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THE KANYE FACTOR: A BRAND'S DILEMMA

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THE KANYE FACTOR: A BRAND'S DILEMMA

By

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Abstract

Adidas is a global sportswear manufacturer that grew from roots that started in 1924 by the Dassler brothers before, evolving into the second largest sports brand in the world, now known as Adidas, on August 18, 1949. The brand has had its fair share of success and scrutiny in its 73-year existence. As a company that has diversity, equity, and inclusion as key points in its global strategy, Adidas is not a stranger to facing criticism in this area. In October 2022, recording artist, producer, and entrepreneur Kanye (Ye) West came under fire for a series of controversial actions. From wearing a shirt that had "White Lives Matter" written on the back of it, to anti-Semitic comments he's made, Ye is no stranger to controversy, and neither is Adidas. Fellow celebrities and consumers alike were calling for boycotts against Adidas, which initially placed the partnership with Ye "under review".

Ye was suspended from his social media accounts after tweeting and posting antisemitic remarks on Twitter and Instagram in October. His account was most recently suspended on Twitter on December 2 after he tweeted an image of a swastika inside the Star of David. In response, Twitter CEO Musk said, "He again violated our rule against incitement to violence...Account will be suspended". (Yoon 2022).

This paper aims to examine the impact of controversial celebrity-brand relationships. It explores whether consumers are influenced by celebrity partnerships or spokespersons when making purchases and the potential harm brands face by not distancing themselves from controversial figures. Additionally, it investigates consumer awareness of Adidas's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives regarding social issues and proposes strategies for Adidas to navigate such situations in the future.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“There’s no such thing as bad publicity”, P.T. Barnum once said. Unless you’re a multi-billion-dollar company being pressured by the public to tame your outspoken and controversial collaborator.

Adidas evolved from roots leftover of a company started in their mother’s kitchen in 1924 in Germany by brothers Adi and Rudy Dassler. “Gebrüder Dassler Schuhfabrik”, was registered by Adi in 1924 and their company was born. Despite experiencing significant success together, the Dassler brothers eventually parted ways after a major split, each founding their own sports brand companies. Adidas today is a global sportswear manufacturer that was started on August 18, 1949, by Adi.

In 1954, football boots created by Adidas were worn by the German national football team which beat Hungary in the World Cup. This pivotal moment catapulted Adidas and its founder, Adi, into the realm of household names. In 1967, the Franz Beckenbauer Tracksuit debuted and was the first piece of apparel for Adidas, a departure from its previous focus on footwear. As Adidas Expanded, the brand prioritized gaining the athlete's trust. Meeting with athletes, listening to what they said, observing what could be improved, and determining ways their needs could be met would prove to be a good strategy for the company.

Adi died on September 6, 1978, and leadership of the company transitioned to his wife and son. However, following their deaths in 1987, Dassler’s daughters sold their shares in 1990, precipitating a challenging period for the company that nearly led to bankruptcy. Despite these difficulties, Adidas has managed to maintain its position as the second-largest global sportswear brand.

Their Purpose:

“Through sport, we have the power to change lives”

This, “guides the way we run our company, how we work with our partners, how we create our products, and how we engage with our consumers.” (Adidas 2022)

Their Mission:

“To be the best sports brand in the world”

"Every day, we come to work to create and sell the best sports products in the world, and to offer the best service and consumer experience – and to do it all sustainably. We are the best when we are the credible, inclusive, and sustainable leader in our industry." (Adidas 2022)

Their Attitude:

“Impossible is nothing”

“By being optimistic and knowing the power of sport, we see endless possibilities to apply this power and push all people forward with action.” (Adidas 2022)

Brand Analysis

Their brand strategy puts the consumers at the heart of their focus on increasing brand credibility, elevating the consumer experience, and pushing the boundaries in sustainability. Adidas has taken steps to position the company as one that is dedicated to “Creating Lasting Change Now”, which is the name of their strategy implemented in 2020, "to set measurable goals

for enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion internally and externally, while simultaneously driving business ownership, accountability and transparency to his employees." (Adidas 2022, June 14). Goals include inclusive hiring, inclusive pipeline programs, inclusive intern initiatives, and women in leadership. As a part of this strategy, Adidas hosted its first Global Week of Inclusion in September 2021 which followed its Global Day of Inclusion in 2020. (Adidas 2022, June 14).

Adidas has seen great success with celebrity brand partnerships. Beyoncé's Ivy Park and Kanye (Ye) West's Yeezy brand (until October 2022) have been great examples of that. "Yeezy generates an estimated \$2 billion a year, close to 10 percent of the company's annual revenue, Morningstar analyst David Swartz said." (Peiser, & Bogage, 2022).

Consumer & Market Analysis

The company's target audience is 14-40 years old, and the brand is well-liked among those 40-65. (Heartofcodes. 2018). Adidas also markets quality for premium prices. Adidas' products are aimed at athletes and individuals who enjoy sports.

The Kanye Factor

Adidas announced its partnership with Kanye West in 2013 after the recording artist and designer parted ways with Nike. Two years later, the first Yeezy products under this collaboration were released. Multiple pieces from his collaborations have sold out in minutes. In 2018, Katy Lubin, a communications director at Lyst said, "Sneakers remain the most search-for easy item worldwide. This quarter, the Yeezy Blush 500 and the Yeezy Boost 700 were the most wanted styles", (Hanbury, 2018). Kanye saw success in creating hype for his brand through his

unique style of marketing. He enlisted then-wife, Kim Kardashian West, in some of his campaigns and used his connections to enlist social media influencers by having them recreate Kardashian's look and post to their social media platform.

Never a stranger to controversy, Kanye is known to speak his mind. From joining former President Donald Trump's, "Make America Great Again" campaign by donning a ball cap with the slogan to saying, "When you hear about slavery for 400 years ... For 400 years? That sounds like a choice." (Oremus & Lima 2022). In October 2022, Kanye again faced backlash for behaviors and statements he made over social media and with *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson in which he perpetuated harmful antisemitic troupes, made comments about Planned Parenthood, posted content wearing a "White Lives Matter" shirt, publicly criticized Adidas, and claimed they "...raped and stole my design" (Dellatto 2022).

Adidas initially put West "under review", but faced pressure from celebrities and consumers alike about acting. After about two weeks, Adidas issued a statement saying, "Adidas does not tolerate antisemitism and any other sort of hate speech. Ye's recent comments and actions have been unacceptable, hateful, and dangerous, and they violate the company's values of diversity and inclusion, mutual respect and fairness." (Adidas 2022, October 25). The statement added that the company was terminating the partnership with Ye immediately and stopped all payments to him and his companies. Dropping Ye is expected to have a negative impact of up to \$248 million on the company's net income for this year. (Adidas 2022, October 25).

"Adidas is one of the first companies on DAX (the German stock index) to collect data on DEI." (Guest 2022). Adidas uses this information to support decisions made and measure progress against its targets. While having the initiatives in place is a good start, how aware are consumers of the social initiatives? Does the brand make efforts to emphasize this? Critics have

spoken about how Adidas has a track record of their actions not matching up with their vision statements.

A former employee posted a statement on LinkedIn, saying Adidas is, "more interested in telling a story of impact but not making an impact...the problems with Kanye are not new, and neither is Adidas' lack of accountability when it comes to holding its celebrity partners to the same scrutiny it does with its confirmed community partner." (Burley 2022, October 25).

How long should it take a brand to act? Should a time limit be in place? Adidas' head of global marketing, Vicky Frees said in an interview,

Our conviction is clear, we do not support antisemitism, racism, or hate speech, there's no question about it...The reality is, this is a complex situation. We have employees, partners, and production factories all around the world that are impacted by the decisions we make. We know that was the right decision, but we needed to approach it with diligence and care...We took the time necessary to make the right decisions and I'm personally proud to stand by that decision." (Stewart 2022).

Summary

When looking at Adidas, the partnership has been beneficial for both the brand and Ye, but Ye's controversial actions have cost him and the brand millions of dollars.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It's almost inevitable that brands will often be entangled in crises at one point. Are they able to recover? For larger brands more than likely, they can bounce back, but for smaller brands,

it may not be so simple. When examining the Adidas situation, it's important to establish that while crises may occur, corporate response plays a role in how the brand can recover. A study titled, "Effectiveness of Corporate Response to Brand Crises: The Role of Crisis Types and Response Strategies" says, "Brand-related adverse events (what we refer to as *brand crises*) are common and typically highly publicized." (Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

Naturally, there would be pressure from the public to respond. The study also says, "Such crises can harm a brand's equity through a weakening of brand confidence and a reduced likelihood of brand consideration and choice." (Dutta & Pullig, 2011) Post-crisis responses and long-term effects from corporate brands can add to what is hoped to be addressed with the research questions posed above.

Subway faced a reputation loss when brand celebrity Jared Fogle, was arrested on child pornography charges in 2015. All association with him was erased, but the bad publicity added to the already declining revenue from the brand when sales dropped to \$11.3 billion in 2016 a drop from \$11.5 billion the year before. (Olito 2020). When Tiger Woods was involved in a scandal in 2009, it stated that a cost shareholders up to \$12 billion. He was dropped from brands like Gatorade, AT&T, Accenture, and Gillette with brands wanting to distance themselves. "Our analysis makes clear that while having a celebrity of Tiger Woods' stature as an endorser has undeniable upside, the downside risk is substantial, too," (Reuters 2009)

Celebrity endorsements and collaborations are some of the tactics brands employ to bring in customers. Previous studies have looked at how consumers respond to advertising using celebrities. A study on "The economic growth of celebrity endorsers: An event study analysis" says, "use of celebrity endorsements is an advertising strategy that should enhance the marginal value of advertisement expenditures and create brand equity using the "secondary association" of

a celebrity with a brand.” (Agrawal & Kamakura1995). Throughout the almost 10-year partnership, there have been many instances where one can ask why Adidas did not drop Kanye sooner. While the brand has been wildly successful, is there a possibility that being attached to him this long will hurt them going forward?

Chapter 3: Methods

A cross-sectional survey was created to gain insights into how aware consumers were of the Ye controversy and examine:

- whether it affected their purchasing habits
- examine how social controversy affects their view of a brand in general and
- gage how familiar they were with Adidas's ethics.

It consisted of 10 questions and was created through Microsoft Forms.

Participants and Procedures:

A total of 46 participants responded to the survey over four days in November 2022. Forty-six participants answered the survey, with 43 participants completing all the questions.

The survey was distributed online through social media networks with a link on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat for friends, and was also distributed through a link via messaging apps: text messages, GroupMe, and WhatsApp) because this would reach a bigger sample population than word-of-mouth and in-person surveys. The participants who received the survey from the messaging apps were colleagues, classmates, and friends largely reflecting the demographic segmentation of Adidas of ages 14-40 who enjoy the brand. Most of the

participants were between the ages of 25-34, with ages 35-44 representing the second-largest group. Participants received no incentives and took part in their study of their own free will. By completing the survey, they agreed to the terms and conditions stipulated at the beginning of the survey.

This survey was created to measure three areas:

1. How aware consumers are of Adidas's ethics. i.e. their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals concerning social issues and how issues are handled.
2. Are consumers distancing themselves from the brand and what are the implications that could mean for the brand's reputation?
3. Are consumers motivated by celebrity partnerships or spokespersons in their purchasing journey?

Design:

A combination of a five-point Likert scale and a semantic differential scale was used to collect data in this survey. The five-point Likert scale measured consumer purchasing patterns and purchasing influences using the scale of never, rarely, occasionally, often, and always.

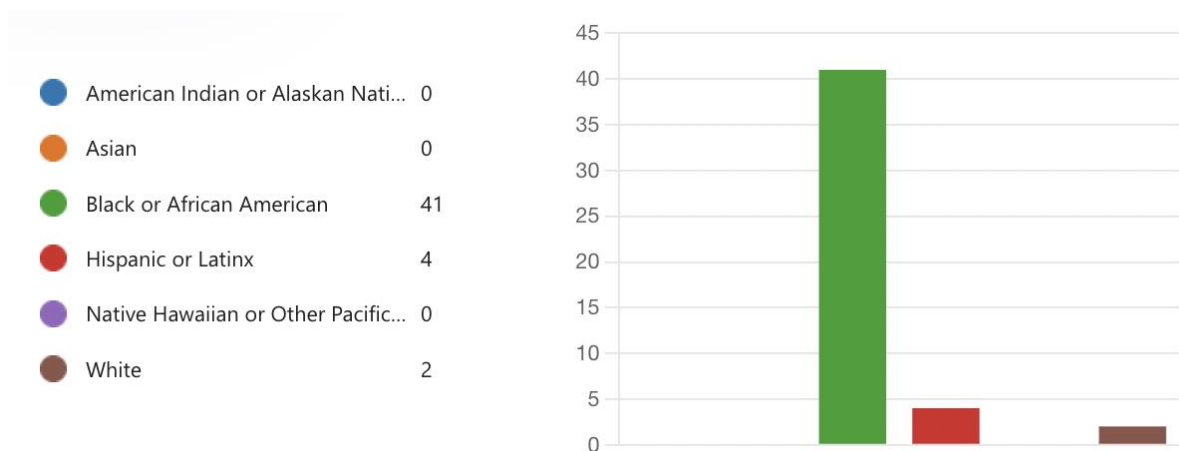
The semantic differential scale gauged how familiar or unfamiliar, how likely, or unlikely, and how satisfied or unsatisfied consumers were. Of the 10 questions asked, 7 were used to gather qualitative data related to the research questions previously mentioned. The survey included a question using a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the higher, most positive value that was an open-response question.

Chapter 4: Results

Because the survey was distributed largely through social media, I predicted age demographics to be heavily concentrated in the 25-34 age bracket as many of my network and look-alike audiences are within that age demographic.

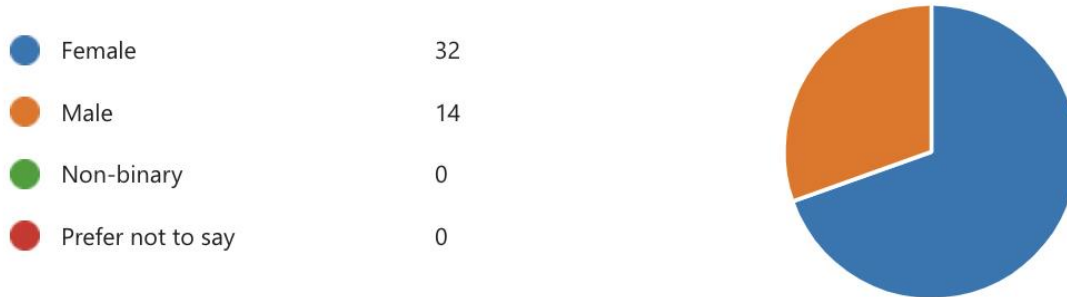
African Americans accounted for 89% of those surveyed. Nine percent identified as Hispanic or Latinx, while four percent identified as White. It is important to note that one participant identified as both African American and Hispanic or Latinx.

Respondent's Race: Figure 1

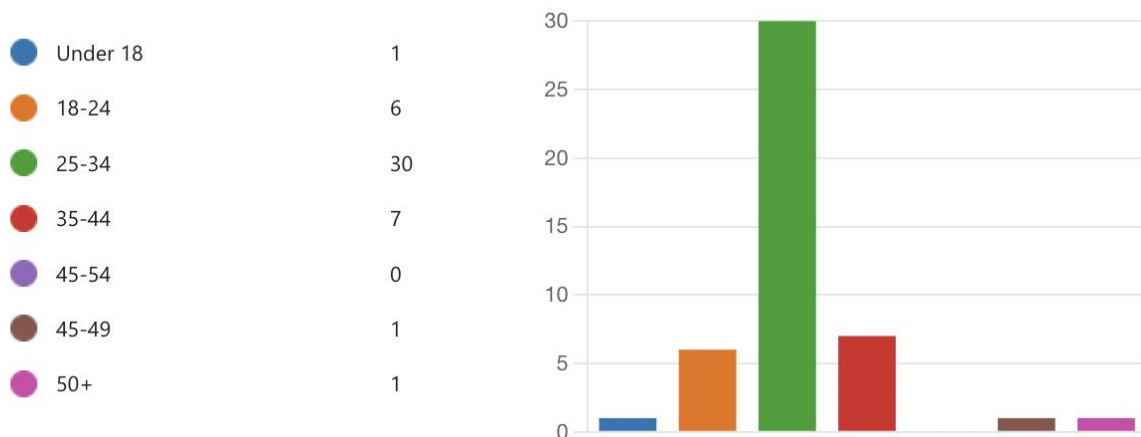


Thirty percent of the participants identified as male and 70% as female. Of the 46 participants, 65% were 25-34, 15 % were in the 35-44 range, followed by 13% for the 18-24 bracket. Under 18, 45-49, and the 50+ age brackets all measured around 2% each.

Respondent's gender: Figure 2



Respondent's age: Figure 3

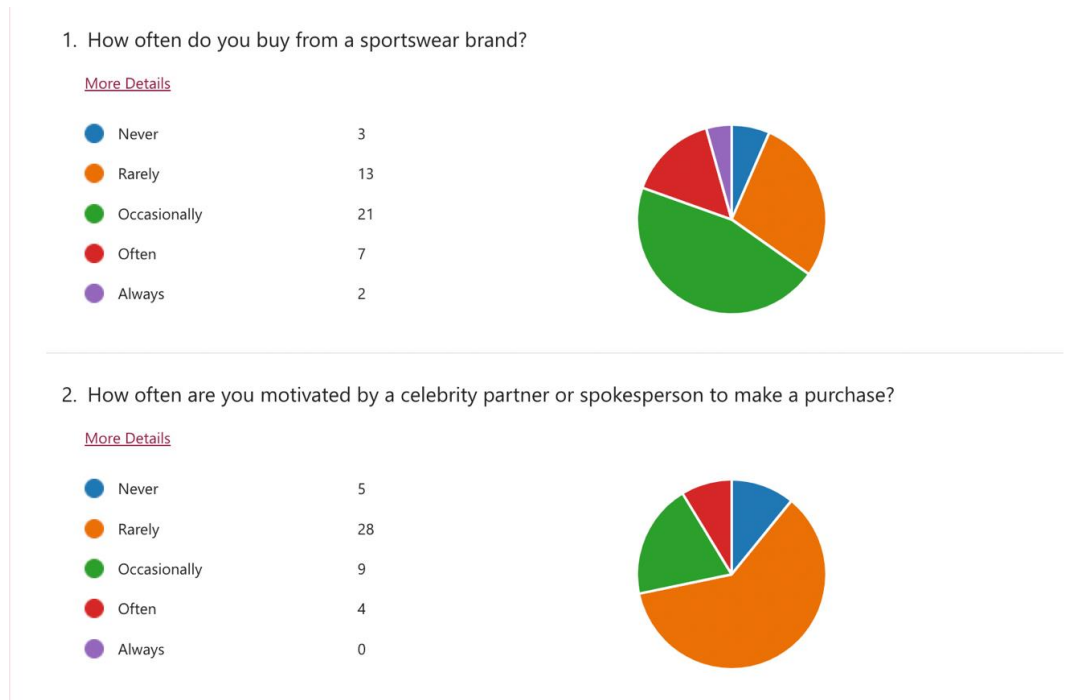


RQ 1: Are consumers motivated by celebrity partnerships or spokespersons in their purchasing journey?

The questions, "How often do you buy from a sportswear brand?" and, "How often are you motivated by a celebrity partner spokesperson to make a purchase?" were used to establish how frequently influencers persuaded them to make a purchase. Would the controversy with Ye would deter them from continuing to shop with a brand like Adidas? Twenty-one percent

occasionally purchase from a sportswear brand, while 13% rarely purchase from the same kind of brand. Twenty-eight percent of people stated they were rarely motivated by celebrity partners or spokespersons to make a purchase, with 9% saying they were occasionally motivated.

Figure 4



RQ 2: Are consumers distancing themselves from the brand, and if so, what are the implications for the brand's reputation?

This research question was addressed by asking the following questions: “On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest, how likely are you to buy from Adidas in the next 3-6 months?”, “when controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to keep shopping?”, and “when controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to cut ties with the brand?”.

Responses to the first question under this section were, 27% answered 3, 13% answered 3, 9% answered 5 and another 9% answered 2.

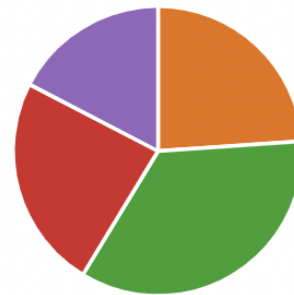
Around 35% answered they were neither likely nor unlikely to keep shopping at a brand when controversy occurs. Around 24% said they were somewhat likely and another 24% said they were somewhat unlikely. Seventeen percent said they were very unlikely.

Figure 5

When controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to keep shopping?

[More Details](#)

● Very likely	0
● Somewhat likely	11
● Neither likely nor unlikely	16
● Somewhat unlikely	11
● Very unlikely	8



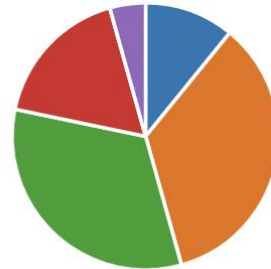
Thirty-five percent said they were somewhat likely to cut ties with a brand after controversy. Thirty-three percent were neither likely nor unlikely. Seventeen percent were somewhat unlikely with 11% and 4% very likely and very unlikely respectively.

Figure 6

When controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to cut ties with the brand

[More Details](#)

Very likely	5
Somewhat likely	16
Neither likely nor unlikely	15
Somewhat unlikely	8
Very unlikely	2



RQ3: How aware are consumers of Adidas's diversity, equity, and inclusion goals concerning social issues, and how can they improve?

To evaluate this, a question featuring a quote from a former Adidas employee stating that, Adidas is "more interested in telling a story of impact but not making an impact... the problem with Kanye or new, and neither is Adidas is lots of accountability when it comes to holding its celebrity partners to the same scrutiny it does with its confirmed community partner. The question went on to ask how familiar participants were with Adidas's ethics and social impact. A follow-up was asked for those familiar or somewhat familiar, gauging how satisfied they were with Adidas's response to Ye's actions over the past month.

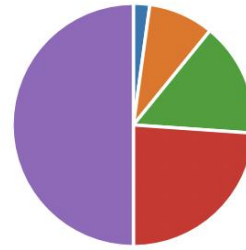
Half the respondents said they were unfamiliar with Adidas' ethics. Twenty-four percent said they were somewhat unfamiliar, 15% were neither familiar nor unfamiliar, 9% were somewhat familiar and 2% were familiar.

Figure 7

According to a quote from a former employee, adidas is “more interested in telling a story of impact but not actually making an impact...the problems with Kanye are not new, and neither is adidas’ lack of accountability when it comes to holding its celebrity partners to the same scrutiny it does with its confirmed community partner.” How familiar are you with Adidas’s ethics and social impact?

[More Details](#)

● Familiar	1
● Somewhat familiar	4
● Neither familiar nor unfamiliar	7
● Somewhat unfamiliar	11
● Unfamiliar	23



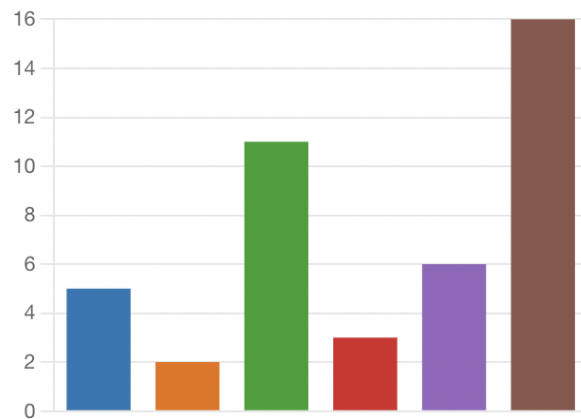
Thirty-seven percent responded not applicable, 26% of the respondents said they were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, around 14% said they were satisfied, 12% were dissatisfied, 7% were slightly satisfied and 5% were slightly dissatisfied.

Figure 8

For those familiar or somewhat familiar: How satisfied are you with Adidas' response to Kanye West's?

[More Details](#)

● Dissatisfied	5
● Slightly dissatisfied	2
● Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	11
● Slightly satisfied	3
● Satisfied	6
● Not Applicable	16



Chapter 5: Discussion

The analysis:

In trying to answer, “Are consumers motivated by celebrity partnerships or spokespersons in their purchasing journey?” data from the survey showed that 61% of those surveyed indicated that they are rarely motivated by a celebrity partner or spouse person to make a purchase. When looking at how frequently people buy from a sports brand, 45% stated they occasionally buy from a sports brand while 28% said rarely.

When asked how likely they were to buy from Adidas in the next 3 to 6, 40% said they were unlikely to shop at Adidas in that timeframe followed by 27% stating they were unsure. Another 9% voted zero even though it wasn't an option given to vote, and another 9% voted that they were likely to shop at Adidas.

From the grand perspective, Adidas would not be losing out on sales from these groups of people. There is room for Adidas to convert them to customers. Looking at it from another angle, the controversy with Kanye or celebrities in the future will not impact how they make purchasing decisions when it comes to sports brands.

The next research question section focusing on, “Are consumers distancing themselves from the brand and the implications that could mean for the brand reputation "seeks to discover how people react when controversy occurs with the brand, how likely were they to keep shopping and how likely were they to cut ties with the brand. Of those surveyed, 35% said they were neither likely nor unlikely to keep shopping, while 24% were both “somewhat unlikely” and “somewhat likely” to keep shopping. Thirty-four percent said they were somewhat likely to cut ties with the brand in the face of controversy while a close 32% said that they are neither

likely nor unlikely to cut ties. The responses seem to align with the survey results showing that celebrity and controversy have little impact on how people make their shopping decisions.

To learn how aware consumers of Adidas' diversity, equity, and inclusion goals concerning social issues are, a quote was provided for participants to read which called into question Adidas' lack of accountability when it came to holding celebrities accountable. The question asked along with this quote seeks to determine how well people know what the brand's ethics and social impact statements were. Half the respondents said they were unfamiliar, 24% stated they were somewhat familiar, around 15% said they were neither familiar nor unfamiliar, 9% said they were somewhat familiar and 2% said they were familiar.

For those that were familiar or somewhat familiar, a follow-up question was asked to gauge how satisfied they were with Adidas's response to Kanye West. One-fourth said they were neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied, 14% said they were satisfied, 12% were dissatisfied, and 5% said they were slightly dissatisfied. The numbers show that the majority of those surveyed were indifferent to Adidas' response, while the next largest percentage was satisfied.

Limitations

There was not enough time to create two studies. If running the study again, two groups will be created from qualifying questions. The first would focus on participants familiar with Adidas and who shop there. The other would consist of less likely to shop with the brand. Participants who did not answer some questions properly affected the data slightly in some areas. Lastly, to truly evaluate the impact of the brand a larger pool of participants could be used.

Recommendation

If this study were to be replicated, a sample group representing various age groups, races, or lifestyle habits as defined by the brand's market segmentation should be selected once the survey questions are determined. Once the data is collected, the information gathered can be analyzed by percentages of the populations surveyed. Once analyzed, the data gathered can be used to determine if the research questions are enough, or if more data will need to be collected in the future.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

While Adidas is estimated to lose about \$248 million from cutting ties with Ye, we will not know the impact both on profit and overall brand perception until a later time. Adidas should create external campaigns marketed to consumers and other stakeholders showing how they are keeping up with their ethics and DEI statements. This way the public can hold them accountable, and Adidas, in turn, can hold their celebrity partners accountable and act accordingly and promptly when those individuals begin to violate Adidas' ethics. A negative reflection on the celebrity can also mean a negative reflection on the brand associated with it. Ultimately, that's bad for business. While celebrity endorsements and influence can be huge for a brand, it can also be a thorn in the brand's side.

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Appendix:**Survey****Research Questions:***Participant Agreement:*

The purpose of this survey is to understand consumer perception of the Adidas brand, ethics, and consumer purchasing influences. This study will take 5 minutes to complete and the responses, if you choose to participate, will be used to aid in a research paper on the topic. Your participation is voluntary and there are no risks or benefits to you for participating. Your information will not be given out and your participation and responses are confidential. You can opt out of this survey at any time.

I have read the information in this form and give my consent to participate in this study. I will show this by indicating completing this survey.

How often do you buy from a sportswear brand?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Often
- Always

How often are you motivated by a celebrity partner or spokesperson to make a purchase?

- Never
- Rarely

- Occasionally
- Often
- Always

On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest, how likely are you to buy from Adidas in the next few weeks?

When controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to keep shopping?

- Very likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

When controversy occurs with a brand, how likely are you to cut ties with the brand

- Very likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

According to a quote from a former employee, Adidas is "more interested in telling a story of impact but not making an impact...the problems with Kanye are not new, and neither is Adidas' lack of accountability when it comes to holding its celebrity partners to the same scrutiny it does with its confirmed community partner."

How familiar are you with Adidas' ethics and social impact?

- Familiar

- Slightly familiar
- Neutral
- Not very familiar
- Not at all

What is your age range?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 45-49
- 50+

What best describes your ethnicity? (Choose all that apply)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

- Other
- Prefer not to say