

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

TEACHING NOTES

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Teaching Plan

This teaching plan aims to equip future presenters of this case with instructions and guidelines on how to present and fulfill the learning objectives of the case most effectively. Provided below is a case synopsis which gives educators an insight into the case and the relevant theoretical areas. Furthermore, the learning objectives are presented, offering instructors an overview of the intended areas of study. Additionally, suggestions for a main discussion question as well as assisting questions are presented. This is followed by teaching suggestions in the form of a proposed time plan and a board plan for how to use class time and classroom tools most effectively.

Case Synopsis

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Service (CPS) publicly announced that all charges against the football player had been dropped after key witnesses had withdrawn their involvement and new material had come to light.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?*

Learning Objectives

This case offers several important learning objectives related to corporate brand management and reputation. When discussing and solving this case, the audience will have to cover topics such as public perceptions versus legal outcomes when it comes to prominent individuals related to a corporate brand. This includes the reputational risks that appear when a corporate brand is associated with controversial people. Furthermore, it requires the participants to discuss the balance of financial interests and ethical considerations. Lastly, the class will have to debate what responsibilities large corporations have towards different groups of stakeholders. Hence, the theoretical areas covered by this case are Brand Crisis Management, Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The relevance of these topics will be discussed more deeply in the following.

Brand Crisis Management

As one of many causes of corporate brand crises, Greyser (2009) mentions spokesperson misbehavior and controversy and exemplifies when Kobe Bryant, a basketball player and ambassador for several brands, was accused of rape which created reputational issues for the brands associated with the player. Similarly, Mason Greenwood, also an athlete, celebrity and endorser of brands stood accused of several criminal offences which put Manchester United, the brand and the club he was employed by, on the brink of crisis. This was because Greenwood was so heavily connected with the brand of Manchester United, being their up-and-coming new star player and possibly personifying the hope the fans felt after several years of the club performing rather poorly on the football field. Furthermore, Greyser means that the most serious reputational crisis cases are those that impact the brand's essence since these have the strongest connection to the brand's meaning and success. This was the case with Manchester United and Greenwood. Having belonged to the club since the age of seven, the fans perceived him as 'one of their own' and one who stood for the values of the club's youth academy. Additionally, being one of the main contributors to the club's sporting success even further connected him with the essence of Manchester United.

Greyser (2009) further argues that authentic behavior from the brand is one of the main parts of building up, maintaining, and protecting corporate brand reputation and that honest and credible responses are what can save a brand that is experiencing a reputational crisis. In the case of Manchester United and Mason Greenwood, the club's communications are central to the case since this is what the fans and other stakeholders rely on to get information about the club and Greenwood's future. Furthermore, whether Manchester United's communications on the matter were honest and credible is heavily debatable since it lies in the club's interest to both retain Greenwood's market value and protect its corporate brand reputation. The fact that the club's internal investigation ultimately resulted in Greenwood emerging as innocent, even though large parts of the public were convinced of the opposite, also brings some uncertainty as to whether Manchester United acted and communicated transparently since the video evidence against Greenwood could be seen as quite compelling.

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation

Greyser (2009) states that to survive corporate brand reputational crises, one needs to understand the organization's identity, not meaning how the organization would prefer it to be but how others perceive it. Managers need to understand the corporate brand essence and its meaning to the most essential stakeholders to understand what a potential source of a crisis could be (Greyser, 2009). For Manchester United in this case, it is therefore of vital importance to understand the brand's meaning to its stakeholders, most importantly the fans, since it is the fans' perceptions of the club that is at stake. Therefore, not comprehending that there are fans who live and breathe Manchester United when deciding how to act in the Greenwood issue, would be detrimental to the club's reputation. Kapferer (2012) argues that corporate brand reputation accounts for the organization as a whole, that brands are made by people and that all categories of stakeholders are concerned with the final result. Furthermore, he means that for stakeholders, brand identity makes out a model that can reflect their self-image. In the case of Manchester United, this is especially true since, unlike other corporate brands, football clubs' fans make out a very special group of stakeholders that need to be considered. What sets the fans apart is the fact that these are not regular consumers. Oftentimes, football fans have supported a club for most of their life or even through their families for generations. Therefore, it is crucial that the club acts in accordance with the fans' wishes since any action will affect how the fans identify themselves with the club.

According to Urde (2021), a brand illustrates a promise that, if kept, helps the corporate brand to build trust and remain true to its purpose. A model that corporate brands can use to understand their corporate brand identity is the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) by Urde (2013). Urde discusses the importance of corporate brand identity and proposes the CBIM (**Figure 1**) as a tool for aligning and defining the identity of a corporate brand. For a brand to be coherent, all nine elements need to reflect the brand core and respectively the core needs to reflect all other elements (Urde, 2013). In the case of Manchester United and Mason Greenwood, the CBIM can be used as a tool to understand the corporate brand identity of Manchester United since any decision being made will require the club to stay true to its identity recognized by the fans.

EXTERNAL	VALUE PROPOSITION <i>What are our key offerings and how do we want them to appeal to customers and non-customer stakeholders?</i>	RELATIONSHIPS <i>What should be the nature of our relationships with key customers and non-customer stakeholders?</i>	POSITION <i>What is our intended position in the market, and in the heart and minds of key customers and non-customer stakeholders?</i>
INTERNAL/ EXTERNAL	EXPRESSION <i>What is distinctive about the way we communicate and express ourselves and makes it possible to recognize us at a distance?</i>	BRAND CORE <i>What do we promise, and what are the core values that sum up the essence of what our brand stand for?</i>	PERSONALITY <i>What combination of human characteristics or qualities forms our corporate character?</i>
INTERNAL	MISSION AND VISION <i>What engages us (mission) and what is our direction and inspiration? (vision)</i>	CULTURE <i>What are our attitudes and how do we work and behave?</i>	COMPETENCES <i>What are we particular good at, and what makes us better than the competition?</i>

Figure 1: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2021)

Furthermore, Urde & Greyser (2016) presents the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM) (Figure 2), a framework showing the links between corporate brand identity and corporate brand reputation. The model therefore builds upon the previously mentioned CBIM but differs by also including the reputation dimension. By applying the CBIRM to the case of Manchester United and Mason Greenwood, one can gain an understanding of which elements matter most in the specific situation. For example, it could be argued that the elements taking the heaviest toll are personality and credibility since Greenwood was the embodiment of Manchester United’s core values. Having grown up in the club’s youth academy and being one of their best-performing athletes arguably made him a personification of the club to the fans. Furthermore, the culture and responsibility elements are heavily affected since Greenwood was a big part of the culture of Manchester United and had now, according to many, acted irresponsibly toward the club, its supporters, and another human being, which does not align with the club’s values. Additionally, the club’s internal investigation and their communications surrounding it made the relationships and trustworthiness elements take a hit since it lacked transparency and authenticity towards the fans.

Urde (2021) states that the reputational layer of the model is about external stakeholders’ perceptions regarding the corporate brand and that reputation is earned from the outside world. What others think and believe to be true about the brand is therefore what corporate brands need to work with. Hence, discussing the decisions of Manchester United related to the perceptions of the fans, but also other stakeholders, will bring valuable lessons regarding corporate brand identity and reputation management.

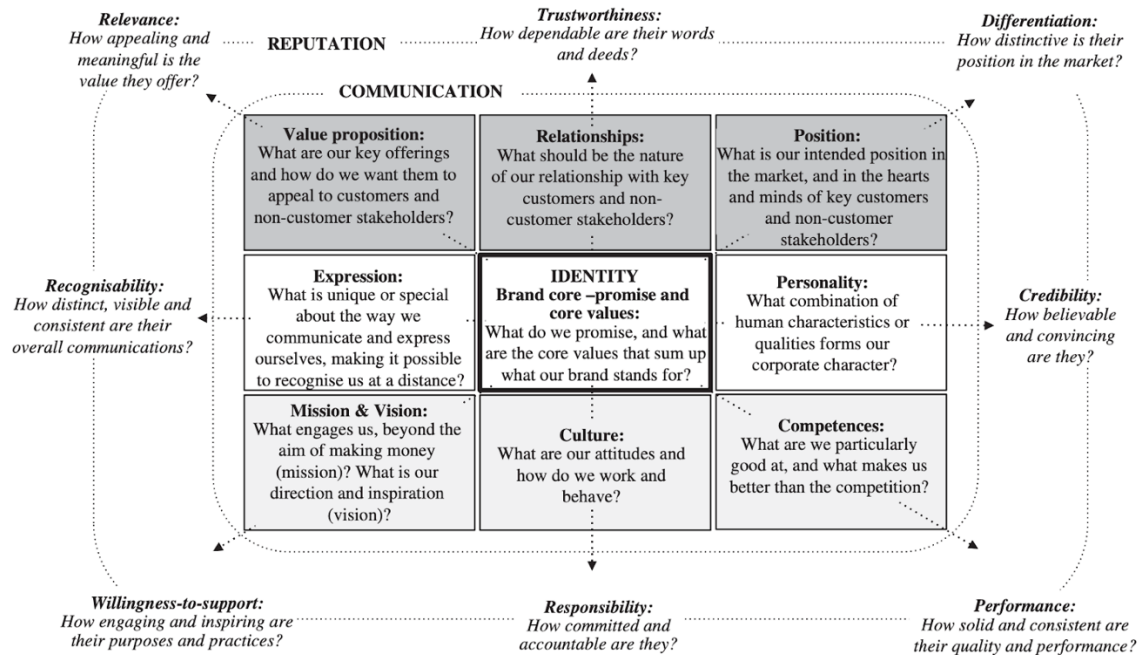


Figure 2: The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Roper & Fill (2012) describe Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a link between an organization and the community around it. They state that CSR is a means for corporations to build reputational capital with its stakeholders. Similarly, Greyser (2009) mentions that organizations can benefit from having a ‘reputational reservoir’ when facing corporate brand reputation issues. Another important reason for engaging in CSR work for organizations is to use it as a point of differentiation in the competitive business landscape as mentioned by Roper & Fill (2012). Furthermore, they argue that governments and the public now expect organizations to contribute to society both socially and economically and that sustainability will be a part of corporate mission statements. In the world of football, many of the worlds’ largest football clubs contribute to society and gain positive reputation in return, one of these examples being FC Barcelona who in 2006 agreed a deal to donate £ 1,5 million to UNICEF annually (Roper & Fill, 2012). Similarly, Manchester United too engage in wanting to benefit society and state on their website:

“The club believes it should be a part of the community in the widest sense and that its success should not only be measured in the number of trophies it wins, but also by the impact it has on the community in which it exists.” (Manchester United, 2018, n.p.).

However, in the communication surrounding the Mason Greenwood case, it becomes apparent that the club still has work to do regarding its CSR work. For example, when rumors surrounding the return of Greenwood surfaced in the summer of 2023, a female supporter group voiced their opinion on the matter and demanded that Greenwood not return to the team. This issue highlights the importance of CSR for a large corporate brand. What responsibilities do you, as a club, have to victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault and can you really stand by an alleged offender of women's rights by letting him back into the team?

Roper & Fill (2012) mention the concept of triple bottom line (TBL) meaning that organizations, apart from financial performance, should include ecological and social performance. This idea argues that organizations take responsibility for more than just the shareholders to include all stakeholders, meaning anyone affected by the organization and its actions (Roper & Fill, 2012). This becomes relevant in the case of Manchester United. Even more importantly than its shareholders, the club needs to consider its responsibility towards all stakeholders, such as fans, employees and especially victims of sexual assault and domestic violence among these groups. However, this becomes increasingly complex in this case considering that Greenwood is an employee of the club and still a young man who has, in a way, been brought up in the club and by its staff. What responsibilities does the club have towards an employee who has been freed from criminal charges but who is convicted in the eyes of the public? What responsibilities does the club have towards the fans? And what responsibilities does the club have to the community and society at large?

Key Learning Objectives

Key Learning Objectives		
<i>Remembering</i>	...that the most serious reputational crisis cases are those that impact the brand's essence since these have the strongest connection to the brand's meaning and success.	Here: Greenwood being heavily associated with the brand essence of Manchester United which resulted in a serious reputational crisis.
<i>Understanding</i>	...the links between corporate brand identity elements and corporate brand reputation elements.	Here: E.g. the credibility of the club taking a toll since Greenwood was seen as the embodiment of Manchester United.
<i>Applying</i>	...corporate brand management and reputation models and theory.	Here: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix, Brand Crisis Management & CSR/Stakeholder Theory.
<i>Evaluating</i>	...the situation of a corporate brand facing a reputational crisis.	Here: How Manchester United have dealt with the situation thus far and what the options are.
<i>Creating</i>	... alternatives for managing a corporate brand reputational crisis.	Here: Deciding whether the club should keep Greenwood or not, based on what would be best for the club financially and/or reputation-wise.

Table 1: Key Learning Objectives

Discussion Questions

To facilitate a meaningful discussion with a clear focus on the case at hand, the proposed main question will serve as a starting point for the class discussion. With respect to the main question, the class is expected to discuss their views on the case, analyze relevant information, and eventually propose potential solutions. To accomplish this, the teacher is encouraged to assist the discussion through the presented assisting questions. The assisting questions are meant to inspire, engage and guide participants to reflect, discuss and partake in the broader discussion of the main question. To do this effectively, the assisting questions will be centered around the theoretical concepts of corporate reputation, financial performance, and corporate social responsibility.

Main Question

What is the best course of action regarding Mason Greenwood's future at Manchester United?

Assisting Questions

- What are the alternatives?
- What responsibilities does the club have towards its stakeholders?
- How do you think the club is perceived by different stakeholder groups?
- What responsibilities does the club have towards Greenwood?
- Do you believe the club has acted authentically and transparently?
- Would you have done anything differently throughout the process?
- Could they have communicated differently to limit the backlash?

Teaching Suggestions

The following chapter aims to support the teacher and presenter of the case with specific suggestions for each phase of the case presentation, including the preparation, introduction, discussion, and conclusion of the case.

Pre-presentation Phase

Before presenting the case to the class, the presenter needs to distribute the written case to the class. This is done so that every participant understands the topic and the issue at hand, which facilitates a higher quality of discussion during the class. Even though the case consists of four documents in total, the in-class participants will only have access to the written case description to not know any additional information that could risk spoiling the case discussion for other participants. This means that ahead of and during the case presentation, participants will only know the information in the written case and not how Manchester United actually acted in the real world.

Furthermore, the presenter needs to read up on the written case, the management decision, and the teaching notes to fully understand the case and all its intricacies. We also recommend practicing the case presentation with the additional PowerPoint images beforehand to make the case as interesting as possible for participants. This will further benefit the discussion and learning possibilities since the class will be more immersed in the so-called 'case bubble'.

Additionally, we strongly recommend looking at the time plan as well as the board plan for the case. These are provided below. The time plan is made to give an understanding of the time needed to present the case as it is crucial for the presentation and the following discussion to run smoothly. Also, the board plan provides suggestions for presenters of this case on how to use a typical classroom tool such as a whiteboard.

Introduction Phase

When introducing the presentation and delving into the case of Mason Greenwood and Manchester United, it can be advantageous to initiate with a light-hearted approach, easing any tension or nervousness in the room. For example, the presenter could ask the audience whether they like watching football or not or what team they support.

After initiating with a light-hearted approach, such as asking the audience about their interest in football, it is important for the presenter to acknowledge the sensitive nature of the upcoming discussion, given its focus on matters of domestic violence, assault, and rape. By forewarning the audience about the sensitive topic, the presenter can set appropriate expectations and foster a respectful environment for dialogue. This proactive approach encourages participants to approach the discussion with sensitivity and empathy towards the gravity of the subject matter.

Discussion Phase

Before initiating the discussion and re-stating the main question, the presenter should ask if the audience comprehends the case thoroughly and if any questions or uncertainties remain unresolved. Once any queries have been addressed, the presenter can introduce the main question. Additionally, it is recommended that the presenter reminds the audience to adopt the role of the Board of Directors of Manchester United. This prompt encourages the audience to engage actively and adopt an "action mode" mindset as they begin discussing the case.

Once the discussion has begun, the presenter has now become a case mediator, taking on the responsibility of facilitating meaningful discussions with a clear focus. To do so effectively, it is important that the mediator stay impartial and open to different viewpoints and opinions. It is also important that the opinions of several different participants are heard since this makes the discussion more interesting and stimulates learning. Given the sensitive nature of this case, it is especially important for the mediator to create an environment where all participants feel comfortable expressing their viewpoints. To promote a free-flowing discussion and sustain its momentum, the mediator can use the assisting questions listed above.

As a case mediator, the presenter is encouraged to make use of presentation tools. For example, a whiteboard can be used to illustrate different views and solutions through comprehensible visuals. Also, if there is a larger time slot available for the case presentation, the application of a theoretical model such as The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix by Urde & Greyser (2016) could be used for this section of the case.

Conclusion Phase

When the case discussion is over, it is time for the presenter to reveal the actual management decision of Manchester United. When doing so, and when time allows it, it is beneficial to refer the actual management decision to what has been discussed by the participants in the discussion phase. Furthermore, we suggest allowing the class to voice their opinions on the actual management decision and have a smaller discussion about whether they would have done the same or if there are other better options for solving the case.

Time Plan

In the following, a time plan for presenting the case efficiently is provided (Figure 3). In total, the case is estimated to take 30 minutes to present. We suggest using around 10 minutes to present the background of the case and the incident. However, within this time slot, it is important for the presenter(s) to introduce themselves, warm up the participants and include the disclaimer about the case being of a rather sensitive nature and that it is a serious subject being discussed. After this, the participants will act as the board of directors for Manchester United. They are now faced with the main discussion question of the case and will have 10 minutes to discuss it. If two or more people are presenting the case, it is suggested that individual roles are decided upon beforehand. For example, one person can be responsible for taking notes and writing people's thoughts on the board, while one or more people are responsible for leading the discussion and letting different people speak. When the discussion is finished, the presenters will reveal the actual management decision of Manchester United. This is estimated to take 5 minutes including letting participants share their thoughts on the decision. Lastly, 5 minutes are reserved at the end for summing up the case and letting any eventual uncertainties regarding the case be cleared.



Figure 3: Time Plan

Board Plan

Presenters of this case would benefit from using a whiteboard or a similar classroom tool during the discussion phase of the case presentation. This is to facilitate the discussion and help the class participants achieve the key learning points of this case. It also helps the audience remember what has already been said in the discussion and can therefore aid participants in furthering the discussion. The main purpose, however, is to make it easier for the participants to arrive at a management decision. Below we provide a suggestion (**Table 2**) for how the board can be divided when presenting this case. However, it is important to keep in mind that this is a suggestion. What the most suitable alternative is can depend on the time available for the case presentation. Furthermore, other presenters might believe another use of the board to be more suitable to their presentation of the case.

	<i>Keep and play</i>	<i>Let the contract expire</i>	<i>Send on loan</i>	<i>Sell</i>
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letting him back into the team might result in the player performing well which benefits the team and the club. He might increase in value which is beneficial for a future sale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could be seen as a statement from the club, condemning his alleged criminal offences. Possibly good for reputation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possibility of increased value over time. Not having to pay his full salary. Could be seen as cutting ties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting rid of the 'problem'. Regaining trust and credibility.
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fans might be furious which can create a reputational crisis. Sponsors of the club might terminate their contracts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could be regarded as mistreating an employee since he cannot continue his career elsewhere. Still needs to pay his salary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manchester United is still associated with the player. Uncertain financial outcome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Huge financial loss since his value is now very low. Possibility of giving rival team a very good player at a very low price.

Table 2: Filled in board plan with pros and cons of the different alternatives.

Table 2 gives a suggestion for a suitable board plan to use when presenting the case. The board outlines the four main alternatives that the board of Manchester United is faced with. Every option apart from *sell* would mean that the club is still associated with the player which is why they are grouped together. The participants are then encouraged to argue for their opinions. During this time, presenters can fill out the board with the mentioned advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. To conclude the case discussion, participants can vote for which alternative they believe to be the best course of action for the club.

Reflection

Writing this case has been equally rewarding and enjoyable, as it has been challenging. When we were tasked with crafting a case for the BUSN35 Corporate Brand Management and Reputation course at Lund University School of Economics and Management, we began discussing various case options before meeting with professor and supervisor Mats Urde for a supervision meeting. During the meeting we exchanged thoughts with Urde and decided together that the case about Manchester United and Mason Greenwood would fit best with the objectives of the assignment.

Taking on the role of case writers has been a very rewarding and enjoyable experience for us. Rather than being the ones tasked with solving the case, we have had the opportunity to craft a narrative that challenges our peers and prompts thoughtful consideration of a real-world brand management dilemma. This has added a dimension to our learning that we have not experienced previously in our studies, providing us with a hands-on opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios.

A significant challenge we encountered throughout the project was crafting a comprehensive and engaging case while maintaining objectivity and sensitivity due to the nature of the subject matter. Despite the sensitivity inherent in the topic, we believe it is crucial to address these challenges head-on. While not every brand manager may face such serious incidents, it is essential to recognize that they can occur, and when they do, managers must act both ethically and strategically. This involves demonstrating transparency, accountability, and commitment to upholding the values and reputation of the brand. By tackling sensitive issues in the context of a case study, students tasked with solving this case can hopefully gain valuable insights into the complexities of Brand Management in real-world scenarios.

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