

CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT AND REPUTATION

MASTER CASES



Making a Red Devil: The Case of Manchester United and Mason Greenwood

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Corporate Brand Management and Reputation: Master's Cases

The "Corporate Brand Management and Reputation: Master's cases" is a case series for applying the case method of teaching and learning in higher education. The cases are relevant to brand strategists in private and public sector organizations, as well as academics and students at universities, business schools, and executive education.

The cases are written by groups of master's students as a course project. The specially developed case format is defined as: *"A management decision case describes a real business situation leading up to a question(s) that requires assessment, analysis, and a decision reached by discussion in class. The alternative approaches and recommendations from the class discussion are followed by a description of the choices made by the case company. This description is then discussed by the class."*

The student groups select the topics of their case providing updated and relevant insights into the corporate brand management. The cases can be used as "written cases" (handed out and read in advance, later to be discussed in class) and/or as "live case" (presented by the teacher following a discussion in class). Each case includes teaching notes, visuals with speaker's notes, learning objectives, board plans, and references.

The mission of the series is *"to develop cases for discussion providing insights into the theory and practice of corporate brand management and reputation, with the intent of bridging the gap between academic teaching and managerial practice."*

The series is a result of co-creation between students and teachers at the elective course Corporate Brand Management (BUSN35 – five-credit course/eight-week half-time studies), part of the master's program International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund School of Economics and Management, Sweden. The cases represent the result of the intellectual work of students under the supervision of the head of course.

Although based on real events and despite references to actual companies, the cases are solely intended to be a basis for class discussion, not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. The cases are free to be used and are to be cited following international conventions.

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WRITTEN CASE

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Making a Red Devil: The Case of Manchester United and Mason Greenwood

On January 30th, 2022, the football world was rocked by the news of Mason Greenwood's arrest by Greater Manchester Police on allegations of a series of assaults, which surfaced via social media. The accusations, posted by his girlfriend, on Instagram, were accompanied by disturbing evidence in the form of video recordings, photographs, and audio clips. The posts included pictures and videos of injuries to the woman, allegedly caused by Greenwood, as well as a video where a man, whom the woman calls Mason, is heard demanding sex and threatening with violence if his demands are not met. Later that day, Greenwood's football club and employer, Manchester United, announced that Greenwood would not be allowed to return to training or play matches until further notice. After more than a year of suspension, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) publicly announced that all charges against the football player had been dropped after key witnesses had withdrawn their involvement and new material had come to light. Moreover, the revelation that Greenwood and his girlfriend reconciled in the second half of 2023, eventually announcing the birth of their child, adds further complexity to the situation. With these sudden turns of events, Manchester United finds itself at a crossroads, faced with a critical decision that could profoundly impact its corporate brand reputation. As the dust settled and legal uncertainties cleared, the club now had to carefully weigh the implications of potentially reinstating their star player, Mason Greenwood. Despite Greenwood remaining innocent in a legal sense, and also getting back together with the alleged victim, the public's perception remains clouded by the convincing 'evidence' posted on social media, casting doubt on his innocence. Balancing the club's core values and its commitment to nurture talent, with the imperative of safeguarding its reputation in the unforgiving arena of professional football presents Manchester United and its board of directors with a formidable challenge; *What is the best course of action regarding Mason Greenwood's future at Manchester United?*

Background

Manchester United stands as one of the most iconic and historical football clubs in the world. Established in 1878, the club boasts a rich and storied history that spans well over a century. Based in Manchester, England, United has garnered a global following and solidified its status as a powerhouse in the world of football. With an impressive record of 68 domestic and international trophies, including 20 Premier League titles, 12 FA Cups, and 3 UEFA Champions League triumphs, Manchester United has become synonymous with success and excellence on the pitch.

At the heart of Manchester United's continued success lies its heavy investments in the youth academy, widely acclaimed as one of the finest globally. The club's dedication to cultivating young talent and offering a route to the senior squad has played an important role in shaping and ensuring the long-term prosperity of the organization. The philosophy of promoting youth has not only proven to be an important component of the club's business model, but it has also helped Manchester United maintain a strong identity and sense of traditions. By investing in homegrown talent and instilling a culture of hard work, discipline, and dedication from an early age, the club has been able to develop players who embody the values and ethos of Manchester United both on and off the pitch.

With a strong commitment to youth development and a proven track record of success, Manchester United's academy remains central to the brand identity, laying the foundation for the club's future. Moreover, the youth academy aligns seamlessly with United's core brand values, encapsulated in the acronym "U.N.I.T.E.D": Unite, Nurture, Invest, Together, Excellence, and Diversity. Of these values, 'Nurture' stands out as particularly significant, reflecting the club's commitment to growing the potential of every young person. This value emphasizes the importance of providing support, guidance, and opportunities for development, nurturing talent and instilling a sense of belonging within the Manchester United family.

Mason Greenwood stands as a prime example of talent cultivated by Manchester United. Joining the club at just seven years old, Greenwood's abilities were evident from the start. His outstanding display, scoring an astonishing 16 goals in a single match for his local team in Bradford, immediately attracted the attention of Manchester United scouts. Recognizing his potential, the club swiftly welcomed him into their youth academy. Following 11 years of dedication within the academy, Mason Greenwood made his long-awaited debut for the senior team in 2018. From his debut in 2018 until the onset of 2022, Mason Greenwood emerged as a consistent starter on the right wing of Manchester United's front three, becoming a beloved player among fans worldwide. Dubbed 'Starboy' by fans, and commonly referred to as 'one of our own', Manchester United saw a substantial increase in Greenwood's estimated market value from £ 7 million to £ 50 million during these years. Accordingly, the footballer player's salary had reached a weekly pay of £ 75 000. This

rapid surge in value highlights his role as an incredibly valuable asset for the club, not only due to his performance on the field but also his significant commercial value.

Manchester United's rich history and commitment to nurturing young talent through its renowned academy have long been central to the club's success, but in some cases, players fail to live up to the values and ethos that the club lives by, putting the management team in a tough spot. Mason Greenwood's journey, though initially promising, took a tumultuous turn with serious allegations against him surfacing in January 2022. With this background, this case will delve into how global and iconic brands, like Manchester United, navigate through challenges where their reputation, financial stability, and ethical considerations are at stake.

The Incident

Due to the complexity of the Mason Greenwood case, and the many turns of events, the following chapter will follow the structure of a timeline with documentation of significant milestones throughout the events surrounding Greenwood's situation.

March 6, 2019 - Mason Greenwood makes his competitive debut with Manchester United's first team against Paris Saint Germain in The UEFA Champions League, becoming the second-youngest to ever play in competitive European competitions for the club.

January 22, 2022 - Mason Greenwood plays his last game before the incident, against West Ham. His market value at the time is estimated to be around £ 50 million and his payroll at £ 75 000 per week, with a contract running out in the summer of 2025.

January 30-31, 2022 - Mason Greenwood is arrested by Greater Manchester Police following allegations of a series of assaults, which surfaced via social media. The accusations, posted by his girlfriend on Instagram, are accompanied by disturbing evidence in the form of video recordings, photographs, and audio clips. Later the same day, Greenwood's football club and employer, Manchester United, announced that Greenwood would not be allowed to "return to training or play matches until further notice".

The following day, Greenwood's sponsor, Nike, announces that their relationship and sponsorship of Mason Greenwood is suspended as they are "...deeply concerned by the disturbing allegations and will continue to closely monitor the situation."

February 1-2, 2022 - Greenwood faces additional charges of sexual assault and threats to kill, leading to his further arrest. Police are granted extra time to question him. Greenwood denies all charges. The following day, he is released on bail pending further investigation.

February 7, 2022 - Nike officially ends their relationship with Mason Greenwood, stating that "Mason Greenwood is no longer a Nike athlete." Manchester United offers owners of Mason Greenwood shirts the opportunity to exchange them for replicas - free of charge.

October 15, 2022 - Mason Greenwood, still suspended by Manchester United, is once again arrested. This time, he has allegedly breached his bail conditions. The same day, Greenwood is officially charged with attempted rape, repeatedly engaging in controlling and coercive behavior, as well as assault occasioning actual bodily harm.

November 21, 2022 - Greenwood attends his court hearing at Minshull Street Crown Court, where it is determined that a ten-day trial will commence in November 2023.

February 2, 2023 - The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) drops all charges against Mason Greenwood, stating: "In this case, a combination of the withdrawal of key witnesses and new material that came to light meant there was no longer a realistic prospect of conviction. In these circumstances, we are under a duty to stop the case." In response to the news, Manchester United announces that they will launch an internal investigation into the matter, with no specific timeframe provided.

June 14, 2023 -The football summer transfer window officially opens in England, scheduled to run until September 1st. Manchester United's internal investigation is still ongoing. At this moment in time, Greenwood's market value is difficult to estimate but is believed to be somewhere in the region of £ 5-7 million, still with a weekly payroll reported at £ 75 000 weekly.

As the transfer window opens, speculations among supporters and other stakeholder groups arise. Moreover, the revelation that Greenwood and his girlfriend have reconciled and have birthed a child, adds further complexity to the situation. After rumors indicating that Manchester United are considering the player's return starts to spread, the club faces significant backlash from fans. A female supporter group issues a compelling statement (See **exhibit 1**) on August 11, demanding that United refrain from allowing him to rejoin the squad. In their statement, the supporter group highlights the gravity of the issue and emphasizes what implications the decision to reintegrate the player could have on society as a whole. In the statement, the group writes:

"Today, we female fans of Manchester United are demanding that the club to abide by their duty of care towards their female fans and employees and demonstrate a zero tolerance approach towards acts of violence against women by refusing to bring Mason Greenwood back into the squad..." and "The situation is clear - taking Greenwood back legitimises and normalises sexual assault and domestic abuse. It tells other players, and the men and boys that look up to them, that abusing women is acceptable, without consequence, and won't affect you or derail your career."

Despite significant public backlash, Manchester United's internal investigation, spanning six months, concluded that Mason Greenwood had not committed the alleged crimes. Completed by mid-August, the inquiry found insufficient evidence to substantiate the accusations. In their statement, it is made clear that the club lacked access to all evidence collected by prosecutors and therefore relied on cooperation from parties directly involved in the case. Ultimately, Manchester United's investigation determined Greenwood's innocence, leading to the decision that there were no grounds for terminating his contract.

Conclusion

After documenting the timeline of events surrounding Mason Greenwood's situation, it is now time to consider Manchester United's options moving forward.

In the world of football, player transfers are governed by specific periods known as transfer windows. These windows, occurring twice a year, are designated times during which clubs can buy, sell, or loan players to and from other clubs. Unlike regular businesses where transactions can occur throughout the year and where decisions can more easily be postponed, football operates within these windows to maintain fairness and stability within the sport. Outside of these periods, clubs cannot officially register new players or transfer existing ones. The structured nature of transfer windows therefore leaves no room for decision inertia; refraining from action constitutes a decision in itself.

As the summer transfer window of 2023 has opened, with various stakeholders eagerly anticipating a resolution, the board of directors at Manchester United now face the inevitability of addressing Mason Greenwood's future with the club. Thus, Manchester United finds itself at a crossroads, faced with a critical decision that could profoundly impact both its corporate brand reputation and its financial performance. Despite the significant public backlash over the mere rumor of Greenwood's return, the club's internal investigation found no evidence or support for terminating his contract. At this moment, within the highly regulated transfer market, Manchester United therefore have a finite set of four primary alternatives to consider, taking into account both reputational and financial effects. Now, acting as the board of directors for Manchester United: *What is the best course of action regarding Mason Greenwood's future at Manchester United?*

Main Alternatives

- Keeping Mason Greenwood and letting him back into the team.
- Keeping Greenwood under suspension and await contract expiration in 2025.
- Send Greenwood on loan to another club.
- Sell Mason Greenwood to another club.

Exhibit 1 Female Fans Against Greenwood's Return: Full Statement

FEMALE FANS AGAINST GREENWOOD'S RETURN: STATEMENT

Today, we female fans of Manchester United are demanding that the club to abide by their duty of care towards their female fans and employees and demonstrate a zero tolerance approach towards acts of violence against women by refusing to bring Mason Greenwood back into the squad. The situation is clear - taking Greenwood back legitimises and normalises sexual assault and domestic abuse. It tells other players, and the men and boys that look up to them, that abusing women is acceptable, without consequence, and won't affect you or derail your career.

It also tells us, as women, that we don't matter. It tells female MUFC employees that their employer is happy to make them work alongside an abuser, and tells hundreds of thousands of female fans that supporting the team we love involves supporting men who abuse women like us. It tells us that our safety doesn't matter, our experiences don't matter; that the 1 in 4 women who experience domestic abuse and/or sexual assault in the UK don't matter. It tells us that men who make the club money matter; not us, our fellow fans, mothers, sisters or daughters. The club has launched all sorts of initiatives in recent years to allegedly promote inclusivity and diversity at the match, but "All Red All Equal" means nothing if the rights of those who have perpetrated gender-based violence are more equal than those who have lived through it.

We know there are currently multi million pound PR firms spinning narratives to go along with his potential return. "Repentant father who has turned his life around and just wants to support his partner and child." "Young genius who made a mistake but deserves a second chance." Threatening your partner with sexual violence isn't "a mistake", it's deliberate, targeted abuse. The lockdown parties and police warnings were apparently "a mistake", getting dropped by England and sent home from camp for breaking the rules was also apparently "a mistake". The problem here isn't a player who has "made a mistake", it's a player who has consistently demonstrated an attitude of extreme arrogance, entitlement and exceptionalism; and who has shown nothing but disregard and contempt for what it means to represent this great club. Everyone makes mistakes, but not everyone does so while in the position of power and privilege Greenwood is. If you want to play at the highest level at the biggest club in the world, your behaviour will be held up to the highest level of scrutiny, accountability and expectation.

The decision of senior management at MUFC regarding Greenwood's return will tell us fans everything we need to know about their ability to run this club, and about whether they have any genuine willingness to listen to, engage with, and support fans on issues that matter to us. Is this club for them just a vehicle for commercial success, trophies, sponsorships and revenue? Or do they genuinely share our vision of Manchester United as a great institution that exists as a place of belonging and community for those who care about its values and traditions?

We are calling on the club to do the right thing. For their fans, for their employees, for the millions of young boys and girls across the world who look up to our players as heroes and role models, and the millions of women whose lives have been blighted by violence and abuse. To the decision makers at the club, remember; this goes beyond football. This decision is a reflection of you, your morals; of who you are as individuals, and as humans. Will you stand with abusers, or with the abused? History will judge your choices. Make sure you choose well.