



University of
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UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

FHSS

Coursework Coversheet

Module Code:	INCM2029
Module Title:	Public Relations and Propaganda
Word Count:	2062
Essay Question:	3. Pick an example of an organization or country making use of a celebrity in PR or propaganda. Critically examine the relationship between the celebrity and the organization or country with reference to Aeron Davis' (2013) argument that "Celebrity symbolic capital tends to be rather more volatile and unmanageable than other capital forms (such as political or economic) because it is reliant on shifting interests and fashions of others (media and publics)" (p. 122).
Coursework Title:	The Significance of Celebrity Symbolic Capital in Ye and Adidas' Yeezy Collaboration

Extenuating Circumstances – TICK ONE	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I have *not* filed for extenuating circumstances in relation to this piece of coursework.
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In the past few decades, the role of public relations has grown more prominent in the marketing industry. According to Hayes (2023), Public relations is defined as the “strategies related to managing how information about an individual or company is disseminated to the public, especially the media”. This strategic communication aims to build mutualistic relationships between organizations and their public. As a result, practicing public relations is crucial to fortifying a good reputation. To further increase the effectiveness of public relations, many companies have alternated to harnessing the presence of famous public figures to promote their products and augment brand exposure. This is the epitome of utilizing symbolic capital – defined by Bourdieu (1984) as “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability...” (p. 291) - in public relations. However, this implies that the brand’s image is bound by the celebrity’s reputation. In response, Davis (2013) argued that “Celebrity symbolic capital tends to be rather more volatile and unmanageable than other capital firms such as political or economic because it is reliant on shifting interest and fashions of others (media and public)”. (p. 122) One example that illustrates this statement is the infamous case involving the high-profile American Rapper, Kanye West, now known as Ye, and the renowned athleisure brand, Adidas. Therefore, in this essay, we will examine to what extent Ye and Adidas’ case supports Davis’ argument that the practice of celebrity symbolic capital is prone to unforeseen circumstances.

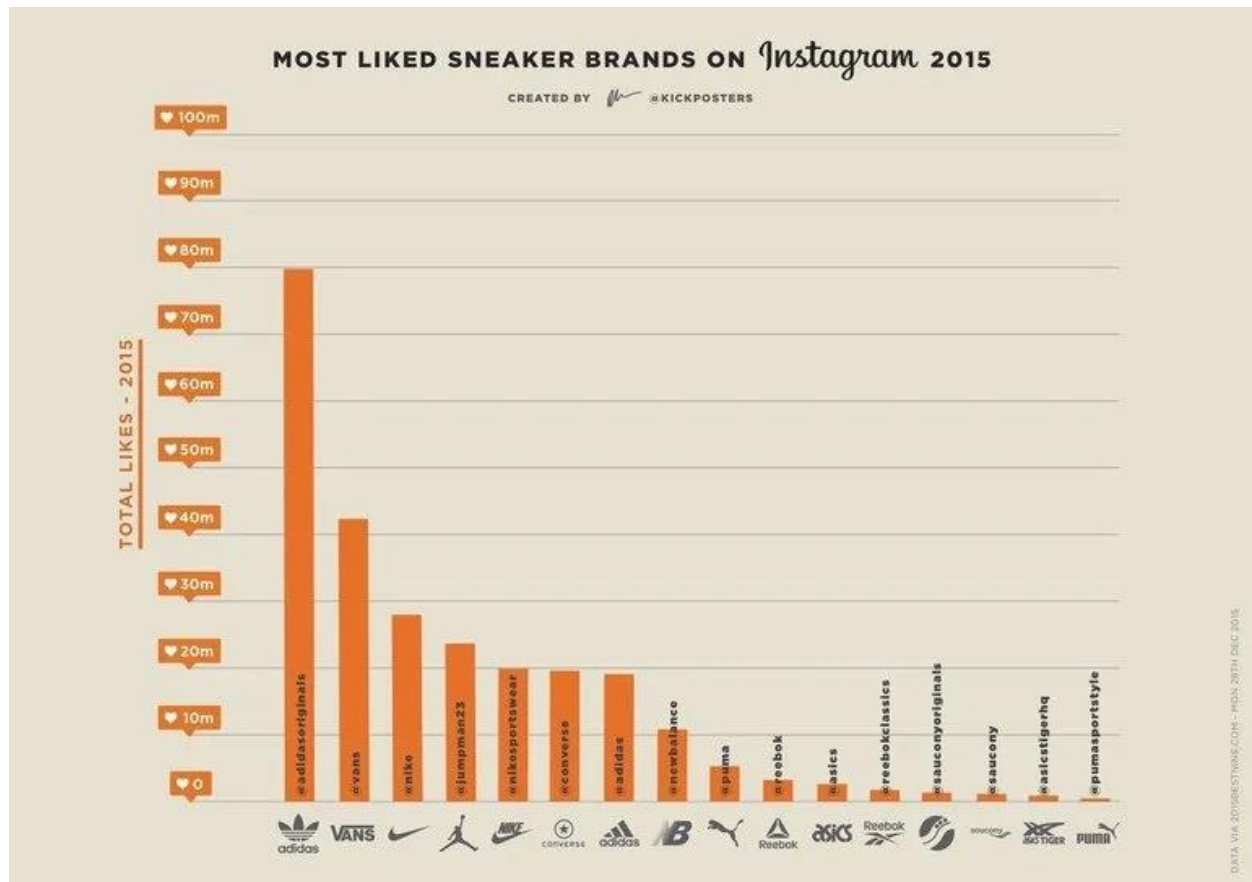
In 2013, Ye and Adidas’ long-lasting collaboration began. While Ye was an influential figure in the music industry, Adidas was a mediocre athletic brand. Although Ye’s reputation fluctuates because of his tendency to portray controversial behavior, Adidas recognized Ye’s talent for designing unique and modern footwear appealing to the public and seized this as an opportunity.

On winning a contract with the rapper, the CEO of Adidas stated that this might be “the most significant partnership ever created between a non-athlete and an athletic brand”. (Valinsky, 2022)

It was not until 2015 that this new alliance finally introduced its first “Yeezy” product line. With Adidas’ cutting-edge materials facilitating utmost comfort and Ye’s pioneering aesthetics, the Yeezys were pivotal to the fashion industry. Adding fuel to the enthusiasm, Ye’s connections including his wife, the influential Kim Kardashian, and other A-list celebrities such as Justin Bieber, Jay Z, and Calvin Harris were also involved in marketing the Yeezys, creating major hype. (Grant, 2017) Yeezy’s unprecedented sales acquired them the title of being one of the “most sought-after and fastest-selling shoes” in history, winning them the “Shoe of the Year” award in 2015. (Angelese, 2016) Consequently, Adams (2020) recorded how Adidas commented on this Kanye effect, “Not only [have each released Yeezy’s] sold out instantly but [they have] also played a major role in propelling Adidas to the most popular sneaker brand on Instagram in 2015,” beating Nike as displayed in Figure 1. The same source also reported that this made Yeezy one of Adidas’ most valuable products as it saw a whopping \$2 billion more in sales in that year.

Figure 1

The Most Liked Sneaker Brands on Instagram in 2015



Note. The number of likes on Instagram in millions. Instagram usernames are indicated on the bar.

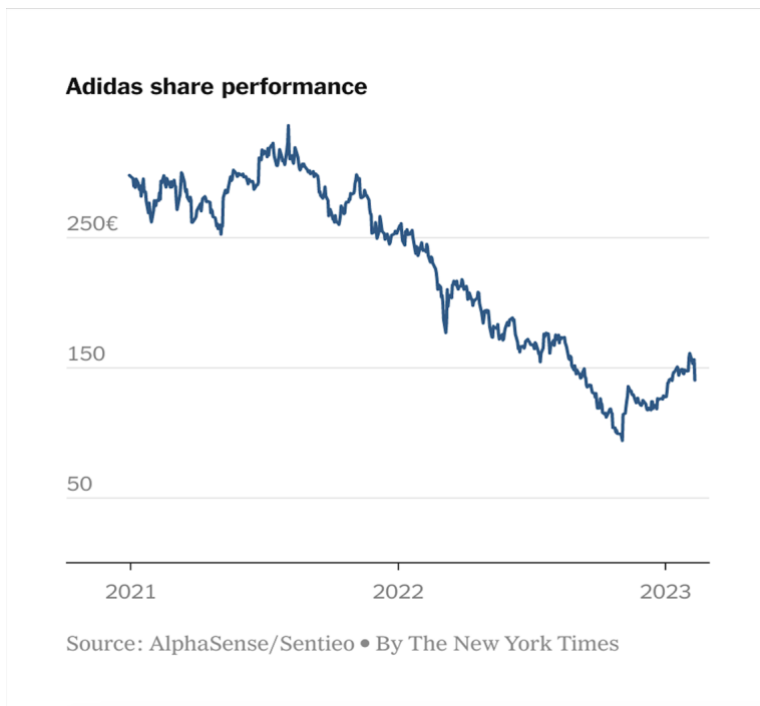
By 2022, these sneakers had become a staple in modern fashion. In fact, Yeezy alone constituted approximately 10% of Adidas' annual revenue in 2022. (Peiser & Bogage, 2022) Collaboration between Adidas and Ye was going through an all-time high when the rapper struck with a major controversy in 2023. According to O'Connell-Domenech (2022), the musician made a series of antisemitic remarks including tweeting "going death con 3 on JEWISH PEOPLE," and prominently wore a shirt that read "White Lives Matter" at the Paris Fashion Week. Following these actions, Ye then boasted "I can say antisemitic s***, and Adidas can't drop me". (Sarlin,

2022) At the release of this news, the media went rampant, putting Adidas and other brands affiliated with Ye under pressure. After deliberate consideration from Adidas, the contract was finally terminated, followed by a statement “Adidas does not tolerate antisemitism and any other sort of hate speech”, the company stated, “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”. (Capoot, 2022).

Syme (2022) reported that the termination of their partnership was expected to cost Adidas \$246 million in earnings, as Yeezy comprised more than 40% of their profits. In addition to the repercussions Adidas received for withholding its relationship with Ye for so long, this athlete brand’s stock price has dropped a massive 30% over one month as portrayed in Figure 2 below. (Warner, 2023) According to Nguyen (2022), while consumer perception of Adidas is still positive in the US, Adidas’ brand reputation has plummeted in the UK by about 17 points as presented in Figure 3.

Figure 2

Adidas Share Performance



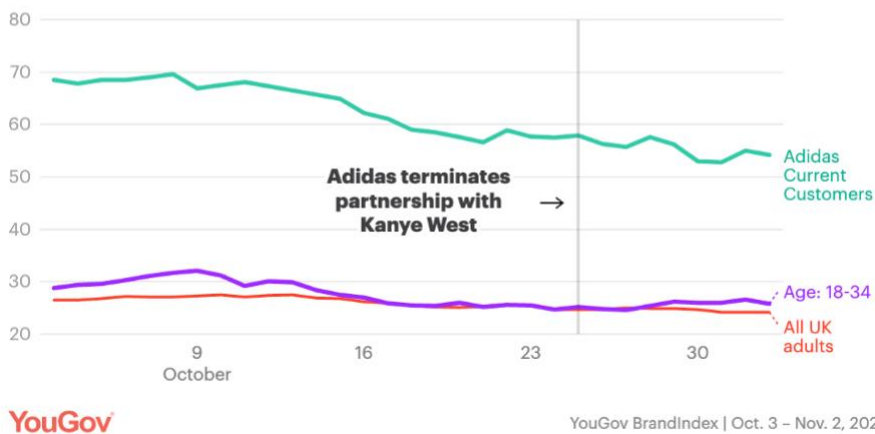
Note. Adidas' Share performance between the years 2021-2023.

Figure 3

UK: Reputation Scores for Adidas

UK: Reputation scores for Adidas

Imagine that you were looking for a job (or advising a friend looking for a job). Which of the following companies would you be proud to work for? Now which of the following companies would you be embarrassed to work for? (Reputation is delivered as a net score; displaying scores among UK adults)



Note. Reputation scores for Adidas among UK consumers.

Thus, this case has described the effects of celebrity symbolic capital on an organization. To elaborate further, consumers have a tendency to define their attitude based on how pleasant the celebrity is, which influences their trust and interest. (Min et al., 2019) This suggests that a brand's credibility and consumer buying intent might unexpectedly escalate depending on the associated celebrity's reputation. For instance, Adidas had gained \$2 billion more sales in the year of Yeezy's release. In the same year, they were awarded the "Shoe of the year award" and achieved the position of the most liked sneaker brand on Instagram. This results were majorly due to the contribution of Ye's symbolic capital. Ye has been known to be a notorious rapper in the music industry, who has been acknowledged as a talented designer. Correspondingly, Ye's involvement in Yeezy's creation has reinforced the brand's trustworthiness. However, Ye and Adidas understood that the public needs an extensive reassurance to invest in this luxury item. In pursuit of this motive, Ye utilized his connections with numerous influential celebrities to promote Yeezy in order to emphasize its reliability. As a result, the engagement of esteemed figures has produced enormous exposure and successfully established a credible image for Yeezy. Demand for the sneakers resultantly was unrivaled, thereby abruptly generating tremendous interest leading to propelled consumer buying intention that expedited their brand equity. This illustrated how the exploitation of multiple celebrities' symbolic capital has provided Adidas with leverage to enhance its reliability to gain customer attention and ultimately assisted them to overcome mediocrity.

Other than that, this case has also shown how customer interest is attained by integrating Ye's symbolic capital and Adidas' brand image. This polarizing rapper is known for having a unique and modern taste in fashion. He has the ability to make streetwear apparel seem high-end, which compels a large portion of the fashion community. (Rudolf, 2019) On the other hand, Adidas was

reputable as a footwear brand that offers shoes with high comfort and utility. (Rucker, 2023) Combining Adidas' groundbreaking technologies and Ye's transcending designs, the compatibility of this collaboration was impeccable, which equipped Adidas with an elevated brand image that intrigued a broader audience including the fashion community, athletes and even ordinary people seeking comfortable sneakers. As a result, the collaboration between a fashionable figure and a sportswear brand has assisted Adidas to expand its image not limited to only comfortable sportswear but also fashionable. "I think Kanye definitely helped make the brand cool again," said Mark King, the president of the North America division at that time. (Kish & Santana, 2022) This celebrity-brand congruence which perfectly incorporated strengths from respective sides has created an immensely successful fashion venture that has encouraged Adidas to diversify and has overall allowed the sportswear brand to stand out in a concentrated market.

However, the dependency of celebrity symbolic capital on consumer perception also conversely indicates how consumers' buying intentions decrease according to the celebrity's reputation. Evidently, a portion of the consumer base who disapproves of this decade-long alliance such as consumers from the UK has affiliated a negative reputation for the sportswear brand and hence, showed notably less motive in purchasing their products. Other than that, it was mentioned how Adidas' profit has dropped a significant \$246 million and declined 30% in stocks. This was due to the public offenses Ye made including numerous antisemitic remarks that outraged society. Moreover, despite his actions, Ye still believed and gloated that Adidas would never break their deal. Accordingly, his actions were perceived by society to be insensitive, rude, and arrogant. Due to this unhonourable behavior, the public has "canceled" Ye, implying how his reputation is damaged as he became despised in society. As the musician was ostracized by the public,

everything related to this rapper was chastised including his partner, Adidas. With actions that are apparent to be contradictory to the company's values along with public criticism, Adidas was forced to abolish the entire Yeezy empire. Hence, this has shown how being associated with a turbulent artist has adversely affected Adidas' reputation, leading to diminished buyer intent. While there was initially a positive correlation between Ye and Adidas' relationship, it was suspended precipitously due to an unanticipated action from Ye, costing them one of their most profitable asset. Therefore, this case has demonstrated how celebrity symbolic capital could lead to receded customer interest at an unpredictable time as it is receptive to the artist's reputation, which is often unmanageable.

This is unlike other types of capital such as cultural, economic, and social capital where outcomes are more manageable because it does not completely rely on uncontrollable factors. For instance, based on Boyte-White (2022), economic capital refers to debt and equity, which are required to increase business profits. While this type of capital might also fluctuate like symbolic capital, its changes are foreseeable by business operation methods such as risk analysis, which cannot be done the same with symbolic capital. The same resource mentioned that social capital revolves around accumulated relationships in order to build social networks. Although this is an intangible asset like symbolic capital, this type of relationship is even more personal compared to celebrities' symbolic capital as the relationship strengthens with time, and with correct maintenance, it will not be vulnerable to fallouts just because of a single misbehavior, unlike symbolic capital. Finally, Bordieu (1984, p. 142) mentions that cultural capital involves the prestige of education and theoretical knowledge in society. Similar to symbolic capital, cultural capital is intangible. However, contrary to symbolic capital, it is not volatile since it does not rely on external factors

but instead depends on self-discipline, which means that knowledge and skills will only be accrued over time. This depicts how cultural capital is the most stable amongst the types of capital, followed by social capital. Although economic capital is susceptible to inconsistency, changes can be anticipated using analytical methods. Therefore, symbolic capital remains the most unpredictable type of capital.

To summarize, the analysis has concluded that Ye and Adidas' Yeezy collaboration is in congruence with Aeron Davis' (2013) argument that "Celebrity symbolic capital tends to be rather more volatile and unmanageable than other capital forms such as political or economic because it is reliant on shifting interests and fashions of others (media and publics)". Although celebrity symbolic capital is a potent tool in public relations, it generates drastic changes which can be either disadvantageous or beneficial for the organization. Other than that, this investigation has also examined how the usage of celebrity symbolic capital enables the enhancement of brand reputation. It grants the organization power to transform a brand's image and reinforce brand credibility, amplifying customer interest provided that the affiliated celebrity is perceived as esteemed and honorable in society. Otherwise, any misdeed inflicted by the celebrity will cause unanticipated repercussions, which will subsequently deteriorate the affiliated organization's reputation to an uncertain extent. This ambiguity illustrates how the utilization of celebrity symbolic capital is highly risky as it is unpredictable, unlike other types of capital. Therefore, while celebrity symbolic capital could be the key to heightened exposure and brand credibility, the exploitation of symbolic capital would require preparation for all possible contingencies. With the strict monitoring and management of the influential figure, celebrity symbolic capital will be essential in public relations to create a lucrative business.

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