

Made in Italy values “meet” sustainability: The E. Marinella case

Abstract

The global fashion industry has been facing the challenge of sustainability for some time now. This issue is felt by practitioners even for Made in Italy (Mdi) products, recognised worldwide for their unique values, such as design, quality excellence, and craftsmanship. However, the research stream on sustainable Mdi fashion is still in its infancy. Studies have addressed the dimensions of sustainability separately, focusing on the environmental and/or social dimensions and devoting less attention to the economic one. Furthermore, there is a lack of a holistic vision of the possible synergies between the values of Mdi and the three sustainability dimensions. Consequently, the study aims to provide an integrated reading of the Mdi values with the environmental, social, and economic sustainability dimensions through an in-depth case study. The results showed how the four themes of Made in Italy values perceived by the firm could be combined with all three sustainability dimensions. Moreover, two different levels of sustainable approach emerged: the first one, almost related in a “spontaneous” manner to the Mdi values, and the second level, characterised by a more aware sustainable orientation. The paper may contribute to the strand of studies on Mdi by outlining the synergies between the values of fashion Mdi and all three sustainability dimensions, delving into the economic dimension that seems to be neglected in the previous studies. Finally, it provides an example of how a company can leverage the Mdi values by combining them with those of sustainability, thus strengthening its competitiveness.

Keywords: Made in Italy, sustainable fashion, single case study, in-depth interviews.

TRACK: Marketing and sustainability

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1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the most important in the world, growing by 21 per cent year-on-year in 2021 (McKinsey, 2023) and, according to Statista (2023), continuing to increase between 2023 and 2027. Fashion represents one of the pillars of Made in Italy: this Country ranks second globally in terms of exports (Confindustria, 2022) and is the European leader both for number of companies, turnover generated, and number of employees in the industry (Istat, 2023; Sace Education, 2023). The success of Italian fashion companies is due to several unique values recognised by consumers in Made in Italy products, i.e., style, creativity, sophistication of materials, craftsmanship production, and qualitative excellence (Mortara & Frangipane, 2016; Napolitano et al., 2020). Already for a longtime, the industry has been facing the sustainability challenge, specifically in environmental and social fields (Joergens, 2006; Henninger et al., 2016; Gazzola et al., 2020). In Italy, this issue has been particularly felt by managers and public institutions, as demonstrated by the publication of the “Decalogue on social and environmental responsibility” promoted by the Fashion Chamber in 2012. More recently, the President of CNA Federmoda emphasised that Made in Italy should interpret both the values of beauty and product quality and those of socially and environmentally sustainable production (Mucci, 2020).

Despite this being a critical topic, academic studies on Made in Italy fashion focusing on sustainability issues are still in their infancy. Moreover, the extant literature considers the dimensions of environmental (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2014; Battaglia et al., 2014; Bernardi et al., 2021) and social (Napolitano & Fusco, 2019; Napolitano et al., 2020) sustainability separately, devoting minor attention to the economic dimension. This focus could also be found in the more general studies in the growing strand on "sustainable fashion" (e.g., Fletcher, 2008; Henninger et al., 2016; Ciasullo et al., 2017; Joy & Peña, 2017). However, considering the Triple Bottom Line, i.e., environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Elkington, 1997) it is necessary to investigate the different facets of such a complex phenomenon as sustainability in the fashion industry (Campos Franco et al., 2020; Di Leo et al., 2023). In addition, the few studies on Made in Italy sustainable fashion do not consider the specificities of Italian productions in adopting a sustainable orientation but often treat Italy only as a research context. Instead, understanding how to combine the values of Made in Italy and the three dimensions of sustainability from a marketing perspective can help to better delineate the value proposition of Italian companies.

Considering the relevance of the topic and the gap described above, the study aims to provide an integrated reading of the Made in Italy values with the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability through an in-depth case study concerning a firm, symbol of Made in Italy, that is undertaking a decisive path towards sustainability. In this way, the paper may contribute to the strand of studies on Made in Italy by outlining the synergies between the values of Italian production and all the three dimensions of sustainability, delving into the economic dimension that seems to be neglected in the previous studies. The research also has interesting managerial implications. Starting with the case analysed, it provides an example of how a company can leverage the Made in Italy values by combining them with those of sustainability, thus strengthening its competitiveness in both the domestic and international markets.

2. Theoretical background and research objective

The “Made in” effect represents the differential value (positive or negative) that is recognised for a product because it was made in a specific country that has a particular country image (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2003; De Nisco, 2006; Marino & Mainolfi, 2013). Particularly in Italy, the categories that benefit from the Made in effect are the so-called 4As (Fortis, 1998): fashion, furniture, automation, and food. These industries are characterised by some distinctive values, linked to the traditional handcrafted production, to the style and design of the products, to high quality, and the close link with the territory and the cultural heritage of the country (Marino & Mainolfi, 2009; Napolitano et al., 2020). These attributes are particularly relevant for the products of Made in Italy fashion (Mortara & Frangipane, 2016) that are exported in UE (mainly to France and Germany) and worldwide (above all to the USA and China) (Allianz Trade, 2023).

Studies on Made in Italy and, more specifically, those focused on the fashion industry have recently started to approach the topic of sustainability, while “sustainable fashion”, considered in more general terms, is a growing research stream. Indeed, due to the highly polluting potential of production processes, the geographical diversification of supply chains (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2014; Lion et al., 2016), and the very rapid product obsolescence to follow changing trends in consumer preferences (Bernardi et al., 2021), the fashion industry is under considerable pressure especially on the environmental sustainability dimension (Henninger et al., 2016; Mora et al., 2014; Battaglia et al., 2014). Previous studies have highlighted the changes that are needed to reduce the environmental impact of fashion companies, with regard to the rethinking of supply chains and production processes (Ciasullo et al., 2017; Henninger et al., 2016), the recourse to strategic partnerships (Campos Franco et al., 2019), the use of renewable materials for products and packaging (Jin & Cedrola, 2018), and, finally, the end-of-life product management (Joy & Peña, 2017; Bernardi et al. 2021). Some authors have highlighted the need to move from linear models to 'circular fashion systems' (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021) that efficiently manage processes from design and materials to product end-of-life management to extend the product life cycle. Moreover, the social dimension of sustainability is the focus of scholars' attention, mainly regarding two realms: i) human resources management (i.e., working conditions and the consequent need to ensure transparency and traceability of production processes, equal opportunities and fair wages) (Henninger et al., 2016), and ii) link with communities (i.e., contribution to economic and social development, care for the country's artistic and cultural heritage) (Fletcher, 2008; Di Leo et al., 2023). In addition, studies have not devoted significant attention to the economic dimension of sustainability.

Lastly, an emergent focalisation on sustainability in luxury fashion has been found (e.g., Campos Franco et al., 2019; Di Leo et al., 2023), even if that is considered almost an oxymoron due to their divergent values: luxury values based on hyper-consumerism, excess, and personal pleasure "against" sustainability values, such as sobriety, moderation, and altruism. However, there seems to be an area of overlap between luxury and sustainability in consumers' perceptions, with reference to the quality, rarity, durability, and craftsmanship of productions (Faraoni, 2021). These considerations suggest a potential synergy between the Made in Italy values and the three dimensions of sustainability, i.e., environmental, social, and economic. However, to the best of our knowledge, this synergy has not been investigated from a managerial perspective that jointly considers the values of Italian-made products and the three sustainability dimensions.

Consequently, this paper aims to investigate how Italian fashion companies can exploit the existing synergies between the values of Made in Italy and all three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic).

3. Methodology

Given the contemporary nature of the phenomenon under consideration and the paucity of empirical studies with a managerial perspective, we adopted a qualitative exploratory approach based on the “single in-depth case study” technique (Yin, 2009). In this regard, we chose the case study following the “criterion sampling strategy”, i.e., implement predetermined criteria that are relevant to the study (e.g., being a fashion Made in Italy company, having sustainable orientation) (Fletcher et al., 2018). Specifically, the brand E. Marinella was selected as it represents a valid case study of sustainable Made in Italy fashion firm, honored by the Forbes Sustainability Award 2022 as one of the 50 Italian companies that have most improved their sustainable performance (Carpentieri, 2022). Founded in Naples in 1914, the E. Marinella firm became famous mainly through the production of fine silk ties and accessories (E. Marinella, 2021). The collaboration with *Orange Fiber* and *TDB Eyewear* has oriented the E. Marinella company towards the production of ties and eyewear with sustainable and biodegradable materials (Comitato Leonardo, 2022).

The study was conducted between May and July 2023, ensuring the triangulation of primary and secondary data (Flick, 2008): online public documents (e.g., E. Marinella Code of Ethics), semi-structured interviews with key informants (e.g., E. Marinella CEO), internal information provided by the interviewees (e.g., inherent to the store assortment). First, public documents providing information on E. Marinella's business were selected and analysed. Secondly, three in-depth interviews were conducted to acquire an integrated reading of the leading Made in Italy values and their connection with different aspects of the firm sustainable strategy (e.g., orientation towards sustainability and the related marketing choices). The first interview, which involved the CEO and the General Manager and Brand Ambassador, was conducted at E. Marinella headquarters in Naples (Italy) and lasted about 180 minutes. The second interview (with the Head of Communication) was conducted via Google Meet and lasted 45 minutes. Following the interviews, the managers provided some secondary sources of a confidential nature, which made it possible to complete the data useful for the study. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and, together with external and internal sources, analysed through thematic content analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010). To verify the reliability of the analysis, the coding process was performed separately by two members of the research team and subsequently compared. Furthermore, the results were confirmed by two independent expert coders, revealing a satisfactory “ratio of agreement” (87%).

4. Findings

From the analysis of qualitative data, the Made in Italy values perceived by E. Marinella have emerged. They can be summarised in four themes:

- 1) *The strong connection with the territory* (Naples and Italy): According to the General Manager, E. Marinella represents a “*Neapolitan miracle*” made possible because of the territory's uniqueness, i.e., genius, creativity, and the continuous search for innovation joint with the richness of tradition. By this close relationship with the territory, E. Marinella has become one of the symbols of Naples, and the company is proud to represent Made in Italy worldwide;
- 2) *The craftsmanship to create high-quality products*: The design ideated by the CEO, the careful choice of raw materials, the traditional printing of the silk, the cutting and tailoring of the products by seamstresses in Neapolitan laboratories make E. Marinella's products unique;
- 3) *The “proximity” to the customer*: This closeness is mainly related to sharing customers' personal stories (which are told in the Naples shop, open from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.) and the consequent knowledge of customers' needs. In this way, E. Marinella has built long-lasting relationships with its clients, accompanying them during the most significant occasions in their lives.

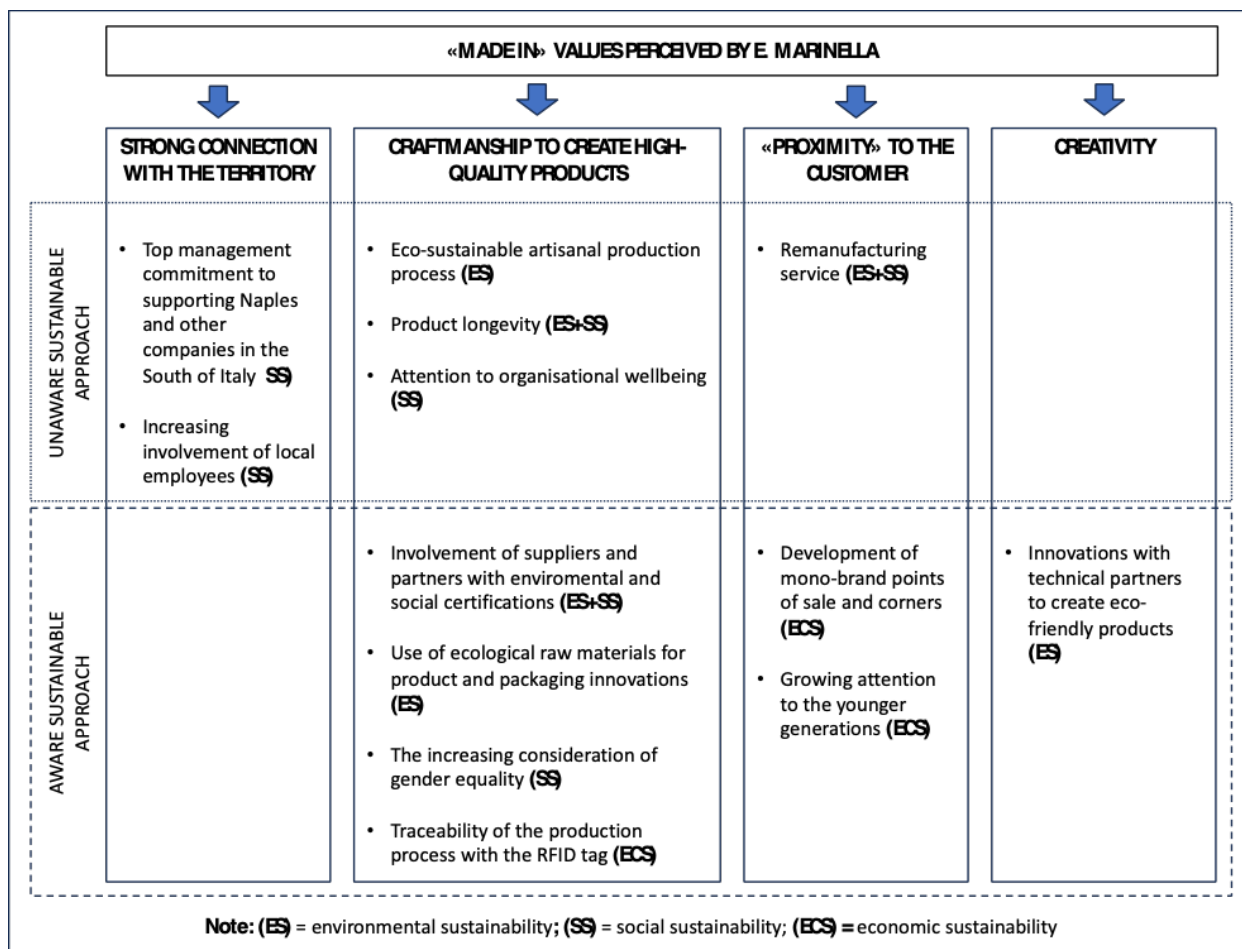
4) *The creativity*, linked by the CEO to the “*Italian creative genius*”: The strength of Made in Italy firms is that they do not replicate what others have done. They continuously create something new in search of new stimuli.

The interviewees have highlighted how the values of Made in Italy led E. Marinella to first adopt an almost unaware approach to sustainability. However, starting in 2018-2019, the company has taken a more deliberate path towards sustainability following the entry of the fourth generation. In recent years, E. Marinella has introduced new professional figures, acquired new skills, and formalised more sustainable processes, in production and all marketing and communication activities. Through the interviews and secondary data, a clear connection emerged between the four Made in Italy values and the sustainability dimensions. Therefore, we will return to each theme to show how E. Marinella interprets Made in Italy values from a sustainable perspective, showing the two levels of its sustainability orientation, namely an “unaware” approach and an “aware” one (fig. 1).

1) *The strong connection with the territory*. Two sub-themes related to social sustainability belong to this theme:

1. *The top management commitment to supporting Naples* (through the restoration of Neapolitan monuments and the contribution to the city's hospital) *and other companies in the south of Italy* (e.g., the start-ups with which it collaborates in special projects);
2. *The increasing involvement of local employees* to rely on “*knowledge rooted in the territory*”, as stated by the company's CEO.

Figure 1- Made in Italy values “meet” sustainability in E. Marinella



2) *The craftsmanship to create high-quality products.* Closely linked to this Made in Italy theme, some sub-themes have emerged that have always been part of E. Marinella's approach to environmental and social sustainability, even if unknowingly:

1. *The eco-sustainable artisanal production process* in terms of the choice of raw materials (e.g., the use of natural colours for printing) and their transformation into finished products (i.e., artisanal work by seamstresses in Neapolitan workshops). In addition, production waste was reduced by using it for new products (e.g., wallets), leading to efficiency improvement;
2. *The product longevity:* E. Marinella products are designed to be durable due to the high quality and quantity of the raw materials and the great attention during all the phases of the hand-craft production process. Moreover, the company offers a *product remanufacturing service* in the Naples shop: ties can be repaired in case of wear, damage, or stains. In this way, the product life could be extended, leading to a less frequent substitution of the products;
3. *The attention to organisational wellbeing:* Special care is taken to ensure a pleasant working environment for the employees, regularity of wage payments, and to provide additional services that can improve their quality of life in the company (e.g., chef in the laboratories).

The following themes related to a more aware sustainable approach have emerged recently:

4. *The involvement of suppliers and partners with environmental and social certifications:* The company has introduced a new professional figure that carries out an audit for the selection;
 5. *The use of ecological raw materials for product and packaging innovations:* E. Marinella has started collaborations recently to create entirely “green” products, such as orange fiber ties with biodegradable plastic packaging and sustainable bio-acetate glasses with recycled paper packaging. In this area, the company is working hard to guarantee the quality excellence sought by the E. Marinella customer, even in products that use raw materials other than “traditional” ones;
 6. *The increasing consideration of gender equality:* Whereas in the past employees were mainly men, a considerable gender balance has been achieved and activities to obtain gender certifications have been initiated;
 7. *The traceability of the production process with the RFID tag:* This innovation, seemingly in contrast to the "emotion of craftsmanship", allows the company to optimise processes and inventory management, as well as guarantee the authenticity of the products.
- 3) *The “proximity” to the customer.* Everyone in E. Marinella is committed to building and maintaining a close relationship over time with customers to whom the firm often offers additional services, such as the possibility of access directly to the laboratories in Naples for personalising the tie. Moreover, the *remanufacturing service* described above (point 2.2) should also be read from the customer relationship perspective: repairing a tie used on a particular occasion means the company contributes to keeping alive over time the emotion linked to a relevant moment in the life of customers. The proximity to the customer has been progressively transformed into an increasing focus on the prospective consumers; this theme belongs to the economic dimension of sustainability, which is realised through the following activities:
1. *The development of mono-brand points of sale and corners* in Italy and worldwide and *the launch of an e-shop:* In this way, the accessibility of products and the company's

presence in the international market is greatly improved;

2. *The growing attention to the younger generations*, who are more aware of environmental and social sustainability issues. Also, in this case, economic sustainability is central to overcoming the “traditional” market of the firm and conquering the preferences of other segments.
- 4) *The creativity*: The ongoing search for “the new”, typical of Made in Italy firms, has led to *innovations with technical partners to create ecological products* (see point 2.5). The company has partnered with start-ups and Italian companies with a marked sustainable imprint, such as *Orange Fiber* and *TBD Eyewear*. The collections resulting from these partnerships have obtained great appreciation. The Ministry of Made in Italy purchased the first capsule collection of orange fiber ties for the Government Leaders involved in the G20 held in Naples in 2021, and the second one sold out in just a few days.

Across the four themes is E. Marinella's approach to economic sustainability, which can be traced back to the company's longevity (over one hundred years of history) and increasing profitability over time (as evidenced by company balance sheets). Investments in digital technologies that enable product traceability and optimisation of production processes help to improve efficiency and free up resources to invest in sustainable innovations. Indeed, according to the interviewees, sustainability is experienced today, along with the digitisation of production and distribution processes, as the central area of company innovation.

5. Conclusion

The exploratory study investigated for the first time in an integrated manner the synergies between the values of Made in Italy and the three dimensions of sustainability in the fashion industry, overcoming, on the one hand, the limited attention on sustainability in Made in Italy fashion studies and, on the other hand, the focus on the environmental or – to a lesser extent – the social dimension of sustainability in the sustainable fashion strand (e.g., Guercini & Ranfagni, 2014; Henninger et al., 2016). Furthermore, based on the combination of the values of Made in Italy and the sustainability dimensions, the results outlined two different levels of the sustainable approach of a traditional Italian fashion company. Firstly, an “unaware” orientation emerged as Made in Italy “naturally” is connected to sustainability concerning the close connection with the territory (as emphasised in more general terms and not referring to Italian productions by Fletcher, 2008), the artisanal nature of the process (Joy & Peña, 2017), product longevity, and remanufacturing services (activities that belong to the circular fashion system outlined by Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021). The second level of sustainability orientation is deliberate, i.e., when top management leverages the Made in Italy values to embark on a more intensive and conscious path towards environmental dimension (e.g., by modifying artisanal production processes and innovating products and packaging), social dimension (e.g., by involving certified partners and increasing attention to gender equality), and, finally, economic dimension (e.g., by introducing RFID tags for production processes optimisation).

Our findings can also provide helpful managerial implications. First, a cultural change and the commitment of the top management in “traditional” firms are needed to adopt a conscious sustainable approach combined with Made in Italy values. In addition, new technical skills are required, as well as the formalisation of procedures and roles to manage all the sustainability issues in the company. Moreover, as ecological raw materials could reduce the quality of the final products, firms should choose the right technical partners to guarantee the excellence of Made in Italy products required by consumers. Finally, regarding marketing communication, managers should continuously balance the technical aspects of sustainability (e.g., environmental

certifications) with the emotional storytelling based on the Made in Italy values (e.g., craftsmanship).

This study is not exempt from limitations that may open interesting future lines of research. First, the investigation field relates to a case study (i.e., E. Marinella), which is beginning to combine in a deliberate way sustainability with Made in Italy values. Consequently, future research can follow the evolution of E. Marinella over time through a longitudinal study. Furthermore, we analysed a single case study in the fashion industry, opening extensions to other Made in Italy fashion companies involved in sustainable productions as well as other industries (e.g., furniture).

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