

## Chapter 22

# The Challenge of Sustainability within the Italian Fashion System

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### ABSTRACT

*Sustainability has become a critical issue for the fashion industry globally. The question of how sustainability-related issues are regarded and implemented within this industry has been covered in recent studies, but there is still no overall perspective on the way these matters are being introduced throughout the entire supply network. This study examines how several focal Italian fashion companies are changing their image and practices to address sustainability concerns and how they are extending these initiatives to their suppliers and retailers. This analysis is based on various research methodologies, involving multiple case studies, secondary data analyses and mystery shoppers.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of the sustainable development in the fashion market has become a matter of the utmost importance in the last decade (Caniato et al., 2012; De Brito et al., 2008; Arrigo, 2013; Perry & Towers, 2013; Turker & Altuntas, 2014). Many authors have focused their researches on this issue, with the aim of ensuring to the future generations the opportunity to fulfil their own needs; but the only work that up to date has been acknowledged as the reference one is the Triple Bottom Line theory developed by Elkington in 1997. This theory sets out the idea that a company's economic perspective should be linked to sustainable environmental and social objectives and it proposes that, when defining their strategies, companies must equally balance, at one time, all these three categories of goals (Lo et al., 2012).

Despite the general growing interest in the literature on sustainability, there are still no insights into how companies can turn the suggested concepts into practice (Srivastava, 2007), especially when considering the implications that this sustainable strategy can have along the entire supply chain. In today's competitive environment, no single company can set up relevant decisions on its own and, likewise, there is the need for a strong integration and collaboration between all the actors in the supply chain (Seuring & Müller, 2008; Macchion et al., 2015). Even ambitious sustainability programmes can be, in fact, seriously damaged or neutralised by a poor environmental or social management of suppliers. Within this framework oriented in achieving sustainability-related objectives, learning how to harness improved collaborations among the supply chain partners is becoming increasingly important (Ashby et al., 2012).

On the other side, the sustainability challenge represents a great opportunity for companies to find new customers, especially those segments that are getting always more sensitive to social and environmental matters. Sustainability, therefore, can provide interesting opportunities to companies, in terms of brand awareness, to acquire distinctive niche skills and a competitive advantage over their competitors (De Brito et al., 2008; Nargurney & Yu, 2012).

In line with these considerations, the aim of this research is to discover which are the main initiatives, concerning the environmental and social responsibility questions that several Italian focal fashion companies are addressing. The approach looks at both the supply and distribution networks, identifying the relative drivers, barriers and best practices. Since sustainability programmes are backed by good communication with stakeholders (today, more than previously, through Internet), this research also examines the web-based communication and verifies whether sustainability practices are aligned to the brand image proposed online by the sample companies to their end customers and other stakeholders. Communication, in fact, has a central role within the fashion industry (Brun & Castelli, 2008; Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012) and learning how to properly communicate the internal sustainability programmes makes a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge concerning the strategies and the dynamics within the fashion industry.

## **BACKGROUND**

The ability to preserve our natural environment and the existing societies in order to allow the future generations to meet their own needs is referred as the "sustainable development" (WCED, 1987) of the world. Such concept can be in turn considered into its two main surrounding dimensions, namely "environmental sustainability" and "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR).

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