

COM 621  
Case Study Analysis – Final  
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# Case Study Analysis

## Final Paper

Case Study Topic: The former creative director of esteemed streetwear brand Supreme, Tremaine Emory, steps down from the creative director role and sights systematic racism as his decision to leave the brand. Supreme disagrees with the reasoning, causing fashion media to invest in the breakdown of the relationship between streetwear's brightest star and streetwear's most significant brand.

## Executive Summary:

Tremain Emory, a highly sought-after designer and fashion brand founder joined Supreme, a streetwear brand that has a global influence in both fashion and pop culture, in February of 2022. Emory's role within the streetwear company was to serve as the creative director – a role new to Supreme and never-before seen in streetwear brands. In the role of creative director, Emory would work alongside the founder of Supreme on each collection (Maoui, 2022). Additionally, it was thought that under Emory's direction that the brand would move away from solely collaborating with mainstream brands like Timeberland, The North Face, and Nike and work closer with much smaller or even unknown brands and artist. In the past, Supreme had relied heavily on logo-based items – the logo is of the brand name in minimal white Futura font with a red rectangle background (Maoui, 2022). However, Ross Wilson, an avid supporter of Supreme who was interviewed by GQ, believed Tremain Emory's addition to the brand brought promise of less reliance on the Supreme logo and more diverse collaborators (Maoui, 2022). Nevertheless, before the release of his first collaboration with Supreme, Tremain Emory stepped down from the role of creative director in late summer of 2023 due to what he cites as systematic racism. Emory believed that the collaboration that he brokered with artist Arthur Jafa whose photographic work depicts harsh yet historic graphics of enslaved and freed Africans was canceled due to Supreme's willingness to side with another black employee's disdain of the graphic photos compared to trusting and complying with his creative direction. The aftermath of Emory's resignation from the brand played out on Instagram with a post from Emory's account detailing his disapproval of Supreme's choice to halt and/or cancel the

collaboration (Instagram - @tremaineemory), following a storm of media outlets reporting on the crisis.

#### Introduction/Background:

Founded in 1994 by James Jebbia, in Soho, New York City, the brand Supreme has developed into a brand synonymous with streetwear. Streetwear is casual clothing that reflects the current cultural landscape. Streetwear is often size-inclusive, gender-neutral, and made by-worn by people of color. It is heavily influenced by both hip-hop/rap and skateboard culture and can be linked back to the influence of black culture (zeitgeist). Streetwear mixes comfort with self-expression and commonly consist of sweatshirts/hoodies, t-shirts, sweatpants, and sneakers. Streetwear has grown to become exclusive with a high demand, by 2017 streetwear entered the high-end and luxury goods arena boosting global sales of luxury goods (BOF, 2017).

Heritage brands, a specific category of luxury goods, are brands that creates a narrative about its history and leverages that for marketing purposes – Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Hermés, etc. – use their history to communicate and market their products (Dion, 2021). Heritage brands, also referred to as fashion houses, have turned their focus to the new average consumer, millennials and gen-z, with invitations to sit front-row at their prestigious fashion shows, partnering with social media influencers, collaborating with popular non-heritage brands, and expanding their communication strategy to reach their new average consumer (BOF, 2017).

In January of 2017, Supreme unveiled a collaboration with heritage brand Louis Vuitton, a juxtaposition of high-end t-shirts, sweatshirts, and skateboard accessories with Louis Vuitton pricing (Wilson, 2017). This collaboration thrust Supreme into becoming a streetwear conglomerate and in 2022 hired its first creative director, Tremaine Emory. Unlike other streetwear brands, having a creative director mirrored Supreme after the heritage fashion brands. A creative director is responsible for shaping and establishing the brand's vision and is the lead on collaborations with other labels that fits the brand's aesthetic. Tremaine Emory took on the role of creative director on February 16, 2022.

Tremaine Emory, a designer and fashion label founder, is a key player in the world of streetwear fashion. Prior to stepping into the role of creative director at Supreme, the brand repositioned the role of brand director to creative director as Emory's creative endeavors has made him a widely sought-after figure in streetwear (Maoui, 2022). Emory honed his design skills under the tutelage of designer Marc Jacobs and previously served as the brand-director-at-large for Stüssy, a brand that Supreme owes its origins to (Maoui, 2022).

Emory is the founder of Denim Tears, a denim brand that began in 2019 that has a signature flower foliage applied to the brand's denim jackets and jeans. His brand is infused with historical references, specifically that of the plight within the African diaspora. Just as Supreme has widen the scope of its brand through collaboration, Emory is not new to collaborations as his brand Denim Tears has collaborated with many well-known brands, like Ugg, the luxury brand Off-White, and Levi, to name a few (Maoui, 2022). Specifically, the collaboration

between Denim Tears and Levi, explored the historical relationship between cotton and African Americans/West Indians with the clothing items being decorated with Denim Tears signature flower foliage portraying a *Gossypium* flower, a species of cotton picked by enslaved Africans and exported during the American and European slave trade.

Functioning in the role of the creative director for Supreme, Emory worked to broker collaborations with lesser-known brands and artist. Particularly, Tremaine Emory began work to bring to fruition a Supreme collaboration with artist Arthur Jafa. This truncated collaboration ultimately led to Emory's decision to step down from Supreme as creative director in August 2023 and site systematic racism, policies and practices that exist within an organization that support unfair advantages for some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race (Wikipedia.com, Institutional racism, 2023), as his reasoning for leaving the brand (Greenberger, 2023).

#### Case Evaluation:

Artist collaborations is not a new phenomenon for the Supreme brand. The brand has previously collaborated with artist, majority graffiti artist and pop culture/skateboard culture/hip-hop culture photographers, to produce exclusive t-shirts and hoodies. So, despite the content of the art in the collaboration brokered under Emory's creative direction, utilizing artistic work from Arthur Jafa did not stray from the brand's identity. Arthur Jafa's artistic works references and question the universal and specific articulations of black beings. Jafa's most notable work is a photograph titled *Ex-Slave Gordon*, a photograph that Emory hoped to use

that depicts a freed slave male with whip lashing scars on his back (MCA Chicago). Additionally, according to Alex Greenberger of Art News, Tremaine had also hoped to use an Arthur Jafa photograph that depicted black men being hung in the collaboration. Luke Leitch of Vogue Business, stated in an article “Supreme has historically used provocative imagery to promote its radical image and Emory planned to harness that heritage to Jafa’s imagery in order to ‘paint the black experience on clothing’” (Leitch, 2023).

Work on the Arthur Jafa and Supreme collaboration began in April of 2023, but by August of 2023 the Jafa images had been pulled and the project was prevented from moving forward. Emory explained in an Instagram post that detailed his dismay for the halting of the project and later his resignation from the role of creative director, that the Founder of Supreme, James Jabbia informed Emory that the collaboration was canceled due to two black employees of Supreme expressing disdain over the use of Arthur Jafa images (Leitch, 2023). Later in that Instagram post Emory stated “...systemic racism that lies deep within supreme an almost all white owned corporations. I wanted to work with supreme to change these things and instead I told I was racially charged, emotional...” Furthermore, in an interview with Vogue Business’ Luke Leitch concerning his resignation from Supreme, Emory divulged that he was not made aware of the cancelation of the collaboration until four months after the start of the processing for the collab. Additionally, he felt slighted due to his colleagues (especially those colleagues in the C-Suite of Supreme) talking behind his back about the cancelation of collaboration rather than speaking to him directly – Emory categorized this a systematic racism (Leitch, 2023).

Recalling the aforementioned accepted definition of systematic racism as policies and practices that exist within an organization that support unfair advantages for some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race. While Supreme's acknowledgement of their other black employee's response to the Arthur Jafa images and choosing to halt the collaboration does not explicitly connect with the definition of systematic racism, Emory acknowledgment that Supreme is a white corporation that may have benefited from a change may serve as evidence that systematic racism is at play in this crisis. Nevertheless, it is unclear where the line can be drawn to assume systematic racism.

As the resignation of Tremaine Emory announcement hit social media platforms and fashion media outlets, Supreme originally remained silent on Emory's resignation but days following Emory's end as creative director, Supreme vehemently disagreed with the cause of Emory's departure from the brand and insisted that that collaboration had not been halted or canceled but instead unreleased (Greenberger, 2023 & Leitch, 2023).

Multiple fashion media outlets and social media platforms reported on the Supreme and Tremaine Emory story drawing additional attention to possible systematic racism and overall end of creative direction of the brand. Think-pieces were produced concerning the brand's collaboration with Arthur Jafa on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Nevertheless, the media seemed to place majority of the blame on Tremaine Emory, while a few outlets found Supreme liable for unfairly prohibiting Emory from functioning in the role of creative director and stopping a collaboration that could have brought about insightful dialogue. On the other hand,

most fashion media and social media outlets placed accountability on Tremaine Emory with the belief of his collaborative efforts and creative direction was simply not on brand with Supreme's established brand, and systematic racism may have not truly been the cause of the demise of the Arthur Jafa collaboration and Tremaine Emory's want to step down from the creative director role. One TikTok creator HeyJodye (@heyjodye) began a discourse about Tremaine Emory stepping down from Supreme due to systematic racism with "...need people to stop weaponizing black outrage for their own selfish reasons." HeyJodye posted alongside his TikTok video "Systematic racism is an issue all the time, not when it's convenient." Another TikTok creator, Jesica (@jesicaelise) argued against both Supreme and Tremaine Emory summing up that context is stripped at every level of the crisis. She stated "Supreme has stripped black culture from streetwear and attempted to bring black culture back to the brand by hiring Tremaine Emory. While Tremaine has stripped the incredible context of Arthur Jafa's work to put it on clothes [for white and non-black consumers to wear]." Much of the discourse that found Tremaine at fault spoke on his other business and even personal endeavors that provided a cause to silence his claims of systematic racism with Supreme. Furthermore, it is important to mention that most of the discourse against Emory's claims of systematic racism was brought about by black and brown creators and journalists.

At no point did a representative, public relations (PR) practitioner or human relations (HR) specialist, speak further to the claims of Tremaine besides disagreeing with his claims of systematic racism and informing that the collaboration with Arthur Jafa was unreleased rather than canceled.

### Proposed Solution and Public Relations Theoretical Frameworks :

A key solution to the Supreme and Tremaine Emory issue is understanding the organization's public. Supreme's global brand at its core is a balance between skateboard culture and hip-hop/rap culture. On the other hand, Tremaine Emory's brand, Denim Tears, infuses historical references of that of the African diaspora's plight. Although a delicate balance may be able to be struck between the global brand and Emory's personal brand – both entities possess converging brand identities. Understanding Supreme's consumer's wants may have been the issue with Tremaine Emory as the creative director. Instead of using his creative direction from a point of reference of a typical Supreme customer, Tremaine may have instead been brokering collaborations and exercising his creative direction for a Denim Tears customer [who may occasionally wear Supreme]. Essentially, Emory may have been using his creative direction for his ideal customer or the public, rather than the customer and a public that Supreme has.

In *Looking back and going forward: The concept of the public in public relations theory*, the author Magda Pieczka informs that *the public* is a collective noun for the rational and autonomous citizens of a modern society. However, John Dewey distinguishes the term public into two contrasting concepts: *the public* and *a public*. *The public* is considered an ideal type rather than an empirical phenomenon. On the other hand, *a public* is concrete and embodied. Dewey informs that there is multiple *a publics* in society (Pieczka, 2019). The contrasting concepts is that the public might be, what is idealistic, or easier to conceptualize for a creative director function. Whereas a public is tangible or what truly exist.

Another key solution to the Supreme and Tremaine Emory crisis is time. Supreme may have been able to avoid some of the backlash that was received if their PR or HR function would have released a statement detailing the timeline and reasoning causing Tremaine Emory choice to step down from the role of creative director. However, due to the lack of Supreme providing additional information and guidance in a timely manner on Tremaine Emory's creative director role, media was able to infiltrate the story and crisis ensued for Supreme.

Timing is one of the most important aspects of handling a crisis. According to Timothy Coombs' article *State of Crisis Communication: Evidence and the Bleeding Edge*, timing is the "stealing thunder" of crisis communication (Coombs, 2014). Stealing thunder in crisis communication concludes that the organization amid a crisis should be the first to address the emerging issues. When an organization reports on an issue first, less damage is incurred, compared to that of a media outlet reporting first on the crisis (Coombs, 2014). Time is of the essence during a crisis. An organization's and/or PR practitioners use of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory framework to build a crisis strategy helps an organization buy back time during a crisis (Amaresan, 2023).

In comparison, creative director Alessandro Michele stepped down from his role at the luxury brand Gucci on November 23, 2022, due to tensions with Gucci's parent company Kering (Spencer & Aloisi, 2022). The CEO of Kering addressed the creative director's departure from the brand with this press release on the same day of Michele's departure: "I am grateful to Alessandro for bringing so much of himself in this adventure," said François-Henri Pinault,

chairman and CEO of Kering in a statement, referring to the designer's tenure as "an outstanding moment" in the label's history (Spencer & Aloisi, 2022). The CEO responding in a timely manner in addressing Alessandro's exit from Gucci allowed for the conversation about the brand to pivot.

In the realm of public relations, the departure of a creative director from a luxury brand, as illustrated by Alessandro Michele's exit from Gucci, underscores the critical importance of effective communication and strategic messaging. The statement issued by François-Henri Pinault, the CEO of Kering, played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative surrounding Michele's departure. Pinault's expression of gratitude and acknowledgment of Michele's contributions was a strategic move to reassure stakeholders and the public. By promptly addressing the departure and emphasizing Michele's significant impact on the brand, Pinault redirected the conversation toward the brand's future trajectory. This approach allowed for a smoother transition in public perception and provided an opportunity to discuss the upcoming collections and the creative direction the fashion house intended to pursue. The incident highlights the strategic role of public relations in managing the fallout from key organization changes within a brand, demonstrating that open and timely communication can help control the narrative and maintain confidence in the brand's continued success.

### Conclusion:

The Supreme and Tremaine Emory case presents a complex intersection of creative direction, cultural representation, and organizational dynamics. Tremaine Emory's departure from Supreme, citing systematic racism as the catalyst, has ignited discussions surrounding the brand's commitment to diversity, collaboration, and artistic expression.

The case evaluation highlights the tension between Emory's vision on collaborations, particularly with artist Arthur Jafa, and the apparent reluctance within the organization to fully embrace these directions. The controversy surrounding the cancellation or unreleased collaboration and the subsequent public discourse have raised questions about the brand's commitment to addressing systemic racism.

The lack of a timely and transparent response from Supreme's public relations or human relations teams allowed external narratives to dominate the conversation. The importance of timely crisis communication, as emphasized by Coombs, becomes evident, as the absence of a proactive response allowed speculation and criticism to gain momentum.

Furthermore, the case underscores the significance of understanding the organization's publics. Supreme's global brand identity, rooted in skateboard and hip-hop culture, requires a delicate balance when introducing creative directions that incorporate historical references, as seen in Emory's work with Denim Tears. Aligning the creative director's vision with the expectations

and preferences of Supreme's diverse consumer base is crucial for maintaining brand authenticity.

As proposed solutions, the case suggests that effective crisis communication strategies, grounded in frameworks like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, can help organizations regain control of the narrative during challenging times. Additionally, understanding and bridging the gap between the creative director's individual brand identity and the overall brand identity of the organization is essential for creating successful collaborations and preventing potential conflicts.

Drawing a parallel with Alessandro Michele's departure from Gucci, the case underscores the importance of swift and strategic communication from organizational leadership. The CEO's timely address of Michele's exit allowed for a smoother transition and steered the conversation toward the brand's future direction, offering a valuable lesson for Supreme in handling similar situations.

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