



The Future of Fast Fashion

H&M CEO, Helena Helmersson

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This case is intended to be used as the basis of class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The material in this case study is based on secondary data from published sources. The authors have not interviewed the business leaders in this case.

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Abstract

The fast fashion industry has long been known for its negative impacts on the environment, and exploitation of workers due to its mass production business model. One brand is leading the charge to rewrite the narrative surrounding fast fashion and make it a greener and safer industry. The current CEO of H&M, Helena Helmersson, is addressing these concerns as part of her long-term vision for the brand to improve. H&M's mission is to embrace sustainability, respect human rights, and make fashion accessible for all. This case study looks at the impact Helmersson and her leadership strategies have had on the sustainability and ethical initiatives at H&M. It will also highlight how she has become a changemaker in the fashion industry by leading with a global mindset and ensuring H&M's focus on sustainability, human rights, diversity in the company, and changes in new market conditions.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, the students should be able to:

- Appraise Helena Helmersson's environmental and human rights efforts in alignment with public policy initiatives and UN Goals for sustainability.
- Evaluate Helena Helmersson's Global mindset.
- Appreciate how Helena Helmersson evolved the H&M brand to adapt to new market conditions and behaviors.

The Leadership Challenge¹

It is another day in a world rattled by a global pandemic, economic downturns, and environmental crises. Hennes & Mauritz, more commonly known as H&M, has recently reported its first rise in annual profit since 2015. With this announcement came another declaration. Former Head of Sustainability and brand veteran Helena Helmersson has been appointed Chief Executive. After beginning her career with the label in 1997 and navigating through different departments and overseas assignments, Helmersson has found herself at the top. As Helmersson settles into her new role, she works from the brand's headquarters in her native home of Sweden. Recently, some fast fashion brands have been under criticism for their negative effects on the environment and human rights violations, H&M being a main offender. Helmersson, however is excited about her new role as she reflects on her career with the brand and trusts her prior experiences. She hopes to usher in a new era of fast fashion. One that is sustainable and accessible to everyone. Helmersson's mission and vision for the future involve paving a path forward for positive change. For H&M, Helmersson is the perfect fit. With experience and a passion for leadership, Helmersson will attempt to reverse the narrative surrounding fast fashion and demonstrate how it

¹The authors have not interviewed the business leaders in this case. The authors used creative license to write a protagonist story to help the reader imagine leader thought processes and feelings.



is possible to operate a major clothing line sustainably while remaining true to the brand's mission to be accessible to all.

The Brand, H&M

H&M (Hennes & Mauritz) is a Swedish multinational clothing retail company known for its fast-fashion offerings. It was founded in 1947 by Erling Persson and is headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. H&M has grown to become one of the world's largest fashion retailers, with a presence in more than 70 countries (PM Newswire, 2023). The company has been striving to improve its sustainability credentials under the leadership of CEO Helena Helmersson. Helmersson has been the CEO of H&M since January 2020, making her the first female CEO in the company's history (Chan, 2020). She has been with H&M since 1997 and has held various positions within the organization, gaining extensive experience in different areas of the company's operations. Before becoming CEO, Helmersson served as H&M's Chief Operating Officer (COO) and oversaw the company's global supply chain and sustainability initiatives. She played a crucial role in implementing sustainability practices and strategies within H&M's operations, focusing on areas such as responsible sourcing, circular economy, and climate action. Under Helmersson's leadership, H&M has made significant changes and initiatives to address sustainability and ethical concerns in the fashion industry.

Some of the changes she has brought to the company include sustainability commitments, aiming to become climate-positive by 2030 and use only recycled or sustainably sourced materials by 2030 (Chan, 2020). Helmersson has been instrumental in driving these commitments and integrating sustainability into the company's core operations. She also has heavily focused on supply chain transparency by publicly disclosing supplier lists and sharing information about supplier factories. This move aims to enhance accountability and encourage better labor and environmental practices throughout the supply chain. She has also garnered focus on recycling and the circular economy with programs such as the "Close the Loop" collection, which encourages customers to bring unwanted clothes for recycling in exchange for store discounts (PM Newswire, 2023). Also, with the conscious collection introduced under Helmersson, H&M has featured more sustainable and eco-friendly clothing options. This collection incorporates organic cotton, recycled polyester, and Tencel, a fabric derived from sustainably sourced wood pulp. Under Helmersson's leadership, H&M has collaborated with various organizations and initiatives to promote sustainability and responsible practices in the fashion industry. The company joined the United Nations' Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action and partnered with organizations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (Chan, 2020). Her leadership has been marked by a strong commitment to sustainability, driving H&M to become a more environmentally conscious and responsible company. Her efforts aim to transform the fast-fashion industry and make H&M a leader in sustainable fashion.

H&M's Operational Capacity

H&M operates through a vertically integrated business model, controlling various stages of the production process (Petro, 2012). They design, source materials, manufacture, and distribute their



products worldwide. With a focus on fast fashion, H&M aims to provide trendy and affordable clothing options for a wide customer base. Their operations can be broadly divided into design and product development, sourcing and production, supply chain and logistics, retail operations, and e-commerce/ digital presence.

In their design and product development, H&M employs a large team of designers and product developers responsible for creating and developing the company's clothing collections. They closely follow fashion trends, conduct market research, and collaborate with suppliers to bring new designs to the market. In sourcing and production, H&M operates on a global scale and sources its products from numerous suppliers worldwide. The company works with independent suppliers and subcontractors, primarily in Asia, Europe, and North Africa (Petro, 2012). H&M places significant emphasis on responsible sourcing and has established strict guidelines for its suppliers regarding labor conditions, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility.

Regarding their supply chain and logistics, H&M maintains a complex and efficient supply chain to ensure the timely delivery of its products to stores worldwide. The company operates regional distribution centers strategically located to serve its various markets. From these distribution centers, H&M manages inventory, coordinates transportation, and optimizes logistics to streamline the movement of goods from suppliers to stores. In Retail Operations, H&M operates a vast network of retail stores globally, both company-owned and franchise-operated. These stores are the primary channels through which H&M sells its products to customers. H&M stores are designed to offer a pleasant shopping experience, with well-organized displays and regularly updated merchandise. The company continually monitors sales data and customer preferences to adapt its product offerings and store layouts. There is also a heavy focus on their e-commerce and digital presence. H&M has a strong online presence and operates an e-commerce platform that allows customers to shop for H&M products online.

H&M Factories and Labor Force

H&M, under the leadership of Helmersson, has implemented a strong system to ensure responsible sourcing and fair labor practices throughout its supply chain. The company has faced scrutiny regarding labor conditions in some of its supplier factories, and it has taken steps to address these concerns. In turn, they have established guidelines and standards that their suppliers and factories must adhere to. These guidelines cover areas such as labor conditions, workers' rights, health and safety, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility.

Some key aspects regarding H&M's factories and labor force include supplier compliance. H&M has a rigorous supplier compliance program to ensure that its suppliers and factories meet the company's standards. The company conducts audits and assessments to evaluate supplier compliance with its code of conduct and requirements. This includes monitoring factors such as working hours, wages, occupational health and safety, and employment practices (Petro, 2012). They also implement a comprehensive code of conduct which outlines its expectations for suppliers and factories regarding labor standards. The code includes provisions for fair wages, non-discrimination, freedom of association, child labor prevention, and environmental protection.



H&M expects its suppliers to comply with these standards and continuously improve their practices (PM Newswire, 2023). They promote social dialogue and collaboration between management and workers within its supply chain. The company encourages worker representation systems and trade unions or other forms of worker representation. These social dialogue groups allow workers to voice their concerns, negotiate for better working conditions, and contribute to decision-making.

Helmerson has also garnered investment in capacity building and training programs for its suppliers and factories (Chan, 2020). The company provides resources, guidance, and training to help suppliers improve their practices and comply with H&M's requirements. This includes training on labor standards, health and safety, environmental sustainability, and management systems. They also emphasize transparency and disclosure regarding their supply chain and factory operations. The company publishes an annual Sustainability Report, which provides detailed information about its sustainability initiatives, supply chain performance, and progress towards its goals. H&M also maintains a publicly accessible supplier list, demonstrating its commitment to transparency. Despite H&M's efforts to ensure responsible sourcing and fair labor practices, there have been instances where labor rights violations have been reported in the company's supply chain. In response, H&M has addressed these issues by terminating contracts with non-compliant suppliers and implementing corrective actions.

A Brief History of Fast Fashion

Throughout the 15th century, fashion was defined as giving form or shape to something. However, as time passed, fashion became much harder to define (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.a.). Fashion became less of a verb and more of an idea. An idea that provides insight into the clothes, hair, and makeup popular for a certain period or place. While fashion as a concept and status is not a new phenomenon, the mass production and purchase of clothing and garments did not occur until many years later.

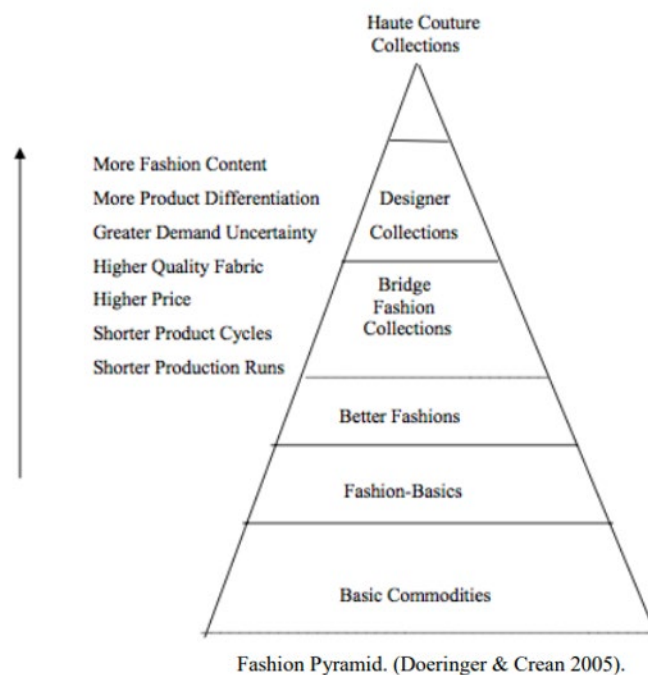
As the definition and meaning of the word itself have evolved, 'fashion' as a market has taken shape. The history and emergence of fashion, meaning the clothing and garment industry can be traced back centuries, with Britain and the United States playing a major role (Linden, 2016). As Britain became more industrious by building factories and mills, the United States was operating a massive industry for cotton through slave labor and the plantation lifestyles of the South. Cotton from the United States was exported to Britain and turned into fabric and clothes. These clothes were then sold ready-to-wear. With the invention of the sewing machine in 1846, clothes were produced at an increased speed and in much larger quantities. These new efficiencies in garment-making decreased the price of clothing drastically (Idacavage, 2018). Previously, purchasing clothing was a luxury that only the wealthy could afford. As articles of clothing had come down in cost, purchasing clothing as opposed to making it became a viable option for an increased number of people.

As the American Civil War broke out in 1861, some soldiers were in need of a ready-made uniform. This need ultimately led to the creation of the garment factory. The workers of these

garment factories would work to produce soldiers' uniforms and even adapt standard sizing (Lower East Side Tenement Museum, n.d.a.). By 1931, New York City was home to the world's largest garment factories. Although highly productive, garment factories were known for their long working hours and unsafe working conditions. The garment factories of the United States would not last much longer, however. The 1960s ushered in a new era of fashion and was widely focused on inexpensive and trendy clothing. Instead of buying clothes meant to last, consumers were more focused on purchases that would only be worn a few times, as new trends and styles constantly evolved. This led to a higher demand for new clothing, which the successful garment factories of the past could not keep up with. As brands attempted to keep up with the demand for cheap and trendy clothing, they were forced to produce their clothing elsewhere (Idacavage, 2018). By the 1970s, clothing production from popular retail brands had been largely outsourced to developing countries to allow for more profitability and cheaper production costs (Linden, 2016). As the production methods of the clothing industry changed, so did the ways in which clothing and garments were purchased. Shopping malls and clothing stores became the norm, and popular brands such as Nike, Levi, and Tommy Hilfiger dictated what was trendy.

As the last twenty to thirty years have seen an increase in globalization and outsourcing of labor and manufacturing, a new age of the fashion industry has developed. Fast fashion, or clothing designs that move quickly from runways and into stores to capitalize on trends has become an increasingly popular business model for clothing brands worldwide. Fast fashion brands are largely marketed to and rely mainly on young women looking to wear stylish and on-trend options while spending the least amount of money possible. These brands often have a large digital presence and rely on online shopping for a large portion of their sales (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Today, popular looks from runways can be reproduced for a fraction of the cost due to cheap labor and synthetic fabrics. (Claudio, 2007). The means of production then allow the product to be sold comparatively inexpensively. This current model of purchasing designer looks at a fraction of the cost, defies the fashion pyramid pictured in Figure 1. As brands are manufacturing smaller quantities of a larger number of products, consumers are incentivized to purchase more clothing in shorter amounts of time due to fears that a certain product will not be available for a longer period. Because these products are made with cheap labor and inexpensive materials, buyers

Figure 1. Old Fashion Pyramid





have an increased ability to purchase more clothing for less money (Linden, 2016). While many argue that being able to purchase more for less is a benefit of breaking the previous mold, the current business model of fast fashion enables a wasteful and disposable culture. From 2000 through 2015, the amount of clothing being produced doubled, while the use and lifetime of these garments decreased drastically (Mulhern, 2022). Not only is this increased demand for more clothing wasteful in nature, it is also harmful to the individuals working in modern-day garment factories and sweatshops. Due to its negative impacts on the environment and human rights, the emergence of fast fashion has resulted in global and environmental catastrophes. Without collective action from corporations and regulators, fast fashion will continue negatively impacting the environment while contributing to climate change and human rights failures. H&M, Helena Helmersson, however, understands the importance of global collaboration and is attempting to evolve fast fashion and adopt a more sustainable business model.

Sustainability Initiatives

As the state of the environment and climate change have reached a crisis stage where individuals' actions are no longer enough to reverse the damage done to the planet, The United Nations is calling for global governance and regulation. The organization has developed a list of sustainability goals that focus on mitigating and eliminating some of the world's problems. To achieve these goals, collective action is required from member states and the companies and organizations that operate within their borders. The fast fashion industry alone is responsible for generating more CO₂ than the shipping and aviation industries combined and produces more than 92 million tons of waste each year (Mulhern, 2022). Due to the magnitude of their negative impacts, fast fashion brands have a corporate social responsibility to address how their products and means of production are directly linked to climate change. As a result of Helena Helmersson's leadership and interest in improving the brand's environmental impact, H&M is helping the United Nations in achieving its goals of ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns, as well as taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. To assist the UN in achieving its aforementioned goals, Helena Helmersson has developed a plan to pave the way for fast fashion brands to move toward a more sustainable future. Despite accusations of greenwashing and claims that the brand is not doing enough, Helmersson has proven her commitment and desire to be a changemaker in the industry.

One of the main aspects of H&M's sustainability vision for the brand is the concept of circularity. Circularity, or circular economic models, are business plans that involve reusing products to make and manufacture new products instead of disposing of old products and

Figure 2. H&M's Circular Ecosystem



extracting new materials (unctad.org). The Circular Ecosystem, as depicted in Figure 2, was introduced by H&M in 2021. The Circular Ecosystem involves three aspects: circular products, circular supply chains, and circular customer journeys. As H&M has committed to creating durable products that are manufactured with recycled materials, these means of production then allow for customers to enjoy H&M's products and clothing for longer before repairing or recycling previously purchased items. This creates a circular supply chain that circulates products and materials that can be repaired or recycled into something new (H&M Group n.d.a.).

To sustain and promote the brand's circular ecosystem, H&M has implemented several initiatives that ensure continued circularity for the brand. She believes this shift to a circular ecosystem will "decouple growth and production of garments from the use of natural resources." Circularity as a concept will also aid the brand in addressing the challenge of overproduction by forecasting customer use and demand more efficiently. (Chan, 2020). To determine the best methods and materials for manufacturing their clothes, H&M has dedicated time and research into how their clothes are worn and their products are used. This has allowed the brand to determine how durable an article of clothing should be made and which recycled materials would work best for that particular item. Everyday items are made with stronger and more durable materials to allow for many uses over an extended period. On the other hand, products that are purchased for special occasions and will be worn less are manufactured to be less durable but consist of materials that are easy to recycle (H&M Group, 2022). These production methods contribute to less clothing waste and more opportunities for old garments to be recycled or reused into something else.

For customers to recycle their clothing easily and efficiently, H&M offers a garment collecting program that is available worldwide. This means that when articles of clothing have reached a



point where they are in disrepair or are no longer worn, customers can donate their used items. The garments are then sorted and recycled based on how the garment could be utilized best. The garment collecting program realized 14,768 tons of textiles from donations in 2022 alone. Coinciding with their garment collecting initiative, H&M is also involved in several clothing rental and reuse agencies that allow customers to express themselves through fashion while also allowing clothing and garments to circulate (H&M Group, 2022). Helmersson has also steered the brand to invest in companies like ColorFix and Alchemie. These companies have worked to develop clothing dyes that use less water, chemicals, and energy than traditional dyeing processes. Because of Helmersson's commitment to the circular model, 84% of the materials used in their manufacturing process are recycled, water consumption per product is down 38% compared to levels in 2018, and the brand has seen a 44% decrease in overall packaging waste (H&M Group, 2022).

Ethical Issues

Fashion has exposed the reality of how humans have mistreated animals for decades to obtain plumage and leather to produce clothing. Also, fashion has exposed other harmful and unethical practices, like environmental contamination, labor exploitation, and discrimination. We can say that haute couture greatly affects the trade in animal fur and exotic animal skins since garments made from this material have been the focus of its most sought-after and acclaimed collections in the industry. According to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) (PETA, n.d.a.), around 20 million animals are killed by traps used to hunt them for their fur, while 40 million are farmed exclusively for the fashion industry.

For many years, organizations like PETA have pushed companies to stop using animal skin to make clothes, bags, and other fashion products. This organization created campaigns to promote cruelty-free production to create change in the industry. PETA influenced many fashion industry CEOs to change these inhumane practices, including Helena Helmersson. Helena announced the change of a policy where she would strategically start transitioning H&M to be a responsible and ethical company while using animal products and eliminating animal products in its future collections.

According to the H&M Animal Welfare Policy (2023), Helena Helmersson plans to work only with certified farms that use less aggressive techniques when removing the wool from the sheep. Even though animal skin is still used in some H&M products, Helena Helmersson has banned using fur, angora, and exotic animal skins, and she plans to only work with certified providers approved by PETA that prioritize animal welfare and provide good living conditions by 2025. Finally, Helena Helmersson introduced 2021, a line that combines innovative fabrics and materials from more sustainable sources; since the designs do not include fabrics or processes derived from animals, it is considered a vegan clothing line.

Another criticism against the brand is racism. In 2018, H&M was affected by the controversial news of having a black child wearing a green sweatshirt with the logo "coolest monkey in the jungle" (Washington Post, 2018). While many people condemned the incident, it put H&M in a



bad light. In 2020, the company was embroiled in another racism scandal where a catalog photograph, reserved for internal use, revealed the draft of a purple hat under the general description "N...Lab Beanie". Helena Helmersson faced this bitter situation through her strong intercultural empathy. She recognized that those actions were very wrong and unacceptable. According to an official H&M website (2020) communication, Helena Helmersson established five new commitments to inclusion and diversity in the company. H&M donated 500K to an organization that fights for justice, economy, and empowering rights to the Afro-American community and is committed to creating stronger relationships with historically colored universities.

Helena Helmersson realized that gender equality in the fashion industry affects females, especially in third-world countries. H&M and other fashion brands have been involved in scandals since it is well-known that many women and girls working in the fast fashion industry have less access to leadership roles due to a lack of technology skills, workforce training, and financial education. So, the H&M Group, led by Helena Helmersson, created a project focusing on empowering women and providing them with the workforce and personal resources needed to promote them into leadership roles. According to Helena (H&M Foundation), this would significantly impact H&M, and it helps to have better gender equality.

Pandemic Effects

The Covid-19 outbreak that began in China in 2020 made governments worldwide close businesses and order millions of people to stay home to try to curb the spread. This situation forced H&M to temporarily close most of its stores, which led to massive layoffs. After three years of the pandemic, most businesses in the fashion industry have been impacted, changing the entire world, including the market conditions and how consumers behave. According to Nazir (2022), consumer behavior changed drastically since 60% of global apparel is through online sales. Considering those drastic changes, Helena Helmersson had to devise a plan that allowed H&M to adapt to new market conditions while accommodating consumer preferences.

Helena has created a plan composed of three main ideas to increase sales without impacting their current sustainability plan. This plan involves investing heavily online, attracting Gen Z shoppers, and building an agile supply chain. (Nazir, 2022), Helena explained that this plan has worked well since 24 % of sales have increased since H&M started focusing on improving technology. For example, the H&M app allows clients to check out at the stores, look for prices through the mobile device, reach out to more customers, and retain customers with their rewards program.

Helena Helmersson has also targeted the consumer market to Generation Z and the millennials to boost sales. This is because those in that generation use technology more and are more interested in green energies, sustainability, and the use of organic cotton and non-animal material. They also prefer sustainable clothing materials to fashion garments. Finally, Helena Helmersson developed a strategic plan to create a close business relationship with a supplier that allowed access to consistent materials. This plan lets H&M create trend fashions using the same vendors and raw materials that enable the company to frequently provide final products on a fast track and at low cost.



Looking Ahead

While the circular model and other human rights initiatives are making an impact, Helmersson and the brand still have a long road ahead of them when it comes to operating a fully sustainable and circular business globally. Helmersson is off to a great start with the culmination of all the strategies shared above. To maintain and further integrate her circular ecosystem, Helmersson, and the brand hope to manufacture their products from 100% recycled or sustainably sourced materials by 2030 and be a climate-positive company by 2040 (Chan, 2020). There was an increase to 57% from 35% of sustainable materials used by H&M in 2018. The equivalent figure for cotton was 95%, close to the company's goal to reach 100% next year. They also have developed a new water roadmap, supported by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), including the goals to reduce water usage by 25% in production and to recycle 15% of wastewater back into production processes by 2024.

H&M has recognized the potential for growth in emerging markets and has outlined several strategies to expand its presence in these regions. The company aims to tap into the rising middle-class populations and increase consumer spending power in emerging economies. These include focusing on localization and adaptation, e-commerce and their digital presence and sustainability and corporate social responsibility. While these goals are lofty, and Helmersson admittedly does not have all the solutions or methods to achieve them currently, she understands that as a global leader, "You can't wait until you have all the answers to set the bold targets; you need to have the courage to set them" (Chan, 2020).



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