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Executive Summary

The report aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the change management for Adidas from three perspectives. To this end, a total three tools are utilized including Lewin's force field analysis, Lewin's three-step model, and Mendelow's matrix. First, the report analyzes three driving forces and three resisting factors for the transition, which altogether formulates an equilibrium. Secondly, three steps—unfreezing, moving, and freezing—are introduced to instruct the company. Thirdly, stakeholders' evaluation is conducted to make sure the company knows who they should keep satisfied. And finally, conclusion and recommendation are listed for the company to realize the transition.

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1. Introduction

1.1 An Overview of Adidas' Development

With the ambition to provide athletes with the best possible equipment, Adi Dassler registered the predecessor of the company, which was later known as Adidas, in 1924 and embarked on his mission (Adidas, 2023). Adidas grew steadily during the 1950s as football players changed to the company's shoes that were lightweight and had more functions, and Adidas became well-known worldwide after the victory of German national football team (Lewis, 2023). From 1960s to 2000s, the company had gained momentum to increase its popularity across the world by capturing the eyeballs of the people at that time. To this end, it created the Trefoil, which serves as a new logo and icon, in 1972 (Paz, 2022). Entering the 2000s, Adidas has signed a lot of world-class athletes including Lionel Messi, champions of the Olympic Games like Tyson Gay, and even famous rap singers such as Kanye West as its brand ambassadors. And the company has also been a change leader in sustainability by bringing eco-innovation products to the market and founding member of game-changing initiatives such as Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) (Port, 2021). And in the 21st century, the company had emerged as the largest sportswear manufacturer and supplier, and the second largest corporation across the world.

1.2 An Overview of Changes of Adidas

From the perspective of change management, Adidas has undergone four major changes. The first change occurred in 1987 when its founder Adi Dassler passed away and it was

him who transformed Adidas into a flourishing global sportswear company that accumulated an enormous amount of clients (Walters, 2021). Thanks to his significant contribution, the company experienced a period of innovation and growth. The next one is the ever-growing globalization started in the 1980s that dealt a heavy blow to Adidas since all its products including sneakers and garments could be produced more cheaply in Asian countries (Parmentier & Reynaud, 2019). As a result, lots of its Germany factories were forced to close due to the rising labor costs and the disruption of its supply chains. It was also during this period when Nike overtook Adidas to become the largest sports brand. The third change is that the company has changed its CEO for three times from Herbert Hainer in 2001 who continued to develop the company and facilitated the acquisition of Reebok in 2006, Kasper Rorsted in 2016 who led the company respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and witnessed its sales plummeting in China, and Bjørn Gulden, the current new CEO. And the last one is the sales decline, and damage of reputation etc., caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the political controversy in China due to the Xinjiang cotton and other factors.

2. A Comprehensive Change Management Analysis of Adidas

In this part, an in-depth evaluation that analyzes the the resisting and driving forces for changes, how the company should do to embrace and realize changes, and what impact stakeholders will pose on of the company without good management will be conducted.

2.1 Force Field Analysis of Adidas

According to Lewin (1943), “to bring about any change, the balance between the forces which maintain the social self-regulation at a given level has to be upset”. In Lewin’s force field analysis model, there is an equilibrium maintained by both driving forces and resisting forces. To break the balance, either the promoting factors need to outweigh the resisting factors, or the resisting forces need to be weakened.

As a sportswear behemoth worldwide, Adidas has witnessed many challenges over the past decade not only in China, but across the world. The first challenge is the emergence of its competitors including Nike, Sketchers, Li-Ning and Anta, which can be seen as the driving force for the company to change. In 1980s, Nike surpassed Adidas to become the largest sportswear corporation. In fact, the company could have strengthened its competitiveness against Nike in the early 21st century, but it wasted them. For example, in 1984, the company refused to offer a sneaker contract to the upcoming super basketball star Michael Jordan who generated massive profitability for Nike (Coyle, 2021). And Jordan brand now is one of the most competitive basketball brands globally. And the same thing happened on Kobe Bryant who shifted to Nike after six years cooperation with Adidas and attracted more new consumers for the Swoosh. As a result, the company is not as competitive as Nike or Lining is in terms of basketball equipment. But now, the company also faces such challenge in China. Li-Ning and Anta, two Chinese sportswear brands, are also catching up.

It can be analyzed that Nike has emerged as the largest sportswear manufacturer in China with the market share of 25.2% in 2021 and Anta’s market share outnumbered

that of the Adidas as the second largest in the country, amounting to 16.2% (as it shows in figure 1). In contrast, Adidas only ranked at the third place with the share of 14.8%. And Li-Ning and Sketchers are also narrowing their gap with Adidas with the share of 8.2% and 6.6% respectively. Therefore, the ever-fierce rival and the declining market share serve as a wake-up call for the company to make some changes.

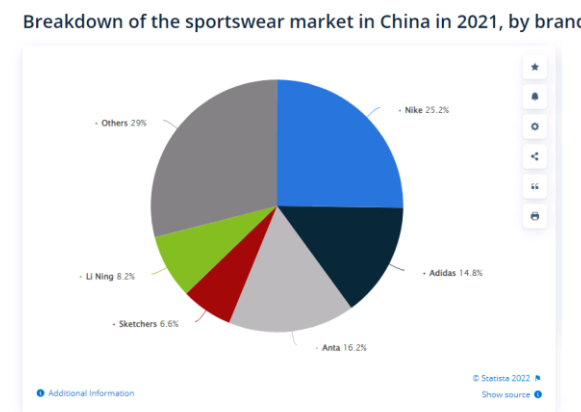


Figure 1 sportswear market share in China in 2021 (Ma, 2022)

The second driving force for Adidas to make changes is the sales decline caused by a Chinese political controversy that will be discussed thoroughly in the resisting forces part and COVID-19 pandemic. According to Russell (2022), the company saw a 3% drop in sales in the fourth quarter to €5.137 billion in 2021, dragged down by a 24% fall in China and it also lost its market share to upstart China's sportswear brands that are mentioned in the first driving force. All of these are blamed to the consumer boycott over the company's stance on Xinjiang cotton. And according to statistics, Xinhua (2021) pointed out that the company witnessed its revenues in 2020 falling by 16 percent year-on-year to €19.8 billion as its sales were hit hard by the globally rampant COVID-19. And It's easy to tell from the figure 2 that the company's net sales peaked

in 2019, plummeted in 2020 due to the impact of the coronavirus, and recovered to the level, nearly to same in 2017.

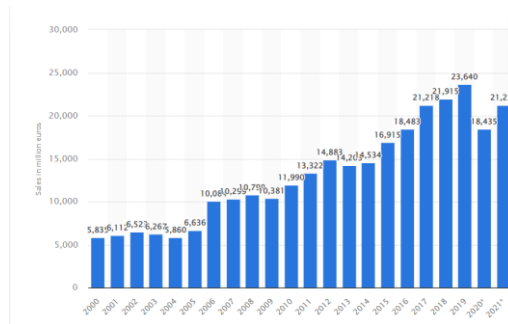


Figure 2 The adidas Group's net sales worldwide from 2000 to 2021 (Tighe, 2022)

And in 2023, a dramatic dispute between Adidas and Kanye West also deals a heavy blow to the company. After signing a contract with Adidas, Kanye and the company together created the Yeezy brand which has generated significant profitability for the company. But the split between them leads to a series of problems, such as a stockpile of Yeezy inventory, and writing it off could result in a massive loss this year (Hübner & More, 2023).

And the third driving force is the shared values of its employees. The main value of its culture falls into three parts: confidence, collaboration and creativity. All the employees are trained as a team to inspire, innovate and grow. More importantly, employees always work with and support each other in the spirit of solidarity (Guo, 2022). By sharing this culture, the company becomes more inclusive and solidary so as to realize its mission of being the best sports brand in the world.

Therefore, all these three challenges have positive effect to break the equilibrium for the company to accelerate the transformation.

In addition to the three driving forces, there are also three resisting forces that hinder changes. The first one for Adidas is the political controversy of Xinjiang cotton. In fact, the Chinese market accounts for a large part of the company's sales not only in Asia, but the entire world. This controversy was started by H&M, one of the members of Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), who issued a statement on Weibo, Chinese version Twitter, to stop licensing cotton grown in Xinjiang, China. And it turned out that Adidas also published similar statement in its 2020 annual report. As a result, it has been caught up in a backlash from users in all social media in China to stop buying all products of BRI brands including Adidas (Woo, 2021). In addition, Adidas, Nike and other foreign brands who joined the BCI all saw a plunge in sales on Tmall, the largest e-commerce shopping platform in China. It's shown in the Figure 3 that Nike witnessed a plunge of over 50% on the platform, and Adidas' sales crashed by around 80%. In comparison, two Chinese brands—Li-Ning and Anta—saw its sales rising significantly by more than 50% and nearly 100% respectively.



Figure 3: Sales Shift on Tmall (Hong, 2021)

And the figure 4 as shown below indicates that the company's revenue also dropped in China after the controversy happened. Its revenue declined from €2,405 million in 2021

to €1,723 million in 2022 in Greater China, whereas its revenue in other continents either increased or remain nearly unchanged.

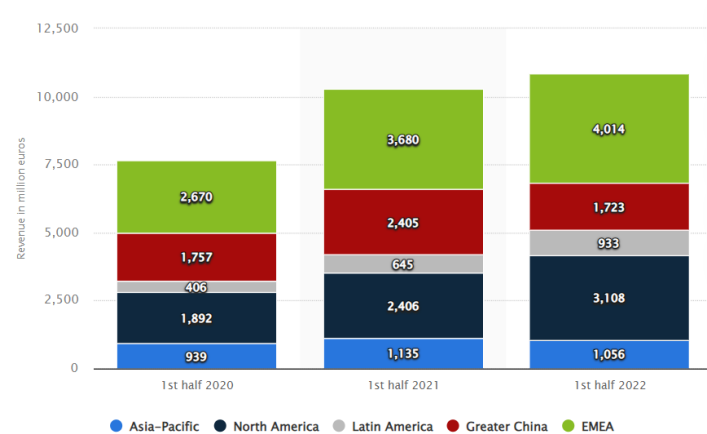


Figure 4: Adidas revenue from H1 2020 to H1 2022, by region (Smith, 2022)

The second resisting force is the notorious COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the global economy and remains recurrent. Since the outbreak of the virus, sports events have been cancelled; an enormous number of brick-and-mortar stores have been closed; and supply chains have been disrupted (Adidas, 2021). All of these have dealt a heavy blow to the company. According to Adidas (2020), in the first quarter of 2020, more than 70% its brick-and-mortar stores around the world were shut down; its revenues declined by 19%; its operating margin decreased by 1.4%; and net income nosedived by 97%. Based on the figure 5, its year-over-year net profits crumbled by 95%, from €632m in the first quarter of 2019 to €31 million in that of the 2020, and its sales fell sharply by 19%, from 5.88 billion to 4.75 billion during the same period.

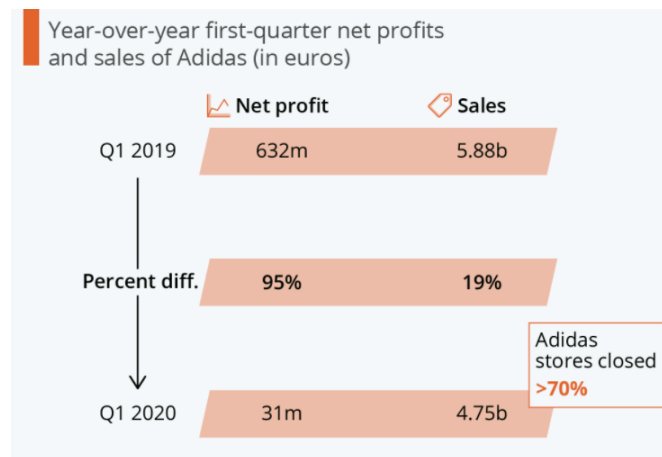


Figure 5: Adidas Profits Crumble Under COVID-19 (Roper & Richter, 2020)

In addition, the virus also disrupted its supply and demand chains since a majority of the company's factories are located in Asian countries such as Vietnam and China. However, many of these countries released lockdown and quarantine policies including the "zero-covid policy" in China, resulting in the disruption of the company's supply chains. Therefore, the company failed to meet the huge demand of its western consumers at the beginning of 2020 (Rigby, 2022).

And the last resisting factor is the changing consumer behavior and the declining demand for apparel caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. And remote working, online classes and virtual events have diminished consumer need for new clothing and footwear, posing further challenges for Adidas. According to Euromonitor, the retail sales of personal accessories and apparel and footwear all fell significantly in 2020 with the respective drop of nearly 20% and 19% (as shown in figure 6). In contrast, all those that witnessed a positive growth are either daily necessities, including hot drink, fresh food and packaged food, or necessary services during the covid lockdown, for instance, home care, pet care, and video games.

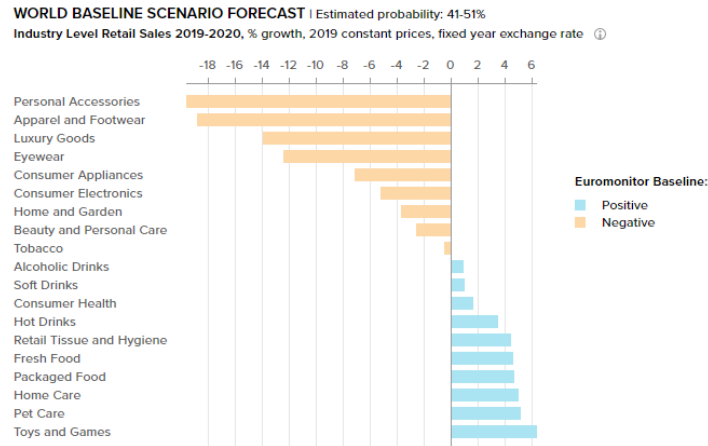


Figure 6: World Baseline Scenario Forecast (Euromonitor International, 2020)

Considering the deteriorating global economy and the ongoing uncertainty regarding COVID-19, consumers' behavior also will change. Figure 7 shows that more than 30% of consumers will make mid-term change to purchase more health and wellness-related products, and another over 30% will make permanent change. And nearly 40% will make mid-term change to buy more products to enhance their life quality at home, and around 30% will make permanent change. And these inevitable changes of consumers will delay the transformation of the company since it is a large sportswear manufacturer.

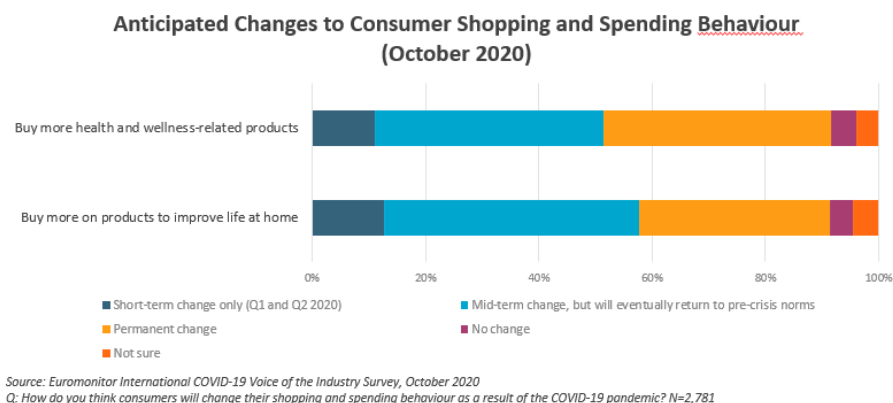


Figure 7: Anticipated Changes to Consumer Shopping and Spending Behavior

To sum up, these three resisting factors are the biggest challenges and hardships for the company to make a change, and reverse the status-quo to consolidate its position as one of the largest sportswear manufacturers.

2.2 Lewin's Three-Step Model Evaluation

According to Moran and Brightman (2000), change management is defined as 'the process of continually renovating a company's structure, development road and capabilities to meet the ever changing demand of stakeholders'. And changing happens thoroughly in businesses, whether big or small, or no matter how many years' history they have. Therefore, change management tools such as Lewin's three-step model should be utilized.

Lewin (1947) summarized his change model into three steps: "Unfreezing, Moving, and Freezing", and explained his approach to behavioral change as follows: "A successful change includes therefore three aspects: unfreezing (if necessary) the present level L1, moving to the new level L2, and freezing group life on the new level. Since any level is determined by a force field, permanency implies that the new force field is made relatively secure against change."

Based on the above force field analysis, Adidas should follow the three-step model to realize the organizational change. To this end, the company should first unfreeze itself—breaking the above equilibrium, which means the three driving forces, namely the strong competitors, sales decline, and shared values, should outweigh the three resisting factors that are political controversy, COVID-19 pandemic and changing

consumer behavior. Therefore, the executive managers of the company should seize the opportunity to promote this change to once again become the global leader in the sportswear industry.

The second step is actually a process moving towards the future ideal state, during which the company should figure out countermeasures so as to respond to those hardships that resist transition. For example, during the pandemic, social distancing and national lockdowns inevitably impacted the company's brick-and-mortar stores and it saw a massive number of consumers selecting online shopping. Therefore, the company has transformed many of its offline activities to online, saving operation money and creating more transactions. Take China as an example. E-commerce platforms such as Tmall of Alibaba, and JD.com, have already become the top priority when it comes to shopping. And its own application in Apple Store also went into effect, improving its sales and generating more profitability.

And the third step focuses on refreezing and stabilizing the new status quo by making permanent change and establishing a new norm (Cameron & Green, 2020). Against this circumstance, such transformation should be embedded into the organizational culture, and the status quo should be reinforced and consolidated. When Adidas really realized its goal—the largest sportswear company in the world, the company needs to spend more efforts on how to avoid returning to the old ways of doing things and keep innovating.

2.3 Stakeholders Analysis

Mendelow (1981) suggests stakeholders should be analyzed on the basis of power (the ability to decide the development strategy or programs and interest (how interested they are in the business or following programs). And the Mendelow's matrix classifies stakeholders into four types: high power and high interest—these people should be managed closely and be satisfied as much as possible, high power and low interest—enough work (but not too much) should be put in to satisfy them, low power and high interest—these stakeholders only need to be informed adequately so as to prevent major issues from happening, and low power and low interest—they only keep an eye on the business to check whether their interest or power has changed or not (**Barrington, 2020**).

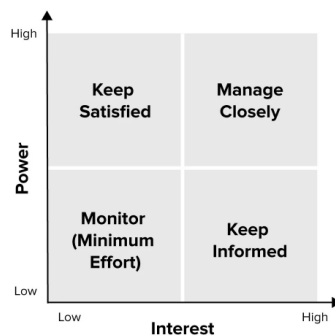


Figure 8: Mendelow's matrix

High power and high interest stakeholders always include shareholders, investors and executive managers. This is also the same for Adidas since they are the most important and powerful stakeholders who can determine the future development of the company. Thus, they should be managed closely to stay away from sensitive topics such as political issue and racism. For instance, Adidas has terminated its cooperation with Kanye West who published antisemitic comments. In fact, Kanye's social media

accounts including Instagram and Twitter were all banned before for his hateful speeches (BBC, 2022). Such a scandal would be a catastrophe for any brand, and without doubt, it leads to a significant loss of Adidas. Therefore, stakeholder with strong power and high interest should be managed tightly.

High power and less interest stakeholders of Adidas involve governments and media to name a few. The company should also make sure they are all satisfied, otherwise they will ruin the transition, just like what happened in China. Because of the controversial statement made by the company, it was not only criticized by the Chinese government, but also boycotted on social media by Chinese consumers who felt offensive and irritated after reading the report about the company blaming the country for forcing Uyghurs to work (Bain, 2021). As a result, such a political controversy has impeded the transformation of the company, and dealt a heavy blow to it.

Low power and high interest normally are customers, low-ranking employees, suppliers and franchisers who pay much attention to the business since they are either highly intertwined with the company, or eager to purchase some new and creative products. Considering their low power, they will not play a big role in determining the company's development. And thus, the company only needs to keep them informed.

And the low power and low interest for Adidas are small communities, non-governmental organizations (NGO), charities and its competitors such as Nike, Anta, and Li-Ning. As they have no impact on decision-making process, there is no need to spend too much time and energy on them. It is enough to keep them monitored.

3. Conclusion

In accordance with the Lewin's force field analysis, Adidas now faces not only three challenges that serve as a warning-call for it to accelerate the transition, but also three hardships that are resisting factors for the transition. The first driving force is its strong competitors including Nike, Li-Ning and Anta who are catching up and even outnumbering Adidas in terms of market share, especially in China where most of its transactions occur. The second driving force is the dramatic sales decline for the company during the previous couple of years when the COVID-19 pandemic remained recurrent and a political dispute about the Xinjiang cotton and labor force was igniting on Chinese social media. And the company terminated its cooperative ties with Kanye West, leading to an enormous loss due to a stockpile of Yeezy and related products. And its racial comments on the internet also posed a negative impact on the company's brand image. And the third driving force is its shared values among all its workers, from high-ranking managers to low-ranking employees. And it is the shared values among them that inspired them to break the equilibrium to realize the change, becoming the world's largest sportswear manufacturer. As for the resisting force, the first is the political controversy about the Xinjiang cotton which Adidas stated in its 2020 annual report that it has stopped sourcing Xinjiang cotton. As a result, a boycott among Chinese consumers occurred. Then second resisting factor is the pandemic that resulted in the closure of over 70% Adidas stores, the sharp sales decline, and the nosedive profitability. And the last resisting force is the changing consumer behavior due to the pandemic. Nowadays, people prefer to purchase daily necessities and health-promoting products

rather than apparel and footwear. Thus, the company should follow the Lewin's three-step model to realize a transition by first unfreezing and breaking its equilibrium, then responding to all hardships and finally achieving its goal to become the largest sports company. And it also should manage their stakeholders well since those high power ones may impede the transition if they are not well-informed.

4. Recommendation

The first recommendation for Adidas is to keep distance from sensitive and political issues not only in China, but the whole world. Since sales in China account for a major part of its total sales both in Asia and the world, the company should always keep an eye on the red line of the country—territorial integrity and sovereignty. The accuse of the government coercing Xinjiang labor force totally violates such a red line. And the company should never follow suit. Instead, it at least should maintain a sound relationship with the local government since it can be the most powerful stakeholder based on the above analysis. By doing so, the boycott will diminish and its sales will also bounce back, promoting the transition.

And the second recommendation for the company is to enhance creativity. It recently has released many hoodies and sneakers related to guochao, an emerging trend in China, which means traditional Chinese style. And now it has become one the top priorities for Adidas, arousing quite good praise globally. With more novel and innovative design, it will eventually realize its transition to be the world's largest sports company.

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