


Chapter 22

Walking or Talking, That Is the Question in the Italian Fashion Industry

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, businesses and civil society have become increasingly aware of the fundamental role they play in maintaining the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants, to ensure a healthy, ethical, and sustainable environment for present and future generations. Particular prominence in this regard is given to the fashion industry, which is one of the world's most polluting industries and at the center of numerous social scandals. Fashion organizations have begun a path of growth toward a sustainable corporation model. This research aims at exploring how Italian fashion companies fit on a continuum at the extremes of which purely talker and purely walker organizations can be placed. The question this chapter will try to answer is: with reference to corporate social and environmental responsibility, what do companies promise and what do they actually implement? Is there consistency between what is said and what is done?

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifty years, businesses and civil society have become increasingly aware of the fundamental role they play in maintaining the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants, to ensure a healthy, ethical and sustainable environment for present and future generations. Thus, environmental sustainability has been an established goal for several decades, while social sustainability is a new area being explored by organizations. A new critical approach to consumption has led to the emergence of a new consumer intent on influencing corporate strategy through his or her purchasing choices.

Particular prominence in this regard is given to the fashion industry, which is regarded as one of the world's most polluting industries and at the center of numerous social scandals. Just consider the several press campaigns against the exploitation of child labour and workers in precarious conditions, among which Nike's factories practices in Indonesia in early 90s was probably the most well-known case (Rossi, 2017). The terms pinkwashing and greenwashing are used to describe deceptive practices in the fashion industry related to social and environmental issues. Pinkwashing refers to the exploitation of breast cancer awareness or LGBTQ+ causes for marketing purposes, while greenwashing refers to false or exaggerated claims about sustainability and eco-friendliness.

Fashion firms have begun a path of growth toward a Sustainable Corporation model. Our study will focus on the Italian fashion industry, a flagship of the Made in Italy (71.8 bn euro in 2018), characterized by mid- to high-end products that embody the values of the Italian Way of Living. The industry is undergoing a transformation towards ethical and sustainable firms. For instance, in the last few years many Italian Fashion companies have joined the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promoted by the United Nations with the governments of 193 member countries with the aim to reach 17 challenging goals related to environmental and social sustainability within 2030 (sdgs.un.org). Moreover in 2019 - during the G7 convention in Biarritz, 56 Fashion companies controlling 250 brands - many of which were Italian - signed the Fashion Pact, an agreement with the goal to stop global warming, restore biodiversity and protect the oceans (thefashionpact.org).

The Fashion Pact is a clear example of how environmental and social sustainability are going through different stages of awareness and growth for governments and companies. Until the early 2000s, the word "sustainability" was more used with reference to environmental and biophysical issues. In the last few years, also due the 2007 economic crisis that pushed companies and governments to revise their strategies and priorities - and even more in 2020 after Covid-19 spread worldwide, a new idea of sustainability has taken hold. This is a concept more focused on new values, such as inclusion, diversity and equality (Valance, Perkins, Dixon, 2011). Thus, while environmental sustainability is a more established, mature and recognized concept, the social one is a new field, still under investigation in the Italian Fashion Industry.

Corporate communication is crucial, but even more important for the purposes of a sustainable revolution on our planet is what companies actually do to deliver on their promises. In this regard, a research stream has emerged in recent years called Walking the Talk, aimed at assessing what companies promise (talking) and what they actually do to meet their sustainable development commitments to their stakeholders (walking). Our research aims at exploring how Italian fashion companies fit on a continuum at the extremes of which purely talker and purely walker companies can be placed. The question we will try to answer is: with reference to corporate social and environmental responsibility, what do companies promise and what do they actually implement? Is there consistency between what is said and what is done? Overall, the "walk and talk" theory emphasizes the need for the fashion industry to not only talk about sustainability but also take concrete actions to implement sustainable practices at every stage.

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