Damned if you do. Damned if you don't.
H&M's challenge in establishing a sustainable reputation.

TEACHING NOTES

Teaching plan

This teaching note aims to assist presenters in teaching the case of H&M's challenge in establishing a positive reputation by providing guidance on how to approach and present the case. It outlines the learning objectives and pertinent theoretical frameworks that can help instructors teach students about the case's main perspectives. Further, it provides recommendations on what to focus on when discussing the case, as well as suggestions on how to make the discussion engaging and unpredictable. Finally, a board plan is provided, including potential key takeaways to keep in mind during preparation, to facilitate an overview of the discussion.

Case synopsis

The present case illustrates the situation of H&M which, despite its unmatched sustainability efforts, struggles to create a positive brand image and associations with sustainability. In reaction to their green initiatives, H&M has repeatedly been accused of greenwashing, as well as environmental pollution and worker exploitation. *Damned if they do, damned if they don't* represent the dilemma of implementing a sustainability positioning within an industry that may be argued to be naturally unsustainable and aims at answering the question of whether or not to be vocal about one's sustainability. It sheds light on the pitfalls of sustainability communication and shows how greenwashing breaks brand promise and trust. The case is protagonised by the (fictitious) CEO of H&M, discussing the future brand strategy with her executive team:

Should H&M communicate about their sustainability efforts? And how should they talk about it?

Learning objectives

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix

Urde's (2021) remarks on brands provide an excellent basis to comprehend the recurring backlash H&M is facing for their sustainability practices:

> "Fundamentally, a brand is a promise, and a strong brand is one with a clear positioning and an earned reputation for keeping its promise. A promise kept builds trust and helps an organisation reach its goals and stay true to its purpose."(Urde, 2021, p. 1)

H&M has an earned reputation for offering the latest styles at affordable prices. However, affordability makes for only a fragment of the core values of the brand. The brand defines its DNA as a combination of price, quality, and sustainability. H&M's promise is to transform not only itself, but the entire fashion industry. Several accusations of greenwashing and malpractice, however, have cast a shadow on H&M's credibility. In order to rebuild trust and a corresponding reputation, the company must constantly ensure to keep its promise to build a strong brand.

This demands for further examination of the corporate brand identity, as for which Urde's (2013) Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) serves as a fundamental model. It provides a systematic overview of the corporate brand identity, and how it can be built and maintained. The matrix emphasises the interrelation of nine elements that make up an identity. At the centre of the CBIM, the brand core consists of the brand promise and core values that are echoed in the external elements. Similarly, the surrounding elements reflect and reinforce the core.

The CBIM is surrounded by two external layers, which are communication and reputation, further examined in the extended Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM), **see Figure 1**. The CBIRM provides a profound understanding of how H&M's sustainability strategy is perceived by external stakeholders, by analysing not only the brand's identity but also its reputation. It provides a managerial framework that structures and supports the management of corporate brand identity and reputation, involving the definition, alignment, and development of the corporate brand. By linking the internal perspective of managing corporate brand identity with the external perspective of brand reputation management, which includes communication, the CBIRM offers further helpful insights for case solving. By applying the CBIRM model to the H&M brand (**see Figure 2**), the key influences on the brand's reputation can be identified, providing an understanding of what needs to be improved in future sustainability communication. Furthermore, it provides insight into whether or not H&M should continue to be vocal about their initiatives.
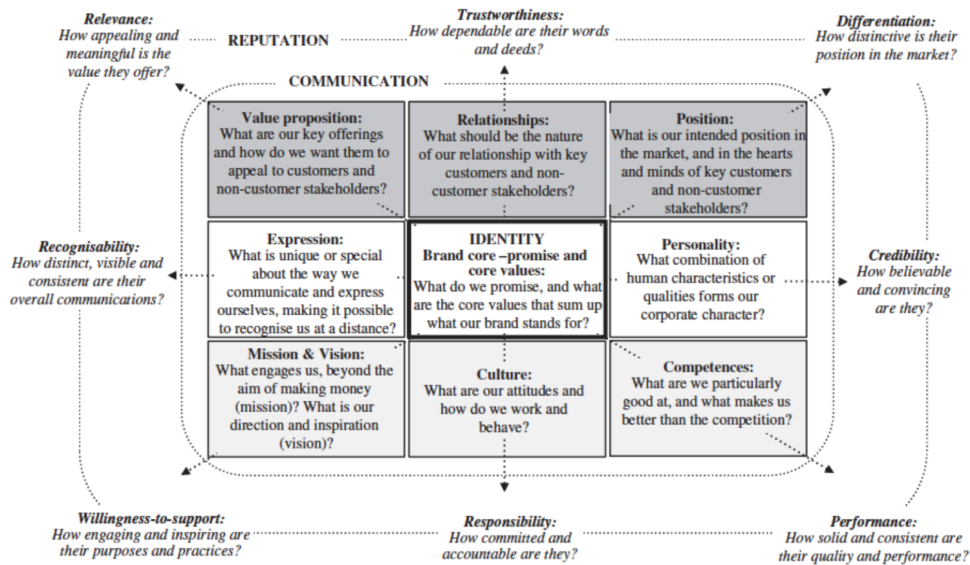
Figure 1: The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

An examination of the interaction vertical, comprising relationships, culture, and the brand core, reveals that although the brand is committed to its objectives, it falls short of delivering on its promised values and metrics. This suggests that H&M has weak relationships with both internal and external stakeholders concerning its sustainability efforts, requiring improvement. To enhance these relationships, H&M must promise only what it can implement and communicate honestly, regaining trust in the brand's mission to change the industry for the better.
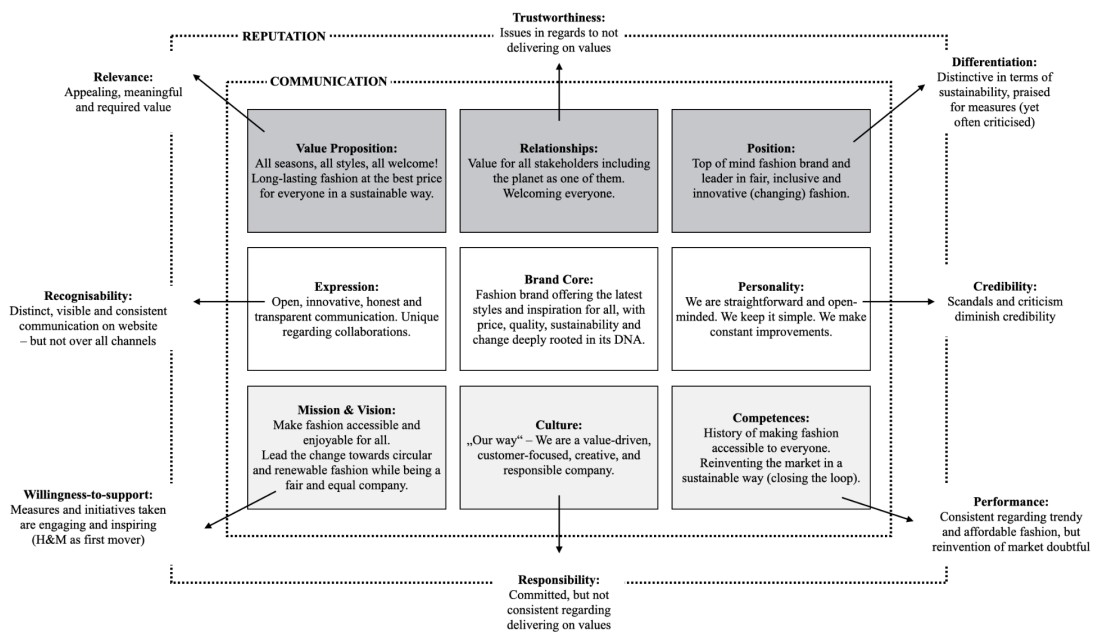

Figure 2: The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix of H&M

Moreover, analysing the character horizontal of the model, stretching in between expression, brand core, and personality, underscores how H&M's credibility and transparent communication have been compromised by the past scandals. Furthermore, to ensure recognisability, it is advised to communicate all values consistently across all channels.

Both relevance and differentiation underscore that H&M is implementing significant and necessary measures concerning sustainability, which could result in a positive external reputation for the company. This indicates that it is not merely a matter of being vocal but rather communicating prudently to avoid further accusations of consumer deception.

The brand core demonstrates that sustainability is deeply rooted in H&M's DNA, emphasising that the brand should not cease to promote its sustainability measures as it constitutes a fundamental aspect of its identity. Nonetheless, as mentioned briefly in the introduction of this chapter, the inherent conflict between fast fashion and sustainability represents a pressing issue for H&M that must be resolved.

Vision-culture-image model

The gaps between H&M's sustainable self-image and the criticism it receives from the public indicate that the vision-culture-image (VCI) model, framed by Hatch and Schultz (2001, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012), could be of use in achieving a better understanding of the strategic problems the brand faces. The model's three dimensions *vison, culture, and image* are key aspects to create a strong brand. The *vision* dimensions consist of the top management's ambitions for the company. The *culture* dimension is the employee's shared understanding of values, behaviours and attitudes when working for the company. Lastly, the *image* dimension consists of the outside world's overall impression of the brand, meaning the shared impression of all external stakeholders. The VCI-model shows how the brand's promise must resonate with the public's actual brand experience. If there is a gap between these two dimensions the corporate brand is weakened, according to Hatch and Schultz.

Understanding the VCI-model enables an analysis of the problems H&M is experiencing, as there is a clear gap between the top management's *vision* of the company and the *image* the external stakeholders have of the company's sustainability. The problem is aggravated by differing stakeholder perceptions. The authors imply that the corporate brand should mean the same to all stakeholder groups - which has not been the case in the past, when end-consumers and experts often had differing perceptions regarding the credibility of H&M's sustainability initiatives, as in the case of H&M's *Conscious Collection* that was hailed by some, yet

criticised for promoting overconsumption. The VCI-model facilitates the location of the problem. Closing the gaps is difficult. However, Davies and Chun (2002, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012) point out the power of the employees' positive image of the brand, stating that the positive view of the employees can be passed on to stakeholders which could improve the brand reputation in the long term.

An example of a radical approach to closing the gaps is Patagonia. The company owner has recently donated the company to the Patagonia Foundation, ensuring that all profits of the company would be forwarded to tackle climate change. By communicating the commitment both the *vision* and *culture* dimensions became aligned and by communicating the decision the company managed to close the gap to their *image* as well, to be perceived as a sustainable brand.

Substance

To further elevate an understanding of the challenges H&M is facing, one may investigate the four contexts of *authenticity,* as described by Greyser (2009). Greyser claims that perceived authenticity goes hand in hand with a good reputation. The four different contexts of *authenticity* are all connected by communication and play a main role in successfully building, maintaining and defending a good reputation (Greyser, 2009). Greyser highlights how the *substance* is the fundamental base to build *authenticity* and should be the base for all corporate communication.

1. The first context of *authenticity* refers to "*talking authentic*", meaning that all communication must be based on substance. Understanding this concept of authenticity enables us to comprehend the risk of greenwashing, and how it can destroy H&M's reputation when the messages are not perceived as authentic.

2. The second context is "*being authentic*", referring to the core values, as well as the corporation's track record and behaviour. In the case of H&M, the problem does not lie within the brand's core values, as sustainability is part of their brand core. However, due to a problematic track record, the company struggles with being perceived as such.

3. The third context is "*staying authentic*", meaning that if a corporation has become authentic, their actions need to be in line with the core values they have communicated previously to also be perceived as authentic, explaining why the scandals, such as the 2022 lawsuits, are so highly hurtful to H&M's reputation and perceived authenticity.

4. The fourth and last context is "*defending authenticity*", referring to the protection of the reputation in times of trouble. Greyser (2009) emphasises the necessity for a *reputational reservoir,* meaning trust generated over time. This context sheds light on H&M's biggest problem, being that the scandals and accusations have impeded the building of a reputational reservoir that could help the brand in

future times of crisis. What H&M, therefore, has to focus on - according to the theory - is to emphasise on substance, by ensuring the honesty and factuality of the communicated measures.

Dimensions of Corporate Responsibility

Roper and Fill (2012) provide four dimensions of corporate responsibility messages that can aid in understanding why H&M's communication is not succeeding in improving their image. According to the authors, the four dimensions are *accuracy, timely, transparency,* and *credibility. Accuracy* means that the information communicated is correct. It can either be voluntarily communicated or as a response. For H&M this dimension is ambiguous as the company communicates that they are truthful, yet the opposite has been proven several times.

The second dimension is *timely.* Being *timely* means that the messages of the corporation are released in sync with actions and efforts made to keep stakeholders informed. It can be observed that H&M has improved its *timely* dimension, as the company has started to actively inform about its sustainability efforts rather than only responding to accusations.

H&M has recently made several actions to become more transparent, which is in line with Roper and Fill's (2012) third dimension, the *transparency* dimension, emphasising that the corporations' messages should be complete, relevant, and meaningful. To better understand the power of *transparency* one could examine the case of Domino's. The restaurant chain succeeded in building trust and reputation through a radically transparent campaign, sloganed "Sorry we suck". In the statement, the CEO highlighted and admitted to several wrongdoings of the company. As a result of the campaign, revenue numbers skyrocketed and customers returned, making the campaign an excellent example of how radical transparency can turn around a company's bad reputation.

The last dimension is *credibility.* Roper and Fill (2012) emphasise that credibility is built from transparency and acknowledgement from external experts and stakeholders. H&M is yet to fully succeed in this regard. One action that can be taken is mentioned by Doorley and Garcia (2007, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012), who suggests that *credibility* can be earned by recognising and admitting to the problem. For H&M it would be to address the problematic nature of fast fashion and the steps the company takes to overcome it in its pursuit to become sustainable. Furthermore, they could recognise how sustainability and profitability counteract each other in the fast fashion industry.

Prisoner's Dilemma

In recent years, fast fashion retailers seem to have understood the lucrativeness of cashing in on the societal sustainability trend. As previously discussed, many, if not most, have faced greenwashing accusations for not backing their communications with (enough) substance, fuelling a general consumer distrust

towards sustainability initiatives of fashion companies. Similarities may be drawn to the economic concept of the *tragedy of commons*, framed by Garrett Hardin in a 1968 essay. The narrative describes a situation where individuals, acting in their own self-interest, exploit a shared resource, leading to its depletion or degradation through their uncoordinated action (Hardin, 1968). There are two ways of applying this theorem to the case of H&M. On the one hand, consumer trust could be regarded as an exploited resource. On a mission to create a sustainable brand image and revenue, H&M and its competitors are exploiting the sustainability topic in their own interest, often breaking promises by deceiving customers. H&M's struggle with establishing a sustainable reputation may be amplified by the negative reputation of the industry it operates in and the distrust resulting from trust exploitation may transfer between brands. On the other hand, sustainability itself may be regarded as an exploited good. The industry's intense competition has led to a downward price spiral, allowing for only little improvements without risking diminishing profits. If the common good of sustainability is to be preserved, competitors must consequently agree on ending the spiral for the greater good. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of this so-called co-opetition, defined in Harvard Business Review as "cooperating with a competitor to achieve a common goal or get ahead" (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 2021, n.p.), it may help to turn away from management theory for a moment and turn towards an infamous 1950s game theory: the prisoner's dilemma (Flood, Dresher, Tucker, & Device, 1950). The problem illustrates how two individuals might not cooperate even if it appears that it is in both of their best interests to do so.

The scenario known as the Prisoner's Dilemma revolves around two men who have been charged with a crime and are being held in separate cells. The rules of the game are as follows: (1) If neither of them confesses, both receive a short sentence. (2) If both of them confess, both receive a longer sentence. (3) Finally, if one confesses and the other does not, the one who confesses will go free while the other will receive a life sentence. The best outcome for both men would be to cooperate and remain silent, resulting in a short sentence for both of them. However, from a self-interested perspective, each individual is incentivised to confess, as this ensures they avoid the worst possible outcome of a life sentence. As a result, the logical but suboptimal outcome is for both to confess, resulting in a longer sentence for both and a less desirable overall outcome. Clearly, there are no prisoners taken in fashion. However, or maybe rather: therefore, what the industry can learn from the model is the necessity of joining forces in achieving a common goal - and the importance of unhindered communication. If real changes to the industry are to be made competitors must work together and communicate openly, to ensure the best outcome for all parties involved. In forming a strategic alliance, fast fashion competitors could, for example, tackle the ecological and economical problem of overproduction by reducing the number of collections and items per collection, a step already taken by luxury fashion retailers during the Covid pandemic. The latter was very positively perceived by consumers

Key learning objectives

The key learning points are presented in **Table 1** which is based on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). The table is structured with measurable factors to indicate the level of understanding required for the different objectives of the H&M case. The aim is to provide a case for students with practical and theoretical implications that is presented in a clear and comprehensible manner.

Category:	Learning Point:	Description
Remembering	*...how H&M used sustainability initiatives to improve their reputation*	*Communicated efforts had a reversed effect and rather fuelled critics to find sustainability errors in H&M's practises and supply chain.*
Understanding	*... the importance of comprehending different forces in a business model.*	*For the fast fashion industry profitability and sustainability are two factors that counteract each other and therefore create turbulence within companies.*
Applying	*... key brand management models and concepts to create strategic actions that can improve a fast fashion brand's reputation.*	*Utilise: The brand idendity and repuation matrix by Urde & Greyser (2016). The four dimensions of corporate sustainability messages by Roper and Fill (2012). Greyser's (2009) four context of authenticity. Hatch & Schultz (2001) VCI model. Lastly the prisoner's dilemma.*
Evaluating	*...the management decisions that have been made and what effects they will have for the reputation short- and long-term.*	*The H&M management decisions taken for the future, how the decisions are going to impact the reputation in the future and what potential backlashes it could have.*
Creating	*... strategies for short- and long-term improvements of brand reputation that is suitable for the fast fashion industry. Include an action-plan.*	*Create a sustainable plan for H&M that can be implemented by the executive team for an improved reputation.*

Table 1: Key learning points

Discussion questions

Main question

You are part of H&M's executive team and asked about your opinion. Should H&M continue to be vocal about their sustainability efforts?

Assisting questions

1. How can H&M as a fast fashion retailer (re)build a positive brand image?

2. What short- and long-term strategies should H&M implement?

Teaching suggestions

The following section offers recommendations to the teacher on how to prepare and present the case effectively. The objective is to achieve a deep understanding of the case, to facilitate a productive discussion, and to attain the case's goals and learning objectives.

Pre-presentation

Before the case discussion, the class should be given the preparation material, which consists of the written case, telling the background and defining the problem. To ensure adequate preparation, the material should be distributed at least 24 hours in advance of the case discussion.

To ensure a successful case presentation, the teacher should follow a structured preparation process. Firstly, the teacher should read and understand the written case along with the management decision to gather relevant information for the class discussion. Additionally, the teacher should also review the teaching notes provided to gain a clear understanding of the case's purpose and to implement the writers' suggestions. After reviewing the teaching notes, the teacher should plan how to structure the presentation and discussion. The plan should outline the case's structure, the order in which information will be presented, how to manage time (**see chapter on time plan**) and lead the discussion effectively. The teacher may also need to prepare suitable visual aids, such as PowerPoint presentations, including videos, pictures, screenshots, etc., to enhance the class's understanding.

Moreover, the teacher should have a plan for structuring and visualising the main and assisting answers provided, such as including them in the presentation, writing them on a whiteboard, and preparing the board plan.

Introducing the case

To begin the case with an icebreaker, the teacher could inquire how many students have visited an H&M store or online shop recently. This would introduce the topic of the case to the audience smoothly and help to create a relaxed atmosphere, especially for a group that may not be familiar with each other. Following the icebreaker, the presenter should proceed with the prepared case presentation.

Discussing the case

To prepare the class for an active discussion, it is advised to remind the class that they are taking on the role of the executive team of H&M and that they are free to take any position within the team. The discussion question should be prominently displayed and reiterated by the teacher prior to the discussion. Additionally, the presenter should ensure that the participants have a clear understanding of the case and the question posed by asking if any clarification is needed before initiating the discussion.

To facilitate and guide the discussion among the case participants, the teacher should take on the role of a neutral case mediator, open to every opinion and point of view expressed by the discussants. The assisting questions listed above can be used by the teacher to encourage a free-flowing discussion if necessary. The utilisation of visual tools, such as completing the board plan on a whiteboard, can assist the teacher in organising the responses during the case discussion in a structured manner. The teacher should also ensure that each group or participant has the opportunity to express their views, which may involve agreeing that participants raise their hands before speaking. The teacher may also actively encourage students that haven't actively taken part in the discussion yet. A diverse range of opinions and an engaged audience are important for a good discussion. When concluding the discussion, the teacher can summarise the key talking points and suggestions raised by the participants. Additionally, the presenter could facilitate a final vote among the class to establish a common consensus on the options developed.

Concluding the case

Once the designated time for the discussion phase is over, the teacher should summarise the discussion and transition to the conclusion phase. During this phase, the teacher should present the real-life management decision, possibly utilising the visual aids decided on during the pre-presentation phase. Additionally, the teacher could draw comparisons between the real measures taken and the solutions the class agreed upon.

After presenting the management decision, the teacher should encourage the class to share their thoughts and opinions on the company's decision in order to facilitate further discussion. To conclude the presentation, the teacher may ask the participants to share their main takeaways and document them, i.e. on a whiteboard. Finally, the presenter should thank the participants for their valuable contributions to the discussion.

Time plan

The following is a suggestion for structuring the case lesson regarding time and the different elements. **Figure 3** provides an overview of the time plan. When introducing the case, it may be added to a PowerPoint to clarify the agenda for the following 30 minutes. The first block should be no longer than four minutes and should provide information on the background and history of H&M. The second block is five minutes and should include the efforts, scandals, and dilemmas that H&M has faced and is still facing. The third block should continue for twelve minutes and introduces the main case question followed by the case discussion. In the fourth block, the real-life managerial decision is presented, taking four minutes time. The final block should include a short discussion, based on the knowledge of the managerial decision and conclude with comments from the discussions.

4 Minutes	5 Minutes	12 Minutes	4 Minutes	5 Minutes
Present H&M's Background	Explain H&M's dilemma, including efforts and scandals	Present main case question & execute discussion	Present managerial decision	Short discussion with managerial decisions in mind, conclude decisions

Figure 3: Time plan

Exemplary board plan

To ensure a successful in-class case presentation, it is essential that the teacher has a clear understanding of the key points that need to be emphasised during the discussion phase. We recommend that the presenter creates a preliminary board plan in advance, taking into account the main learning objectives that the case audience needs to achieve. **Figure 4** presents an illustrative board plan developed by the case writers, which incorporates the learning objectives derived from the above-mentioned theoretical concepts.

Options:	Short-term (1-6 months):	Long-term (6+ months):
Stop being vocal about sustainability measures	- reduce communication about initiatives over all channels - make improvements without publicising them.	- stop communication about initiatives over all channels - re-evaluate sustainability measures and their effectiveness
Being more transparent/honest about sustainability measures	- adapt existing communication to reality (no exaggeration) - communicate the challenges and progress made to the public - involve stakeholders in the process	- admit faults and limitations regarding measures - measure and report on sustainability performance - implement feedback mechanisms to involve stakeholders in the process
Communicating substance	- refocus communication efforts on the substance of sustainability measures and not just on marketing - use credible sources to back up claims	- creation of initiatives that reflect the values and promises of the brand - continuously improve and measure sustainability performance - use multiple communication channels to reach a wider audience
Sacrificing profit for purpose	- identify areas where profits can be sacrificed in order to implement more sustainable practices and communicate this commitment to stakeholders - reduce expenses that are not related to sustainability	- continue to prioritize purpose over profit, find new ways to balance sustainability goals with financial success - giving profits to the planet (e.g. Patagonia)
Co-opetition with industry leaders	- identify industry leaders who prioritize sustainability and explore partnerships and collaborations to drive progress - use joint communication channels to promote sustainability	- continue to collaborate and share best practices with industry leaders to drive meaningful change, communicate successes and challenges to stakeholders - advocate for sustainability policies and regulations

Figure 4: Exemplary board plan

Reflection

The master case series is part of the *Corporate Brand Management and Reputation* master-level course at Lund University, taught by professor Mats Urde and provided a rewarding and complex learning opportunity. The process of writing the present case was initiated by a brainstorming meeting, consisting of reviewing several cases and discussing the interests of the group members to find a suitable case to prepare. The first challenge was aligning our ambiguous thoughts regarding whether or not to choose an open or closed case. Finally, the dilemma nature of the H&M case, fuelling the reader's frustration, became one of the deciding factors, together with the group's interest in both fashion and sustainability.

The process of composing the case expeditiously further revealed the complexity of H&M's situation. By collecting and analysing data both concerning H&M's actions and efforts in sustainability, and the incidents and predicaments that have adversely impacted the company's reputation, a deep understanding of the case was developed, which was further strengthened by discussion among the case writers. One big challenge proved to be creating frustration among the readers by working out the interplay of actions and reactions, providing enough examples while still keeping it simple enough to follow along. The case writing consisted of reviewing the problems H&M faced in reaction to their actions and inactions and analysing the case from various perspectives. We identified that a fundamental problem lies in the nature of fast fashion, where sustainability and profitability are often regarded as counteracting concepts. By the end, the title of the case was decided to be *Damned if you do, damned if you don't*, describing the seemingly hopeless dilemma that H&M is facing.

The next challenge after the initial data gathering was the process to create a red thread with theories, creating a coherent and thrilling, yet highly informative storyline. As for the teaching note, relevant theoretical frameworks were discussed to achieve the goal of proving the reader with a deep understanding of the case, including practical and theoretical knowledge. The discussions revolved around the theoretical applicability of the theorems decided upon in the context of H&M's reputational challenge. An initial attempt to include Kapferer's (2012) brand identity prism, which aids in understanding a brand's identity in depth, was discarded for the V-C-I model. While it surely enables an interesting understanding of H&M's aspects, it did not fully resonate with the direction of the case to the same degree, which Hatch and Schultz' model does. Further research and discussions resulted in the choice of Roper and Fill's (2012) theories on the dilemmas of being vocal about CSR efforts and the dimensions of corporate responsibility messages, as well as the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix by Urde and Greyser (2016).

Writing the academic case improved several skills and taught us several lessons. The written case provided us with in-depth knowledge of the fast fashion industry and the problems its actors might be facing in the short- and long-run, when trying to establish a sustainable reputation. Furthermore, we got to learn about the critical reactions H&M has faced and still is facing, no matter how sustainable the initiatives might seem at first sight. Reflecting on the initiatives and reactions, we gained a deep understanding of the complexity of sustainability issues. Crafting the teaching note was a completely new and challenging task for us as master students, which allowed us to get an insight into the teacher's perspective. Writing this part of the assignment was an enriching experience that improved our critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Further, it taught us about how to incorporate theories in real-life scenarios which we - as future professionals - highly value and appreciate. Working on the different parts of the teaching note, such as the key learnings, insights and visuals we got to deeply reflect on our own learnings, adding further value to the case writing process. Composing the managerial decisions further enabled us to view and reflect upon H&M's actual strategy decision and the perspectives and practices of a professional brand leader, enabling great learning that we can return to in future for case-solving challenges. We found the challenge to provide us with a deeper general understanding of brand management as a whole; and more specifically of the dilemmas one could face in brand management, as well as the difficulty in managing reputation. To sum up, we enjoyed writing this wonderfully complex case and hope it will enable future students to get the same learning experience as we had.

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