

THE EVOLUTION OF COLLABORATION:

ANALYZING CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE YEEZY PARTNERSHIP



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Akshaya Kummetha, Megan Zhang, Rahma Sahal, Sharon
Nwogwu, Soha Hasan, Tehreem Khan

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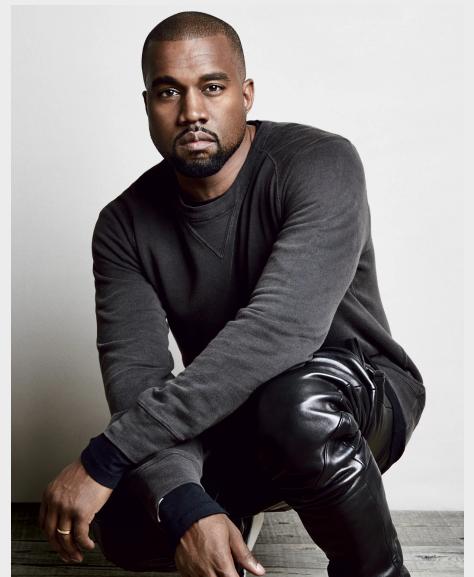
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Abstract

The Yeezy-Adidas collaboration yielded a brand that redefined streetwear and elevated both the creative behind the brand's designs and Adidas, the company behind the products' production. However, as time passed, creative differences, communication issues, and changes in market positioning began to emerge, ultimately ending the decade-long partnership. West's desire for affordability and autonomy clashed with Adidas' pursuit of high-value fashion, leading to public disputes, leading to further misunderstandings and damaging the reputation of the collaboration. This conflict between West and Adidas provides valuable insight into the complexity of brand collaboration, the importance of aligning values, and the far-reaching implications of ineffective and impersonal communication in the age of social media. It highlights the need for open and transparent communication channels, effective conflict resolution strategies, and a shared vision for success. Ultimately, the Yeezy-Adidas partnership is a cautionary tale for any brand collaboration, emphasizing the need for clear communication and mutual respect.



Ye and Adidas Partnership Timeline

In 2013, Kanye West, now known as Ye, left his partnership with Nike, citing creative differences, and announced a new partnership with Adidas (Gupta, 2019). The partnership led to the creation of the Yeezy brand, which included both clothing and footwear lines.

From 2015 to 2021, Yeezy products begin to pick up in recognition and purchase. The most iconic products of the Yeezy-Adidas collaboration were the Yeezy Boost sneakers. Ye also designed clothing under the Yeezy brand, known as Yeezy Season collections. These collections were showcased at fashion shows and received both praise and criticism for their designs and presentation.

In 2016, the Yeezy brand expanded beyond just sneakers and clothing. The brand's offerings expanded to include various product categories, including accessories and slides. Overall, the Yeezy brand was commercially successful, generating substantial revenue for both Ye West and Adidas. The partnership between Ye and Adidas helped boost the sportswear brand's profile and sales; however, recent conflict has arisen during the partnership between Ye West and Adidas (Gupta, 2019).

In 2019, a recurring issue in the partnership was the extent of Ye's creative control and autonomy. Ye was vocal about wanting more control over design and production, including issues like pricing and supply. Limited supply and high demand for Yeezy products led to issues such as product scarcity, long waiting times, and inflated resale prices (Gupta, 2019). He desired to make Yeezy products more affordable and widely available, at odds with the luxury and exclusivity of high-fashion collaborations.

As the result, he announced a partnership with Gap to create a Yeezy Gap line in June 2020. This venture was aimed to make Yeezy products more accessible at a lower price point, but it also added complexity to his partnership with Adidas and potentially led to further discussions on creative control and market positioning, deepening the ongoing pricing and supply disagreement in 2019. Adidas established "Yeezy Day" to commemorate the release of the shoe line on August 2nd of every year. Ye took offense at the celebration and contacted the media firm, Complex Networks, immediately. On August 2, 2022, the publication revealed that the musician had sent a long direct message to his Instagram account, in which he stated, "Adidas made up the Yeezy Day idea without my approval" (Gupta, 2019). He said that the German shoemaker had hired individuals, chosen colors, brought back previous styles, and hired them all without his permission. Ye said that Adidas "stole my colorways" and his "styles and material approaches," among other things (Gupta, 2019).

In 2022, Adidas launched a new footwear product called the Adilette 22 sandals which Ye claimed resembled the Yeezy slides. He criticized Adidas on June 13 in an Instagram post that has since been removed, claiming that the Adilette 22 is a "fake YEEZY made by Adidas themselves." Ye responded bluntly to Adidas' then-CEO, Kasper Rørsted, "I will no longer tolerate this blatant copying. This is for everyone who feels they can't express themselves for fear of losing their contract or being labeled as insane. These shoes stand for the disdain that some in positions of authority have for artistic ability" (Johns, 2022).

Ye criticized senior Adidas executives in a since-deleted Instagram post from September 2022, in which he said, "To adidas' creative director Alasdair Willis: How can you watch adidas take advantage of another creative and remain silent, never even setting up a meeting or giving me a call? Why was I forced to perform this in public?" he penned, as reported by Page Six (Gupta, 2019). He claimed that he was not included in meetings about plans and products. After a flurry of memes about Alasdair Willis appeared on his post, Ye asked his supporters not to make any more of them in a subsequent post. Through September, Ye persisted in his accusations that Adidas was pilfering his designs, focusing on Daniel Cherry III, the company's SVP, executive board members, and JP Morgan & Chase. Moved by his fight to defend his creative rights, fellow musicians and public figures joined in solidarity on social media, Diddy, T.I., Swizz Beatz, and actor Nia Long, among them (Johns, 2022).

On October 6, 2022, Adidas revealed that it is reviewing its agreement with Yeezy. In a statement to FN, an Adidas representative states that the company "will continue to co-manage the current product during this period" and that the decision was made "after repeated efforts to privately resolve the situation" (Johns, 2022). West, however, had made no secret of his desire to end the agreement. Adidas' announcement coincides with Kanye West's contentious Yeezy SZN 9 fashion show, where he was seen sporting a black long-sleeved T-shirt with the words "White Lives Matter" printed across the back. He then reiterates his position on Instagram in the face of strong criticism. The hashtag #boycottadidas gathers traction after major brands like Balenciaga, Vogue, CAA, and others declare they are severing their relations with West, as he escalates his anti-Semitic remarks (Johns, 2022). People quickly interpreted Adidas' silence as consent. Following accusations by Los Angeles protestors that West's remarks are part of their antisemitic campaign, a boycott petition against Adidas had started. On October 25, 2022, Adidas put an end to their partnership with Ye.

Company Background and Financials

With these facts in mind, Adidas has maintained and increased its reputation throughout the early 1900s till the present day. The company's mission, which is mentioned on its website, is written "to be the best sports brand in the world" (Adidas Group). The reiteration on the company's website to create sustainable products globally is a goal that they have shown to prove in various ways, one of them being the company's partnerships (Adidas Group).

In November of 2013, Adidas decided to collaborate with American songwriter and rapper Kanye West. West introduced a fresh set of sportswear in the same year (2013) in which the company showed a 1% decline across the North American region (Santana et al., 2023). According to an article published by Business Insider in 2023, West introduced a wide range of products that became trends, which added the "NMD, Ultra Boost, and West's Yeezy" to the Adidas line (Santana et al., 2023). West agreed to work with Adidas after ending his deal with Nike. Three years into the partnership, the company had seen an increase in sales growth by 18% for the year (Santana et al., 2023). An 18% increase for Adidas within the sales year meant that it surpassed competitor Nike's percentage gain for the fiscal year by almost more than twice the amount (Santana et al., 2023). In 2021, about eight years into the partnership with West, Adidas' sales were reported to be beyond the \$1 billion mark (Santana et al., 2023). However, during the same year, tensions between the two parties began to rise, which ultimately led to the financial downfall of Adidas and the loss of a partnership with West. In the final months of the partnership, it was projected that Yeezy sales would surpass \$2 billion for the sales year despite the widely known conflicts that were taking place (Santana et al., 2023).

Eventually, the long-lasting business relationship of 9 years between the rapper and sportswear company called it quits in October of 2022 (Santana et al., 2023). The company went on to emphasize that it anticipated a loss of \$250 million in income for the year after withdrawing its contract with West (Adidas Group). As for West personally, the impact of losing his contract with Adidas has shown to have a decline in his finances. During his association with Adidas, West "debuted on the billionaires list in 2020" with a reported net worth of \$1 billion (Voynko, 2023). Without the additional income from the sale of his Adidas products, West's net worth is estimated to be \$400 million, which is a \$600 million decline (Voynko, 2023).



Leadership and Communication Problems

Looking at Kanye v. Adidas, there is some acknowledgment that there is a lack of leadership communication. It is crucial to understand that the collaboration started in 2013, with two separate goals of what the collaboration was truly for. Understandably, conflicts are inevitable when looking through the lenses of two different management teams, and creative differences already exist within the Yeezy-Adidas Collaboration.

Nonetheless, conflict is a struggle; both parties already have different perceptions of values and goals towards the Yeezys-Adidas Collaboration. Ye was more vocal by openly showing his frustrations throughout social media about wanting more creative control and aiming for Yeezys to become affordable sportswear; however, Adidas had already announced that all Yeezys products would be designed and created by the Adidas team therefore becoming a high-value fashion (Adegeest, 2023). This undoubtedly created interdependence within the group, potentially leading to conflicts in talents and agendas. However, these conflicts could have been easily avoided if both parties had discussed their initial role in the collaboration.

The interdependence of Ye and Adidas had grown substantially due to the conflict, causing the environment to become more heightened (Northouse, 2020). To understand how to manage conflict, many effective leaders use the Fisher and Ury negotiation methods. The four basic principles are people, interests, options, and criteria (Northouse, 2020). The first principle is separate people from problems. It suggests that people must work together to solve problems they have faced rather than working against each other. Ye openly criticizes Adidas on social media due to his lack of involvement in the creative and financial aspects of the collaboration. For Ye, his frustration should not go to social media rather he should have discussed his ideal involvement of making Yeezys with the Adidas team. In Adidas aspect, when publicly announcing the collaboration and seeing his post on social media they could have taken the leadership skill and focused on managing conflicts.

Fishers and Ury's Negotiation Methods

If Adidas had known Ye's frustration with the Yeezys Collaboration, then Adidas should have taken the initiative to create options for mutual gains. Typically, we tend to do what we want as it seems to be a more favorable result since we do not want to see another possible option. Companies collaborate with celebrities to become more recognizable to consumers and create a positive public perception. When Adidas collaborated with Ye, they should have provided options to have more creative control or give financial advice to Yeezys.

Failing to provide options for Ye, not only shows a lack of leadership competencies but also creates more conflict rather than managing conflicts. The lack of options and the one-sidedness on their part in collaboration with Ye led to fractionation within their agreement. Fractionation is a technique of breaking down larger conflicts into smaller ones (Northside, 2020); working alongside Ye, Adidas could have taken the opportunity to take the approach and break down conflicts allowing constructive communication (OpenAI, 2023).

The fourth principle from Fisher and Ury is the importance of using objective criteria. When parties are involved in a disagreement, they must seek objective criteria to see the dispute objectively. The objective criteria typically used for managing conflicts manifest in many forms. With the dispute between Adidas and Ye, the objective criteria should have been precedent, moral standards, and what a court would have decided. Precedent is used for looking at what had been resolved in previous situations (Northside, 2020); Adidas and Ye could have looked at previous conflicts with celebrity endorsements and resolved any further implications—for example, Johnny Depp and Disney's abrupt termination. In 2020, after the allegations from Johnny Depp and his ex-wife, Amber Heard, Disney decided to terminate the contract. Adidas and Ye could have also resolved by moral standards, which is resolving conflict based on 'ethical' reasons. Lastly, if the conflict still could not have been resolved, going to court to have it decided is the best option. Looking through legal ramifications can help both parties initially understand the purpose of collaboration.

Implications

The Kanye West vs. Adidas conflict and its subsequent impact on the Yeezy brand and the larger fashion industry raises significant implications. Ye, a prominent figure in both the music and fashion worlds, has often been the center of attention, and his partnership with Adidas for the Yeezy shoe brand was a groundbreaking collaboration. However, when Ye made unfavorable remarks and exhibited anti-Semitic sentiments, it triggered a chain reaction of consequences that reached far beyond the realm of sneakers.

One of the most immediate impacts was the termination of the partnership between Ye and Adidas. This decision not only shocked the fashion industry but also raised questions about the values and principles that brands uphold in their collaborations. The Adidas website states, "...Values: Courage, Ownership, and Innovation, as well as Team Play, Respect, and Integrity...embedding these values across our people policies and processes, including the way we hire, promote, and evaluate performance" (Adidas.com). Ye's actions undoubtedly do not align with the values and expectations that Adidas has for people who represent and are seen as an extension of their brand. This conflict highlighted the importance of brand reputation and the responsibility that celebrities have when they represent a company. Adidas had invested heavily in the Yeezy brand, and their decision to cut ties with Ye emphasized the significance of aligning with individuals who share the company's core values.

In addition to the business implications, this fallout also had societal and cultural impacts. This case served as a reminder that the actions and statements of public figures have consequences. Ye's fallout with Adidas fueled discussions about accountability, free speech, and the responsibility of celebrities to use their platforms wisely. Ye's antisemitic outbursts have raised concerns regarding the extent of offensive behavior that companies are willing to accept. It showcased the power of consumer activism, as many consumers and advocacy groups expressed their discontent and pressured Adidas to dissociate from Ye.

After Ye's antisemitic remarks, Adidas stayed silent for about 2 weeks. Because of their silence, Adidas faced backlash on social media for their slow response to Ye's outbursts. Their silence caused #boycottadidas to trend on social media and more than 90,000 people had signed a Change.org petition (Treisman, 2022). The founder of Rebellis Communication, Deirdre Latour, posted online "Adidas decision took way too long...There are times to be slow and thoughtful as a company and there are times for speed and decisiveness. This was a time for decisiveness. The point is NOT to punish Ye but rather to stand firmly against hate and send a message against antisemitism..." (Bradley, 2022).

Furthermore, this case had financial implications for both parties involved. Ye's Yeezy brand was a significant source of revenue, not only for himself but also for Adidas. The termination of the partnership meant potential losses for both entities, and it underscored the complex interplay between individual brands and larger corporate interests. Adidas has publicly stated that its decision to cut ties with Ye has had an unfavorable impact on its finances due to the timing of the decision, as it severed ties with Ye before the company's fourth quarter. Adidas faced the dilemma of continuing to sell the Yeezy shoes without a connection to Ye and risked ruining their brand reputation or enduring losing roughly \$535 million. As a result, Adidas' fourth-quarter earnings were affected, with the company experiencing a revenue loss amounting to nearly \$750 million (Pintado, 2023).

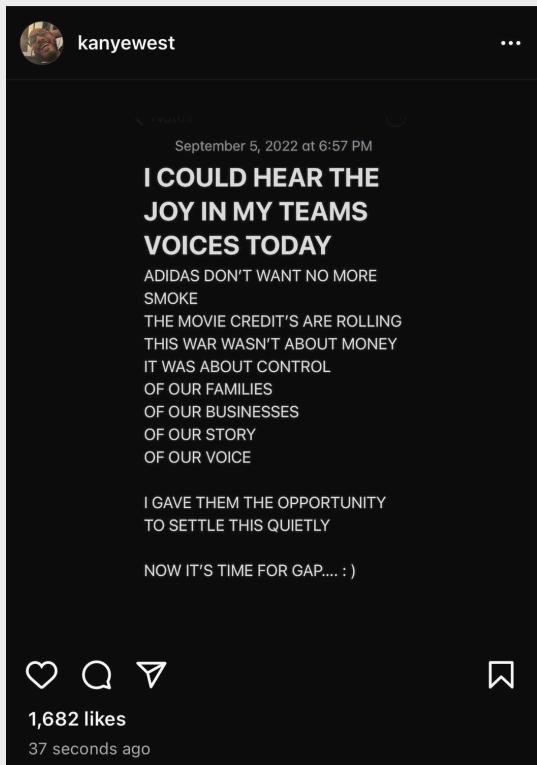
In sum, the Kanye vs. Adidas conflict, driven by unfavorable remarks and anti-Semitism, offers a compelling case study on the intricate web of consequences that extend from individual actions to broader industry, societal, financial, and cultural impacts. It serves as a reminder that in today's interconnected world, the actions of a single individual can ripple through numerous facets of our society, and businesses must carefully consider the implications of their associations with public figures (OpenAI, 2023).

Key Takeaways and Leadership Communication Lessons

This case serves as a reminder of the importance of aligning a company's values and principles with those of the individuals or entities it collaborates with. Successful leadership in these collaborations requires doing your research and being aware of the possible risks to your reputation. Leaders should adopt a proactive approach to crisis management, with a well-thought-out plan in place. This strategy should encompass anticipating potential issues and having a clear, consistent response strategy, avoiding hasty or inconsistent reactions. Leaders should prioritize the interests and concerns of their stakeholders when it comes to decision-making. For example, Adidas' shareholders brought forth a lawsuit against the company, alleging that Adidas had failed to warn investors about Ye's antisemitic behavior. According to the lawsuit, Adidas "failed to take meaningful precautionary measures to limit negative financial exposure" if the collaboration ended, despite being aware of Ye's behavior (Valinsky, 2023). This lawsuit highlights the enduring nature of reputation management. Even after a crisis has passed, it is important for leaders to remain dedicated to rebuilding trust and consistently reflecting their values through their actions.



Hurdles and Potential Unintended Consequences



It is especially difficult to balance transparency with legal constraints, especially if legal implications prevent leaders from disclosing certain information. In this case, Adidas was extremely cautious while publishing information regarding the more intimate details of their partnership. On the other hand, Ye spared no details when exposing the inner workings of his collaborations with Adidas. This further reveals the difference in communication styles between Adidas and Ye's team.

Additionally, there is a potential for alienating Ye's personal supporters which might carry financial repercussions for Adidas. In terms of resources, developing and maintaining a proactive crisis management plan can be demanding which would pose a challenge for some organizations. In Adidas' case, this resource-intensive process was evident in its delay in issuing an official statement. It is also crucial for leaders to strike a delicate balance between managing a crisis and tending to the other important aspects of an organization's operations because an excessive focus on a crisis can overshadow those essential responsibilities.

garthgaston So they want to use his name but not pay him "yet"?

12h 1 like Reply

brokeboyav People only care bout adidas cause of Yeezy

12h 108 likes Reply

yeshuarc They really thought they could finesse ye outta his money using his name on Yeezys 😊

13h 82 likes Reply

icon.bo W for Ye.

via instagram

What Leaders Should Consider and Do

A thorough assessment of the public's sentiment and reactions is necessary to craft a statement that comprehensively addresses the concerns of its consumers. This step holds significance as it enables Adidas to respond effectively to the public, demonstrating its commitment to understanding and addressing customers' concerns. It is imperative that an organization's actions and decisions align with its core values and ethical principles. In this case, company leaders should have scrutinized their association with Ye more closely to prevent potential conflicts with their values. Adidas' actions and decisions should align with their core values and principles. Their core values are courage, ownership, innovation, teamplay, integrity, and respect. Ye had made comments that violated the company's "values of diversity and inclusion, mutual respect and fairness." He made antisemitic remarks that did not align with Adidas' values and as a result, their partnership ended. Adidas "does not tolerate antisemitism and any other sort of hate speech" and said Ye's comments were "unacceptable, hateful, and dangerous" (Valinsky, 2023)



Brian Tyler Cohen
@briantylcohen

It really is incredible that Kanye West could say, "I can say anti-Semitic things and @adidas can't drop me," and Adidas chooses to do exactly that.

Their silence says it all.

12:10 PM · Oct 24, 2022

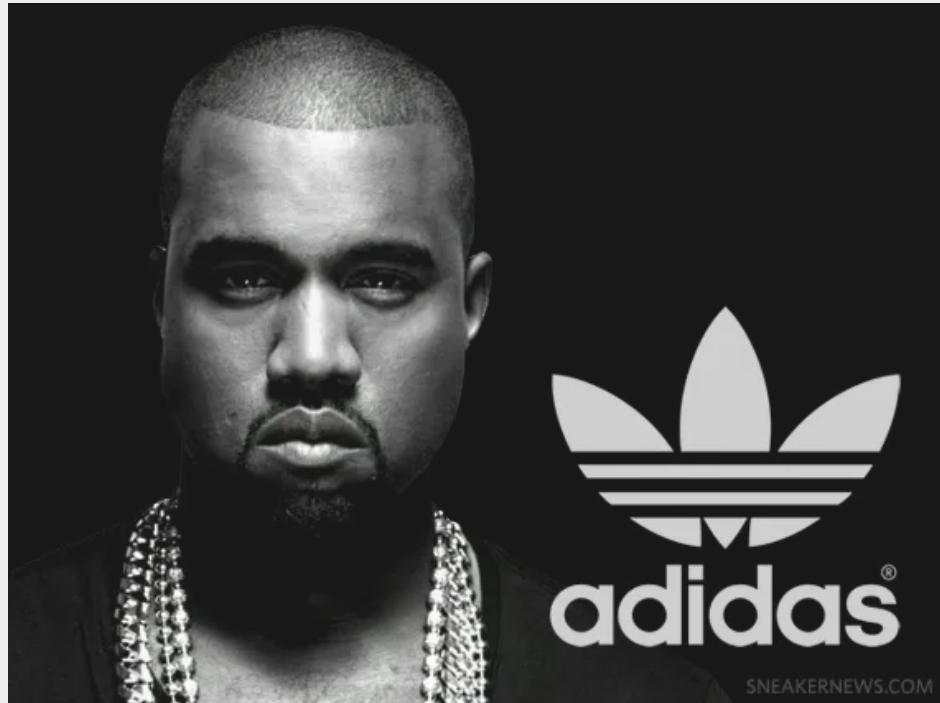
Open and transparent communication is crucial during a crisis. Leaders should clearly communicate their stance, the steps being taken, and a commitment to addressing the issue. This transparency builds trust and reassures consumers.

Since Ye was the face of Adidas, he was a big representation. If Adidas did not cut ties with Ye, Adidas would risk its own reputation and what it stands for. A Twitter user wrote, "It really is incredible that Kanye West could say, 'I can say anti-Semitic things and Adidas can't drop me,' and Adidas chooses to do exactly that. Their silence says it all" (Sung, 2022). Adidas faced criticism as people called them out for their initial silence and many deemed their subsequent statement as merely the bare minimum. Dedicated Adidas customers expressed their frustration over the extended delay in the company's response. In this case, Adidas should have swiftly distanced themselves from the unfavorable remarks and anti-Semitism to protect their brand's reputation. When a crisis occurs, leaders should act decisively to address the issue.

Adidas should have ended their partnership with Ye when he made his first statements. Instead, Adidas stayed silent for 14 days which caused outbursts on social media. PR and marketing experts have expressed how they felt about Adidas' silence. Adidas faced criticism from many people regarding its slow approach.

Conclusion

The saga of Kanye West and Adidas, marked by the unraveling of their once-thriving partnership, is a compelling case study of brand partnerships and the need for vigilance in an era of rapid information dissemination and heightened public scrutiny. The partnership's termination echoes recurring questions about the responsibility of celebrities to use their platforms wisely and the power of consumer activism. Furthermore, the financial consequences of this dispute, with both parties suffering losses, emphasize the intricate interplay between creative control and corporate interests. To navigate such conflicts, leaders should prioritize alignment with collaborators who share their core values, adopt proactive crisis management strategies, and maintain open and transparent communication with stakeholders.



Teaching Notes

Case explanation:

The Adidas and Kanye West (also referred to interchangeably as “Ye” or “West”) partnership began in 2013, producing the widely acclaimed apparel brand, Yeezy. The global sports brand tapped into a new market focused on creative streetwear clothing and generated substantial revenue for both West and Adidas (Gupta, 2019). However, recurring issues in the partnership made publicly aware to consumers throughout the life of the relationship were Adidas’s infringement of Ye’s creative and operational control over the brand and West’s controversial social media posts and political statements. Notable conflicts included the establishment of “Yeezy Day” by Adidas to commemorate the release of the shoe line every year on August 2nd—an event that West took offense to due to his lack of involvement and endorsement of the event—and the release of the Adilette 22 sandals by Adidas. West criticized the brand for copying the style and motifs of his own shoe lines in Yeezy and stated that his actions spoke for those who believe they can't express themselves for fear of losing their contract or being labeled as “insane” (Johns, 2022). In response to public outcry and further controversial posts made by the rapper and creative, Adidas stated that the company would be reviewing its contract with West and ended the contract in October of 2022. The conflict highlights the need for open and transparent communication channels to foster a constructive climate, effective conflict-resolution strategies, and a shared vision for success which connect to sections 8.2, chapters 8 and 10, and section 11.2 of the Northhouse textbook respectively.

Discussion Questions:

- I. What are some conflict management strategies that Adidas and Kanye West could have employed to come to a consensus on business operations?
- II. What are some common sources of conflicts that can arise in celebrity-brand collaborations, and how might these conflicts affect the success of the partnership?
- III. How can companies and individuals ensure that their partners share their core values to minimize conflicts and controversies?

Teaching Notes

Discussion Question Answers:

I. Instead of publicizing the internal issues between themselves, Kanye West and the Adidas leadership team could have set up meeting times with an impartial intermediary to discuss differences in brand management goals. This would help alleviate any recurring issues that arise between the parties and would give reassurance that their own concerns were being heard and accounted for. If these meetings weren't set up or followed through successfully, the Adidas teams could have introduced a more rigorous onboarding process for the independent creatives they work with to acclimate them to the company values and norms. Even though West had creative control over the collaboration designs and product development, Adidas was still responsible for procurement and distribution. As such, Adidas was still responsible for addressing any publicity issues that could reflect on its reputation poorly.

II. Two common sources of conflict in celebrity-brand collaborations could be a disagreement on brand values (affordability, target market, etc.) and a disagreement on contractual agreements. Many celebrities build their success and personal personas on social media under the guise of authenticity, so if they don't think that the products they're promoting/creating don't reflect their personal brand, they would not want to continue supporting the brand. Companies have to make sure that their brand direction is sustained throughout these collaborations, so they have to balance accounting for the celebrity's input with the company's identity. The contractual disagreement can come from payment terms and contract duration. A brand might want rights over the designs created within the relationship and a celebrity might want more favorable conditions or better financial terms.

III. Companies should do their due diligence and fully understand their past history and public image, clearly establish a strong line of personal communication, and have regular check-ins. Once a brand establishes a relationship with a public figure, its identity is tied to the brand's identity, so a brand should ensure that the person they've chosen to represent the brand will do that well. Establishing a strong line of communication will allow brand executives and leadership to settle any differences and disputes efficiently before the public is aware of any extreme conflict between the two parties. Regular check-ins provide the celebrities with an opportunity to express their grievances and allow the brand to understand any potential issues that could arise.

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