duke has a Center for the Study of Suicide Prevention and Intervention dedicated to it. That's just one example of an alternative path that was available to them.

Brands, some more than others, should prepare for escape velocity. Once your brand is part of the zeitgeist, it can get swept up in the cultural conversation. And you want it that way. The question thereafter becomes whether you want to shape the narrative or just react to it.

By trading off brand control in favor of brand management, you gain access to sizable opportunities to grow and maintain relevance at scale. Only the businesses and teams that do the work ahead of time to ensure their brands are fit for culture stand a chance of navigating viral moments successfully. When unfit brands see fire, they grab water.

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