

Greenwashing within the Context of Nation Branding and National Reputation Management: Hennes&Mauritz (H&M) – A Swedish Case

Yeliz KULALI MARTIN (*), Gaye Aslı SANCAR DEMREN (**)

Abstract

The image and reputation of a country reflect on its brands. Just as well, the image and reputation of a brand reflect on its country of origin. The present study, on the basis of the theoretical frameworks of nation branding and national reputation, focuses on greenwashing, which affects both of the said areas. In our day, the sensibility concerning sustainability and environmental matters influences also brand policies. The ambition of being 'The most environment friendly brand', often leads brands to mistakes which end up transforming into greenwashing. This is also the case for the Swedish brand H&M which aims to be the 'leader' in soft power areas like the environment. The study, after the theoretical framework, focuses on H&M's greenwashing strategies and their causes, using the qualitative situational analysis method.

Keywords: Nation Branding, National Reputation, Greenwashing, H&M, Sweden.

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Ulus Markalama ve Ulusal İtibar Yönetimi Bağlamında Yeşil Aklama Uygulamaları : Bir İsveç Markası Hennes&Mauritz (H&M)

Yeliz KULALI MARTIN ^(*), Gaye Aslı SANCAR DEMREN ^(**)

Öz

Bir ülkenin sahip olduğu imaj ve itibar, o ülkenin sahip olduğu markalara da yansımaktadır. Yine aynı şekilde bir markaya ait imaj ve itibar da o ülkeye yansımaktadır. Bu çalışma ulus markalama ve ulusal itibar teorik çerçevelerinden yola çıkarak, her iki alanı da doğrudan etkileyen yeşil aklama kavramına odaklanmaktadır. Günümüzde sürdürülebilirlik ve çevre konularına gösterilen hassasiyet, marka politikalarına da yansımaktadır. 'En çevreci marka' olma hırsı, çoğu zaman söz konusu markaları yanlışlara itmekte ve yeşil aklama stratejilerine dönüşmektedir. Çevre gibi yumuşak gücü ilgilendiren alanlarda 'lider' olma arzusu güden İsveç firması H&M için de bu durum farksızdır. Çalışma, teorik çerçevenin ardından niteliksel vaka analizi yöntemiyle H&M'in yeşil aklama stratejileri ve nedenlerine odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ulus Markalama, Ulusal İtibar, Yeşil Aklama, H&M, İsveç.

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Introduction

In the globalising world of the present day, nations are subject to branding just like companies. The nation brands of countries that are the most visited, that have the most appreciated food, that attract the most investment, that have the most adopted cultural characteristics due to the desire of creating attraction on individuals are considered to be strong nation brands. According to Anholt's model; exports, governance, culture, tourism, immigration and investment are the elements constituting the dimensions of the nation brand. At this point, national brands owned by a country are also factors that serve the nation brand and play a part on the management of the nation's image and reputation. This factor called country of origin effect can result in the identification of brands with nations, and even in the identification of some nations with brands. Therefore, the image and reputation of national brands affect the image and reputation of their country of origin and at this point the corporate behaviours of companies gain importance.

In the global competition climate of our day, companies' corporate behaviours, their commitment to their promises to their shareholders and the society, their social responsibility concept and application of ethic codes become crucial. Environmental sustainability as a dimension of corporate sustainability is an important tool of self-expression for companies. Herein, Greenwashing is a concept referring to companies' pretending, to the steps they undertake without really undertaking, to appearing environment friendly without protecting the environment. The present study will focus first on nation branding and national brands' relation with nation branding, national reputation and the effects of greenwashing on national reputation will also be analysed. Sweden, like other Nordic states, is very sensitive to environmental issues. The crisis H&M went through as a retail brand from Sweden, which aims to be global leader in soft power area, constitutes the origin of the research question. So based on the question: "What could be the effects of H&M brand's greenwashing practices on Sweden's soft power?", H&M's greenwashing issues will be analysed within the framework of qualitative situational analysis method.

Nation branding concept and Countries' national brands' relationship with nation branding

Nation branding consists on managing a nation as if it was a brand, in order to have a positive perception before foreign populations. "Nation branding consists on influencing and creating an effective environment and positive platforms in the market for a nation. Nation branding is also an area in which business and political spheres cooperate in an integrated manner, for a diplomatic or political purpose."¹ Nation branding is not only used for commercial purposes, but also for political and diplomatic purposes.

It is of course necessary to mention Anholt in order to understand the extend of the concept: Nation Brand Index research realised by Anholt and Ipsos Research Company since 2008 will celebrate its 15th edition this year. The nation branding hexagon measures country

¹ Hlynur Gudjonsson. "Nation Branding," *Place Branding* 1, no. 3 (2005): 286-287.

performances in five different areas. These are; exports, governance, culture, people, tourism and, immigration and investment.² The table below explains the criteria for each topic in detail.

Table 1: Understanding NBI Hexagon³

Exports	This aspect examines whether knowing where a product is made increases or decreases the likelihood of it being purchased (also known as the “country of origin effect”), whether a country has particular strengths in science and technology, and whether it is considered to be innovative in national and global pursuits.
Governance	This aspect incorporates the perceived competency and honesty of government and its treatment of citizens and respect for their rights, as well as global behaviour in the areas of international peace and security, environmental protection, and the reduction of world poverty.
Culture	Cultural aspects are measured by gathering perceptions of a country’s heritage and its contemporary cultural “vibes” accrued from music, films, art, and literature, as well as its perceived excellence in sports.
People	The general assessment of a nation’s friendliness is measured by whether respondents would feel welcome when visiting the country. Additionally, we measure the appeal of the people on a personal level – whether respondents would want to have a close friend from that country – as well as human resources on a professional level: That is, how willing respondents would be to hire a well-qualified person from that country.
Tourism	Respondents rate a country’s tourism appeal in three major areas: Natural beauty, historic buildings and monuments, and vibrancy of urban life and attractions. Tourism potential is also rated: How likely a respondent would be to visit a country if money were not an object.
Immigration and Investment	Lastly, a country’s power to attract talent and capital is measured not only by whether people would consider studying, working, or living in that country, but also by perceptions of the country’s economic prosperity, equality of opportunity, and ultimately whether it is perceived to be a place with a high quality of life.

As seen in the table, a country’s nation brand is constituted from many different elements and countries need communication strategies in order to attract economic investment, to increase the number of visitors for generating more tourism revenue.

Nation branding is often conceptualised as nation brand management and identity-based brand promotion. Nation branding researchers attach great importance to image.⁴ The systematic literature review realised by Rojas-Mendez and Khoshnevis in 2021 lists all definitions of the nation branding concept made up to the current day. Based on the research, the writers suggest the definition below for nation branding;

² See www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-11/NBI%202022%20Report%20-%20Updated%20JAN23.pdf accessed 30 June 2023.

³ Ipsos, 2023.

⁴ Gyorgy Szondi, “From Image Management to Relationship Building: A Public Relations Approach to Nation Building,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 4 (2010): 335.

Nation branding is a systematic strategic process of involving public and private sectors to design a branding strategy for the nation, communicate the nation's core values and national identity, and applying branding strategies and tactics to promote a nation's image, improve the country's reputation among all different audiences, differentiate a nation from other nations, and reach economic, social, political, business, and international competitiveness.⁵

Based on this definition, it can be presumed that H&M, as a private retail brand which is the subject of the present study, serves Sweden's nation branding strategy. Creating a successful nation brand has various economic advantages for the country. There are many motivations to design a strong country brand and all of those are essential for the prosperity of the country's citizens. Country branding can be built on various elements like the concerned country's cities, famous personalities or groups, television programs, important cultural heritage or natural beauties, food or drink, or behaviour patterns.⁶

Nation branding, differently than the tourism-oriented promotion works made with the purpose of obtaining economic gains, can potentially have societal and political advantages for the country in addition to the economic ones. Nation branding is put in practice by the initiatives started by the state and governments that are in charge of directing the county. Countries having precise aims in societal, economic and political matters can set forth their communication strategies that will differentiate them from other countries according to these aims, by means of nation branding. As nation branding allows positioning the nation brand and creating the nation brand identity, the nation and the country is perceived through a precise image across the world and the confusion due to the various images of the country is avoided.⁷

Nation branding is resourced from four main areas which are; country of origin, place marketing, public diplomacy and national identity studies. One of the most important factors that differentiates nation branding from place branding is the presumed international influence sphere and the close relationship with the nation state. Therefore, in a way, nation branding feeds on public diplomacy and international relations fields. Accordingly, nation branding takes root in national identity, in the nation branding process the nation brand identity makes use of country's social, political, economic and cultural values, the nation brand created within and outside the country is promoted via various channels and therefore it aims to strengthen the country's image and to boost its reputation.⁸ Nation branding concept's relation to national

⁵ Jose Rojas-Mendez ve Mozhde Khoshnevis, "Conceptualizing Nation Branding: The Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Product and Brand Management* 32, no. 1 (2021): 114.

⁶ Burcu Zeybek, "Ülke Marka Kişilikleri Üzerine Bir Analiz: Turkey Home Kampanyası," *Erciyes İletişim Dergisi* 6, no. 2 (2019): 1325

⁷ Alparslan Nas, *Ulus Markalama: Dünyadan Örneklerle Kuram ve Uygulama*. 2. Baskı (İstanbul: Kriter Yayınevi, 2021), 25-26.

⁸ Şakir Özüdoğru ve Haluk Yüksel, "Ulus Markalama ve Beslendiği Kaynaklar: Bir Derleme," *Bitlis Eren Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 8, no. 1 (2019): 333-342.

brands becomes crucial at this point. The country-of-origin effect is based on the assumption that the image and the reputation of the country will also reflect on the brands it owns. In the same way, the image and the reputation of a brand will also reflect on the country. “The country-of-origin effect has very close ties with the image and the economy of a country. Most of the time, companies try to encourage image transfer between the product or the company name and the positive image of the state.”⁹ Chanel’s high-quality products are a great example of image transfer to the French culture and elegance. Insuring a positive reflection of the country of origin impact requires the management of the national brands as well as the national reputation.

As the examples above show, nation branding also feeds on a country’s soft power elements. Practices realized through culture and values create sympathy for countries in individuals, and people who like any food or use any brand of a country feel close to that country. As a result, in today’s global world, the concepts of nation branding and soft power have become intertwined, and many stakeholders have come into play in conveying the ideals of a state and its nation to foreign publics. In this sense, national brands are essential in building national images and creating attraction as an element of soft power. Therefore, the behavior of national brands and global companies will play a positive/negative role in managing the reputation of a nation.

National Reputation Management and Greenwashing Concept

National reputation management is another subject complementary to the above-mentioned nation branding concept. A country that has a successful nation branding campaign is also expected to manage well its national reputation. Just like the nation branding concept, the reputation concept is multidimensional as well, and is based on trust building: “A nation’s reputational capital is significant, both politically and economically. It affects the country’s ability not only to pursue and achieve international political objectives but also to attract inflow of foreign investment as well as tourism. It may also influence consumer perceptions and purchase decisions with regard to products from certain countries of origin.”¹⁰

“There is an interaction between the city-nation brand and the global reputation of the country, as well as an emotional, economical and directly purchase related interaction with the brands, whose origin is or will be said city-nation.”¹¹ As Saydam stated, the image and the reputation of the national brands affect the image and the reputation of their country of origin. The brands pass the national identities on to the customers and the nation branding process functions in a holistic manner: “Over the last twenty years brands have become one of the most important channels for transmitting national identities to consumers. Whereas earlier generations may have identified countries primarily through their history, political institutions

⁹ Michael Kunczik, *Images of Nations and International Public Relations*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997), 68.

¹⁰ Jay Wang, “Public Diplomacy and Global Business,” *Journal of Business Strategy* 27, no. 3 (2006): 41.

¹¹ Ali Saydam, “Emir Kusturica Değil Başkan Sorumlu...” *Akşam Gazetesi*, 11 October 2010.

or high culture, today brands can form an important part of the national image of some countries".¹² "From the moment a product is put on the market, the product, the brand, the corporation behind the brand, the corporate leader, the country images if the global markets are taken into account, form representative systems in the shape of interlocking circles in order to convince the target audience."¹³ It can be said that, especially considering the improvements on communication technologies in our day, the interaction between these interlocking circles will be faster. At this point, corporations wishing to benefit from the country-of-origin effect shall not damage the image and the reputation of their country. Another dimension of this subject is the occasional boycott of the brands of a certain country by other countries. Thus, the country-of-origin effect can have negative effects as well as positive ones. The H&M example which will be studied later in the present study, is also on the negative side. H&M, especially because of its recently exposed practices, casts a shadow on Sweden's global national reputation and image. Before examining H&M's green washing practices, it is necessary to further explain the green washing concept.

Environmental sustainability draws more and more the interest and the concern of societies, governments and individuals worldwide. The rapid globalisation and industrialisation in the past few decades have significantly contributed towards environmental degradation in the form of pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, ozone depletion, global warming etc.¹⁴ Due to the increase in environmental problems, and consequently in public awareness, many stakeholders are more aware of environmental consideration. Over the past decade, stakeholders like investors, consumers, governments, and corporate customers are increasing the pressure on companies to disclose information about their environmental performance and for environmental-friendly products.¹⁵ As a result, the ethical consumption has reached 141 billions exclusively in England.¹⁶ By 2030, the global annual *green market* revolution spend will reach \$8.1 trillion dollars and by 2050, 321 trillion dollars.¹⁷ While some companies and brands share transparently their performances in this matter, many others continue greenwashing without compromising their profits.¹⁸

¹² Mark Leonard, Catherine Stead ve Conrad Smewing, *Public Diplomacy* (London: The Foreign Policy Center, 2002), 65.

¹³ Nazlı Aytuna, and Banu Karsak, "Kurum İmajı ve İkna Stratejileri: Etkili İletişim Sorgulamaları," In *Yönetim İletişim Kültür* eds. Poussard, J.M. & Erkmén, T. (İstanbul, Arıkan Yayınları, 2008), 246.

¹⁴ Priyanka Aggarwal, ve Aarti Kadyan, "Greenwashing: The Darker Side of CSR," *Indian Journal of Applied Research* 4, no. 3 (2014): 61-66.

¹⁵ De Freitas ve Vieira, (2020): 1-12.

¹⁶ See <https://www.co-operativebank.co.uk/about-us/press-release/2023/uk-ethical-consumer-spending-hits-141-billion-as-second-hand-clothing-market-booms/> accessed 18 January 2023.

¹⁷ See, <https://www.forrester.com/press-newsroom/forrester-global-green-market-revolution-spend-will-total-326-trillion-from-2023-to-2050/> accessed 18 January 2024.

¹⁸ See, <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/fashion-greenwash-report-companies-hiding-true-environmental-costs-fast-fashion/> accessed 11 December 2023.

It is difficult to find a consensual common definition of greenwashing in the literature. Many industry-specific definitions of the greenwashing concept are made in a general and vague manner. Oxford English Dictionary¹⁹, one of the most referred dictionaries about this concept, defines greenwashing with the following words: “The creation or propagation of an unfounded or misleading environmentalist image; To mislead (the public) or counter (public or media concerns) by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible; to misrepresent (a company, its operations, etc.) as environmentally responsible.”²⁰ The definitions of Terrachoice and Greenpeace, two leading ONGs in greenwashing area, draw also the attention. Terrachoice describes the greenwashing concept as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service”²¹ and Greenpeace describes it as a “Public Relations tactic used to make a company or product appear environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental impact.”²²

Greenwashing practices that basically consist on misleading, misguiding and fooling the public opinion, customers and shareholders are used by companies in various and multidimensional manners. The forms of greenwashing can be categorised according to the type and deceitfulness of the claim concerning the product, service and company. Accordingly, the product’s orientation, the process of production and environmental and other conditions can be subject to greenwashing.²³ In a similar manner, Terrachoice’s²⁴ 7 types of greenwashing are approved and studied by many academicians. These 7 types are, “Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off, Sin of No Proof, Sin of Vagueness, Sin of Worshipping False Labels, Sin of Irrelevance, Sin of Lesser of Two Evils, Sin of Fibbing”²⁵. To further explain these concepts; *Hidden trade off* – Suggesting a product is “green” based on a narrow set of attributes; *No proof* – claims that are not supported by a reliable third-party certification; *Vagueness* - Poorly defined claims that may be misunderstood by consumers; *Worshipping false labels* – creating false labels or false ratifications; *Irrelevance* - making claims that are unhelpful for consumers; *Lesser of two evils* – claims that may be true but that omit the essential for customers; *Fibbing* – claims that are simply false.²⁶

Companies proceed to greenwashing practices due to the encouragement of and the interaction with various factors and variables. Companies lean towards greenwashing practices because of external factors like ONGs, media, legal and legislative framework; market factors

¹⁹ Sebastião Vieira de Freitas Netto, Marcos Felipe Falcão Sobral, Ana Regina Bezerra Ribeiro ve Gleibson Robert da Luz Soares, “Concepts and Forms of Greenwashing: A Systematic Review,” *Environmental Sciences Europe* 32, no. 1 (2020):12.

²⁰ See, <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=greenwashing> accessed 20 January 2024.

²¹ TerraChoice, *The Sins of Greenwashing Home and Family Edition*, (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010).

²² Das, L. “Greenwash: What It Is and How Not to Fall for It,” *Greenpeace*, (2022).

²³ Netto et al., “Concepts and Forms of Greenwashing: A Systematic Review,” 11.

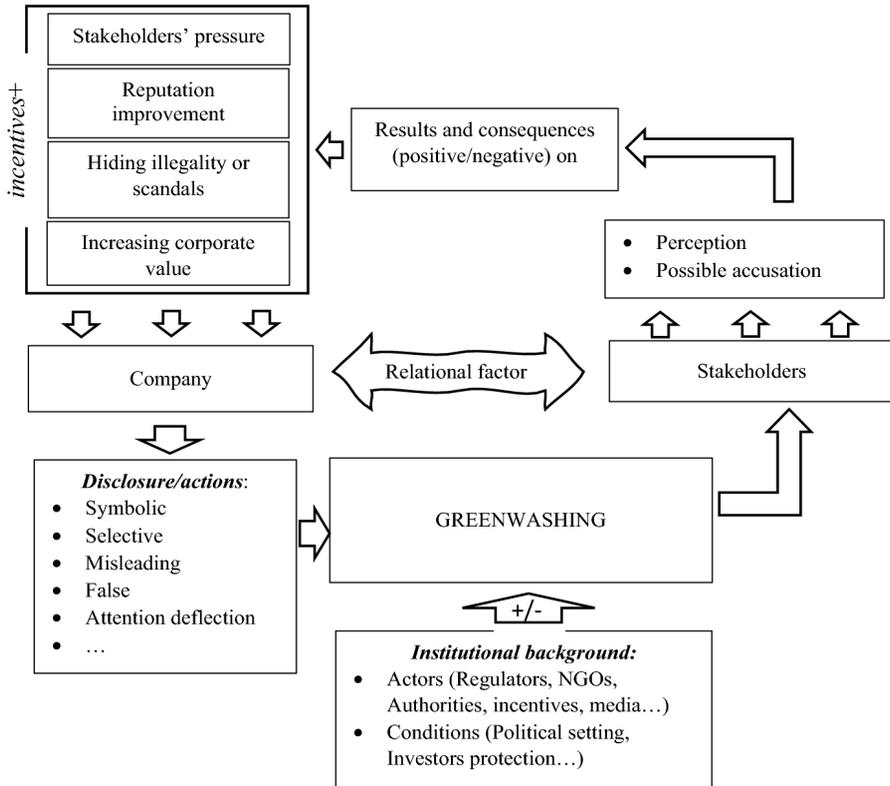
²⁴ TerraChoice, “The Sins of Greenwashing Home and Family Edition.”

²⁵ TerraChoice, “The Sins of Greenwashing Home and Family Edition.”

²⁶ Brain Mulch, “The Seventh Sin,” *Alternative Journal* 35, no. 5 (2009).

like consumer and investor requests, competition; company's internal factors or individual psychological factors.²⁷

Graphic 1: Greenwashing: A Conceptual Vision²⁸



No matter the factor in the origin, as seen in Picture 1 greenwashing practices affect companies in a reflexive loop. Companies practice greenwashing by symbolic, selective, misleading, erroneous etc. discourses and actions; in order to raise the company's value, to boost its prestige, to hide corporate scandals, because of shareholder pressure. Greenwashing practices influence shareholders' perception and the positive and negative impacts of the situation force the companies to undertake another greenwashing practice.²⁹

On the other hand, the greenwashing level of the companies has negative effects on their

²⁷ Magali Delmas and Vanessa Burbano, "The Drivers of Greenwashing," *California Management Review* 54, no. 1 (2011): 64-87.

²⁸ F. Bernini and F. La Rosa, F., "Research in the Greenwashing Field: Concepts, Theories, and Potential Impacts on Economic and Social Value," *Journal of Management and Governance*, (2023): 1-40.

²⁹ Francesca Bernini and Fabio La Rosa, "Research in the Greenwashing Field: Concepts, Theories, and Potential Impacts on Economic and Social Value," *Journal of Management and Governance*, (2023): 1-40.

market values. When companies' environmental performances are not in line with their speeches and actions, when promises are not held, they are punished by the financial markets and the trust of the shareholders is broken.³⁰ Moreover, greenwashing practices have also widespread negative impacts. First of all, the trust between the brand and the consumer will be broken and the customers' motivation to buy environment friendly products will weaken, potential shareholders which would prioritise green products will be affected negatively. Even though present shareholders could notice a positive impact in short term, companies with bad environmental performance will have a negative impact on the population's social prosperity as well.³¹ Looking from this point of view even if greenwashing has a misleading positive effect on companies' environmental performances in short term, in long term it has devastating effects on the corporate reputation and values. The problems encountered in long term by H&M, which had a strong image in recycling area for years, are the concrete example of this situation.

Hennes & Mauritz (H&M): The Fall of a Recycling Leader

Hennes&Mauritz, better known as H&M, was founded in 1947 in Sweden, and is one of the country's most successful brands in fast-fashion area. Even though H&M's fame has long reached the global level, not many know that it is a Scandinavian brand; which demonstrates the cross-border success of the brand. H&M is also known as one of the first brands to have environmental awareness about fashion production.³² The main reason it is among the firsts, comes perhaps from Sweden's sensibility to environmental matters in state level as well as in societal level.

All states of the Northern Europe area– Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Finland – are environmentally conscious in a general manner. This consciousness comes on one hand from the educational system and from the public awareness developed thanks to said system.³³ On the other hand, these states' active policies in matters of sustainability and environment come from their geographical disadvantages. High pressures on the marine environment and eutrophication of the Baltic Sea, unfavourable conservation status for some protected habitats and species³⁴, melting glaciers in Arctic region, air pollution and other factors³⁵ have placed Northern Europe amongst the regions that are directly affected by the global environmental

³⁰ Marco Ghitti, Gianfranco Gianfrate and Lorenzo Palma, "The Agency of Greenwashing," *Journal of Management and Governance*, (2023): 1-37.

³¹ Zhi Yang, Thi Thu Huong Nguyen, Hoang Nam Nguyen, Thi Thuy Nga Nguyen and Thi Thanh Cao, "Greenwashing Behaviours: Causes, Taxonomy and Consequences Based on a Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Business Economics and Management* 21, no. 5 (2020): 1486-1507.

³² Diana Bojonca, *Corporate Sustainability in the Fast Fashion Industry: The Case of H&M*, (Universitat Jaume I, final project, 2019).

³³ Linnea Dunne, *Lagom: İsveçlilerin Dengeli Yaşama Sanatı*. (S. Tezcan Trans.), (İstanbul: Pegasus Yayınları, 2020), 132.

³⁴ See, <https://www.oecd.org/environment/country-reviews/Sweden%20Highlights%20web%20pages2.pdf> accessed 11 December 2023

³⁵ See, <https://www.oecd.org/fr/environnement/examens-pays/34087771.pdf> accessed 11 December 2023.

crisis. For said reasons the Nordic Five has been leading in green politics for many years now.

Sweden is the state that ratified the first environmental protection act in 1967, and that hosted the first UN global environment conference in 1972.³⁶ The Swedish government which introduced the carbon tax to the world in 1995, is also one of the first signatories of the Kyoto protocol.³⁷ According to OECD's latest 2023 data, Sweden is in 2nd position with a score of 86/100 in SDG Index³⁸, and also in 2nd position according to the Global Innovation Index.³⁹ Looking at past results; it has been 3rd in 2017 Global Cleantech Innovation Index, 2nd in 2020 Global Innovation Index, and first in the Global Competitiveness Index the same year⁴⁰. According to the SGI Index, in 2022 Sweden ranked first in environmental policies area.⁴¹ The country aims to have 100% renewable energy, to be climate-neutral and fossil energy-free in 2045.⁴² Within the context of the new Climate Policy Framework adopted in 2017 and the new Climate Act which came into force in 2018, the long-term target is to have zero net greenhouse emissions by 2045.⁴³ Moreover, "The country is a leader in international environmental protection campaigns. It has a record of going beyond the requirements of international accords."⁴⁴

"Sweden performs extremely well in areas such as reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the use of renewable energy sources but is not a leader in recycling or water usage."⁴⁵ To support this assertion, H&M was the first global retail brand to start a collect & recycle program in 2013 thanks to the system named 'Looop', however today it is also one of the main Swedish brands to be accused of greenwashing.⁴⁶ The brand, as ambitious in green politics area as its state of origin, is currently at the source of scandals that could tarnish Sweden's national reputation. The country, aiming the total use of recyclable materials in textile industry, does not present H&M - which has very active green practices - as one of the exemplary brands in fast-fashion area. Filippa K, Houdini Sportswear, Stutterheim, A New Sweden etc. are part of fashion brands lesser known in our country and globally, yet they act in accordance with

³⁶ Jens Hoff, "The Green Heavyweights – The Climate Policies of the Nordic Countries," In *The Routledge Handbook of Scandinavian Politics*, eds. Peter Nedergaard & Anders Wivel, (New York, Routledge, 2018), 49.

³⁷ See <https://sweden.se/climate/sustainability/sweden-and-sustainability> accessed 06 December 2023.

³⁸ See, <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/profiles/sweden> accessed 06 December 2023.

³⁹ See, <https://sweden.se/climate/sustainability/sweden-and-sustainability> accessed 06 December 2023.

⁴⁰ See, <https://sweden.se/climate/sustainability/sweden-and-sustainability> accessed 06 December 2023.

⁴¹ See, https://www.sgi-network.org/2022/Sweden/Environmental_Policies accessed 11 December 2023.

⁴² See, <https://sweden.se/climate/sustainability/sweden-and-sustainability> accessed 06 December 2023.

⁴³ See, <https://www.naturvardsverket.se/en/topics/climate-transition/sveriges-klimatarbete/swedens-climate-act-and-climate-policy-framework/#:~:text=Sweden's%20long%2Dterm%20target%20is,the%20market%20and%20other%20actors> accessed 06 December 2023.

⁴⁴ See, https://www.sgi-network.org/2022/Sweden/Environmental_Policies accessed 11 December 2023.

⁴⁵ See, https://www.sgi-network.org/2022/Sweden/Environmental_Policies accessed 11 December 2023.

⁴⁶ See, <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/fashion-greenwash-report-companies-hiding-true-environmental-costs-fast-fashion/> accessed 11 December 2023.

Sweden's global environmental policies.⁴⁷ Considering that in all Scandinavian countries, the government and private companies act together on environmental issues,⁴⁸ Sweden's failure to bring H&M to the forefront shows that it still needs to adopt the brand's policies. So, what are the factors that made H&M so visible and well known in the recycling domain and that also caused its downfall as fast? Is the brand being crushed under its own success in retail industry, or is it simply unable to reach the high standards of its own country in green politics area?

H&M Group and its Green Strategies

H&M group, constituted of 'H&M, Cos, Weekday, Monki, H&M Home, &Other Stories, Arket, Afound, The Singular Society, Creator Studio and Sellpy' brands, has gained worldwide renown with more than 4000 stores.⁴⁹ Before analysing this famous brand's greenwashing practices, it is necessary to mention its promises about green policies, and more specifically about sustainability and environmental management. After all, being as assertive and ambitious as its country makes oneself inevitably the focus point of environmental activists.

Without a doubt, what made H&M group known by everyone using or not fast-fashion products, are 'the recycle boxes' placed next to the cash registers. Each bag of used clothes comforts the client in the idea of helping to preserve the environment while also contributing to preserving the budget with the 15% discount per bag. The company that launched the clothes collecting program in 2013 with the 'Let's close the loop' motto, tries to motivate clients about this subject under 3 principles: "Rewear, reuse, recycle".⁵⁰ According to these 3 targets, collected clothes are either transferred to the second-hand market, transformed into other clothes, or being made reusable in production by breaking down the materials.

In addition to 'Let's close the loop', the brand's other environmental catchwords can be resumed as: "let's innovate, let's be fair, let's be for all, let's be transparent, let's clean up, let's reward our members"⁵¹. 'Inovate'; represents creating new technological solutions in order to produce clothing with less environmental impact. The partners in this domain are announced to be companies that support circular fashion such as Re:newcell, Worn Again, Ambercycle and Infinited Fiber. The 'groundbreakers' proper to the brand according to H&M are; 'Vegea', the leather made of grapes, created in cooperation with Italian wineries; 'Circulose', made 100% from waste cotton; 'Agraloop – Biofibre' made from waste food and 'Orange fiber' made from orange juice.⁵² It can be said that the brand has very creative solutions in this matter. In addition

⁴⁷ See, <https://sweden.se/culture/arts-design/making-fashion-sustainable> accessed 11 December 2023.

⁴⁸ <https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/fr/les-entreprises-danoises-veulent-sauver-la-planete-main-dans-la-main-avec-le-gouvernement> accessed 25 May 2024.

⁴⁹ See, <https://hmgroup.com/about-us/> accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵⁰ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/close-the-loop.html accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵¹ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm.html accessed 10 December 2023.

⁵² See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/innovate/the-groundbreakers.html accessed 12 December 2023.

to those, lyocell, recycled wool, linen, recycled polyester, recycled polyamide, are enumerated as recycled plastic sustainable materials.⁵³

‘Be fair’ topic can be resumed as equal payments, animal welfare, zero-tolerance approach to forced labour and to child labour.⁵⁴ ‘Be for all’ underlines equal representation, body positivity and women rights.⁵⁵ ‘Be transparent’ presents us at first the sentence “With us, it’s super simple to find out where your clothes were made”.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the following question has to be ‘or, not?’; because one of the most important greenwashing accusations made against H&M group concerns transparency. ‘Clean up’ includes elements from the general Scandinavian environmental and climate policies. In this section, the brand makes reference to biodiversity, emphasises its objective to be ‘climate positive’ by 2040, promises to neutralise more greenhouse gas and carbon than it produces, underlines its cooperation with WWF and Solidaridad about water.⁵⁷ ‘Reward our members’ aims to earn points to clients with the condition of acting environmentally responsible. What an idealistic approach, isn’t it?

“Our ambition is to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, reduce our absolute water consumption, secure wastewater quality and contribute to the global goal to have a positive impact on nature. We are moving to a circular ecosystem, where resources are kept in use for as long as possible, to decouple our growth from resource use.”⁵⁸ As this sentence witnesses, H&M, like its country-of-origin Sweden, has planned its environmental objectives for an approximately 20 years period. “At H&M Group, our goal is to reduce absolute greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across our value chain by 56% by 2030 and by at least 90% by 2040 (against a 2019 baseline). We will also balance out the remaining 10% of unavoidable emissions to reach net-zero by 2040 through carbon dioxide removals.”⁵⁹ The Net-zero and circularity can be cited as the most emphasised ones amongst these objectives. “Eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials at their highest value and regenerate nature”⁶⁰ are the main points explaining how circularity is achieved.

⁵³ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/innovate/all-stars.html accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵⁴ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/fair.html accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵⁵ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/for-all.html accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵⁶ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/transparent.html accessed 12 December 2023.

⁵⁷ See, https://www2.hm.com/en_gb/sustainability-at-hm/our-work/clean-up.html accessed 13 December 2023.

⁵⁸ See, <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/circularity-and-climate/> accessed 04 April 2024.

⁵⁹ See, <https://hmgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/HM-Group-Annual-and-Sustainability-Report-2023.pdf> accessed 04 April 2024.

⁶⁰ See, <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/leading-the-change/green-investment/> 13.12.2023

Graphic 1: H&M Group – Circular Ecosystem Key Factors⁶¹



In addition to those, H&M 'take care project', aims to give customers the habit of reusing in various areas the clothes they bought by explaining the washing methods for materials such as silk, wool, leather etc.; reinventing boots; sewing buttons and cutting denim.⁶² In fact this can also be considered as a very idealistic approach; since it is quite exceptional for a fast-fashion retail brand to have products lasting for years. Why? Because the essence of the fast-fashion industry can be resumed as; "(...) to seduce their clientele with the constant updating of their designs and the low prices of their products"⁶³. Motivating the clients to use the products over and over is an ideal difficult to realise for these brands who have a dynamic trend concept. The interest of the customers for the products changes as fast as the seasons do. In other words, fast-fashion is an industry in which the product is created very quickly in accordance with the latest fashion, however it is also consumed as quickly because of the changing trends. Therefore, in our opinion, it is a difficult challenge to convince fast-fashion customers to reuse. Finally, it is important to mention in the present section that 80% of the bags in H&M stores are recyclable.⁶⁴ Said initiative is as crucial as encouraging clothes' repair.

⁶¹ <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/circularity-and-climate/circularity/>

⁶² See, https://www2.hm.com/tr_tr/sustainability-at-hm/take-care/take-care.html 15.12.2023

⁶³ Diana Bojonca, *Corporate Sustainability in the Fast Fashion Industry: The Case of H&M*, (Universitat Jaume I, final project, 2019), 12.

⁶⁴ C. Kadioğlu, C. and İ. Gürsoy, "Yeşil Pazarlama Örnekleri ve Yeşil Pazarlama Stratejileri," In *Pazarlama ve Organizasyon Perspektifinden Kuramlar ve Tartışmalar*, ed. Ş. Karabulut, (Ankara: Gazi, 2021), 115.

The company makes green investments in order to achieve a low carbon textile industry. The examples to these projects can be summed up as being one of the leading partners of Apparel Impact Institute's Fashion Climate Fund, signing PPAs (Power Purchase Agreements) in order to have renewable energy, as well as making common projects with organisations such as WWF, Ellen MacArthur Foundation, IPBES, Business for Nature, UNFCCC, World Economic Forum, Race to Zero.⁶⁵

H&M Group Greenwashing Claims

H&M group has been elected the most transparent brand by Fashion Revolution Transparency Index with 61% rate in 2019,⁶⁶ and with a 73% rate in 2020.⁶⁷ This means that H&M communicates and shares the maximum with the clients concerning the environmental policies it applies and the measures it takes. For example, looking at the global or local websites of H&M, it can be seen that the information in said areas is very detailed.

However, all of the above-mentioned green strategies are difficult to achieve successfully and to maintain, no matter how much ambition is put in. The brand, which has hundreds of stores globally, collects clothes for recycling at the same scale. The clients of a fast-fashion brand that creates designs according to the seasons – even if they are encouraged to repair – consume this fashion at the same speed. Therefore, even the recycling process of these fast consumed products draw criticism. Being the first to place recycling boxes in stores does not mean being the best at recycling. This indeed resumes the situation of H&M.

The starting point of the present study is a greenwashing scandal in the summer of 2023 involving H&M, precisely about the above-mentioned recycling topic. Bags of used clothes have been tracked by environmental activists using geo trackers and turned out to be left to rot in discharges in random countries; which left H&M group in a situation difficult to explain.⁶⁸ With reference to Terrachoice's 7 sins concerning Greenwashing, it can be said that this scandal concerns directly the Sin of Fibbing. Indeed, H&M has given false information to the clients about the fate of the clothes collected for recycling. Said scandal has strongly shaken the 'Let's close the loop' project. Yet, this is not H&M's first greenwashing case.

For instance, the scorecard system H&M created for each product, shows clients the environmental requirements according to which the items have been produced. "For example, one pair of cotton shorts was described as using '88% less [water] than conventional materials'; its global warming impact was '14% less than conventional materials.'⁶⁹ Each clothing item has

⁶⁵ See, <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/leading-the-change/green-investment/> accessed 13 December 2023.

⁶⁶ E. Fraser and H. Van der Ven, H., "Increasing Transparency in Global Supply Chains: The Case of the Fast Fashion Industry," *Sustainability* 14, (2022), 7.

⁶⁷ Paige Street and Katleen Horton, *Transparency in the Fashion Industry: A case study on H&M*, (New York, Sage Publications, 2023), 1.

⁶⁸ See, <https://fashionunited.com/news/business/h-m-s-response-to-allegations-of-dumping-textile-waste-in-global-south-highlights-industry-s-problems/2023062854563> accessed 17 December 2023.

⁶⁹ See, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/jun/28/fashion-brands-pause-use-of-sustainability-index-tool-over-greenwashing-claims> accessed 17 December 2023.

a scorecard. The brand is one of the pioneers of this 'rating' system.⁷⁰ However, according to a news report in 2022, H&M made some products appear more 'environment friendly' than they are - which can be accepted as a Sin of Worshiping False Labels - and for some gave completely unrealistic information – which represents a Sin of Fibbing. Moreover, the Higg Materials Sustainability Index (MSI) used for rating is claimed to be outdated.⁷¹ Such that, as a result of the reports published, this card system has been 'paused'. This news, to begin with, contradict the transparency policies of the brand and cause brand damage.

A similar non-transparency case came out in 2019, concerning the brand's 'Conscious' collection which was said to be environmentally conscious.⁷² While 'Synthetic fiber' made from the combination of various chemicals is considered to be one of the most damaging fabrics for the nature, it was used up to 72% in the Conscious collection, causing great debate. In fact, this rate is 61% in an ordinary collection.⁷³ A similar greenwashing case, again about the same subject concerns 'circulose'; produced as a sustainable 100% recycled cotton material. H&M has an agreement with Re:newcell company for its production. While being an ideal vegan, non-toxic, durable and biodegradable material, circulose, is impossible to produce in a fast pace according to experts.⁷⁴ In another saying, producing clothes made from circulose and even further, from completely sustainable materials shall still require many years for the fast fashion industry. It can be concluded that H&M is not totally honest with its clients in this matter. Making reference to Terrachoice once again with this example, the attitude about circulose can be explained by the Sin of Lesser of Two Evils. While the brand makes a good action by using said material, from a wider point of view as it is impossible to produce at fast pace it does not bring a concrete solution. Furthermore, going back in time, a 2018 report claims that H&M has got incinerated unsold clothes in exchange for 4 billion dollars.⁷⁵ Finally, it is necessary to precise that factory standards are crucial in order to minimise carbon emission and that H&M does not own any of the factories ensuring its production.⁷⁶ The scandals in which H&M was involved are shown in the below table from a 2022 study.

⁷⁰ See, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/jun/28/fashion-brands-pause-use-of-sustainability-index-tool-over-greenwashing-claims> accessed 17 December 2023.

⁷¹ See, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/retailwire/2022/07/13/hm-case-shows-how-greenwashing-breaks-brand-promise/?sh=6aa6e0131171> accessed 17 December 2023.

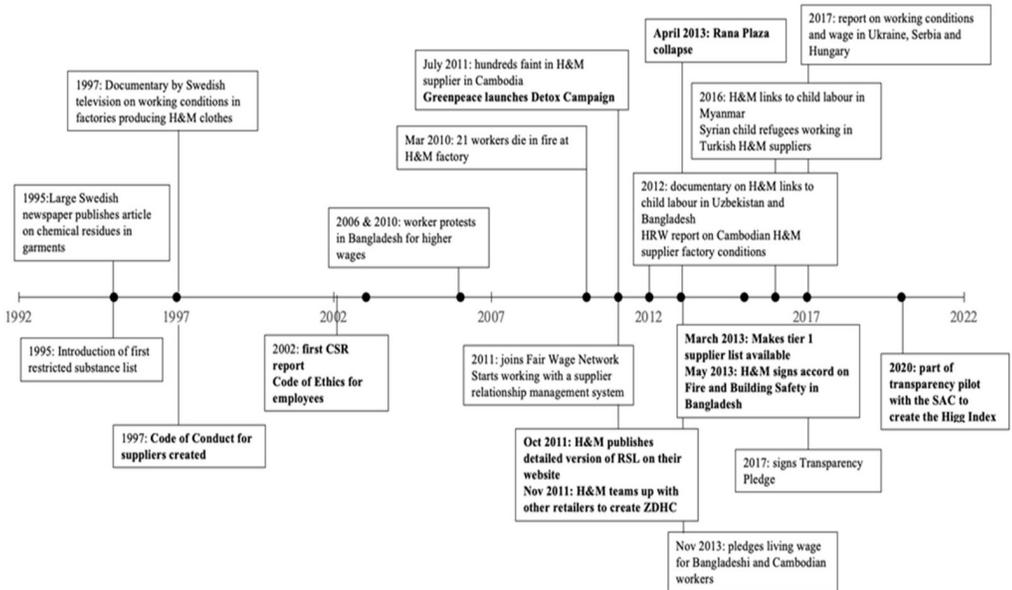
⁷² See, <https://www.usinenouvelle.com/article/h-m-accuse-de-greenwashing-avec-sa-collection-conscious.N872620> accessed 17 December 2023.

⁷³ See, <https://www.indyurk.com/node/441036/ekonomi%CC%87/ye%C5%9Fil-y%C4%B1ka-ma-dev-markalar%C4%B1n-%C3%A7evrecili%C4%9Fi-moda-haline-getirme-giri%C5%9Fimleri> 17.12.2023

⁷⁴ See, <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/hm-greenwashing-sustainable-circulose-venetia-falconer-manna-a9312566.html> accessed 17 December 2023.

⁷⁵ See, <https://o.nouvelobs.com/mode/20180416.OBS5263/h-m-l-incarnation-du-greenwashing-dans-la-mode.html> accessed 18 December 2023.

⁷⁶ See, <https://o.nouvelobs.com/mode/20180416.OBS5263/h-m-l-incarnation-du-greenwashing-dans-la-mode.html> accessed 18 December 2023.

Graphic 2: H&M Scandals 1995-2020⁷⁷

Conclusion

Contrary to the popular belief, textile industry is not the most polluting industry right behind petrol.⁷⁸ However fast-fashion industry has doubled clothes production since 2000's because of the fast-changing trends of our day.⁷⁹ Constants like water use, amount of the polyester used, carbon and greenhouse gas emissions are the main problems encountered particularly in this industry. Even though H&M group is one of the first brands of the industry to act responsible about environment and sustainability, due to the nature of said industry it is impossible to not to cause more harm than good. In another saying simply the fact that H&M is a fast-fashion brand is enough to bring up greenwashing. The link between the steps made by the brand in environmental matters & outcomes are similar to a pool problem in mathematics. Encourage repair, develop circulator mechanisms, save water and energy ...; yet when it comes to fast-fashion it is almost impossible to recycle as fast as the factories produce clothes. On the other hand, it will take years to accomplish clothes production from completely sustainable materials. So, the pool will never be full because of the hole placed in some corner.

⁷⁷ E. Fraser and H. Van der Ven, H., "Increasing Transparency in Global Supply Chains: The Case of the Fast Fashion Industry" *Sustainability*, 14, (2022).

⁷⁸ See, <https://o.nouvelobs.com/mode/20180416.OBS5263/h-m-l-incarnation-du-greenwashing-dans-la-mode.html> accessed 18 December 2023.

⁷⁹ See, <https://o.nouvelobs.com/mode/20180416.OBS5263/h-m-l-incarnation-du-greenwashing-dans-la-mode.html> accessed 18 December 2023.

The above explained situation not only causes brand damage or client mistrust to H&M, but it also harms the national reputation of Sweden, brand's country of origin. As mentioned in the present study, Sweden, like other Nordic states is particularly vigilant in environmental matters. It aims to be a global leader in such 'soft power' areas. Thus, the scandals caused by a globally renown Swedish retail brand inevitably have a negative effect on Sweden's image in the international system. Moreover, all these incidents happened in a period during which either for the first time since 1987 a government took office without a Minister of environment⁸⁰ or the new draft budget announced by the government had cuts concerning environmental measures.⁸¹ Today, H&M, as much as the new government, is at times in contradiction with Sweden's traditional environmental policies.

The present study can bring up the following debate in this matter: "Since Fast-fashion does not really allow a sustainable lifestyle, why is H&M trying to achieve the impossible for so many years? It is obvious that the brand has been targeted by greenwashing accusations for a long time. Why is it causing brand damage to itself? Could it be because in line with Nordic objectives, it shares the same environmental awareness as Sweden? Or even beyond that, could it be in order to be a global example? At this point, looking back to the reasons mentioned in the theoretical part of the present study, which push brands to greenwashing, the fact that H&M was one of the 'first' brands to care about sustainability and environment naturally intensifies the rivalry on this matter. Moreover, the global position Sweden wishes to reach in this area increases the psychological pressure on the brand. As a result, H&M gets dragged into a series of mistakes listed in the present study, shadowing its own image as well as Sweden's national reputation.

Based on the 2024 data, H&M's ranking in the 'The Annual Report on the Most Valuable and Strongest Swedish Brands Index' is a significant indicator. Despite a 4.3%-point loss, H&M's ability to maintain a respectable 3rd position showcases its resilience in the face of a challenging year. This year was marked by difficulties in attracting customers and keeping sales, exacerbated by the shifting consumer preference towards sustainable alternatives. However, H&M's brand still stands strong, a testament to its enduring appeal.⁸²

Nikki Baird, vice president of Aptos Retail, emphasizes the need for H&M and other brands in the retail sector to take direct action on sustainability. She argues that "the industry cannot rely solely on trade associations as the arbiters of sustainability or eco-impact scoring".⁸³ Instead, brands should engage directly with organizations exclusively focused on reducing environmental impact and increasing the sustainability and reuse of products.⁸⁴ In response

⁸⁰ See, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2022/10/22/sweden-s-climate-policy-is-in-turmoil_6001310_114.html accessed 18 December 2023.

⁸¹ See, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/20/swedish-government-criticised-curbing-green-policies-budget> accessed 18 December 2023.

⁸² See, <https://brandirectory.com/rankings/sweden> accessed 25 May 2024.

⁸³ See, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/retailwire/2022/07/13/hm-case-shows-how-greenwashing-breaks-brand-promise/?sh=6aa6e0131171> accessed 25 May 2024.

⁸⁴ See, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/retailwire/2022/07/13/hm-case-shows-how-greenwashing-breaks-brand-promise/?sh=6aa6e0131171> accessed 25 May 2024.

to accusations of greenwashing, H&M has made a firm pledge to accelerate its efforts and become fully transparent about its environmental impact by 2023. This commitment includes publishing a comprehensive list of suppliers and disclosing the environmental impact of each product and other relevant data, providing stakeholders with a clear view of the brand's ethical practices.⁸⁵

The study demonstrates that global brands can significantly influence a nation's soft power values, both positively and negatively. A case analysis reveals a potential negative impact of H&M's greenwashing practices on Sweden's soft power and national branding. This underscores the direct link between a state's image and reputation and that of its global brands due to image transfer. To avert such issues in the eyes of foreign peoples, national branding policies must be shared with all national brands. National brands should develop and enforce their corporate codes of conduct, taking into account their national image and reputation, thereby ensuring the preservation of Sweden's soft power.

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⁸⁵ See, <https://retailboss.co/hm-wins-lawsuit-over-greenwashing-allegations/> accessed 25 May 2024.

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