

Daniela Sica, Benedetta Esposito, Maria Rosaria Sessa, Ornella Malandrino and Stefania Supino

Sustainable fashion sector through a gender diversity perspective: evidence from Italy

La sostenibilità nel settore della moda in un'ottica di genere: best practices in Italia

Abstract

In recent decades, the multiple pressures determined by the extremely complex context in which organizations have found themselves operating, have imposed incessant changes in management and strategic policies, in order to face and, therefore, identify new solutions to possible problems.

The world of production and, in particular, that of fashion is called upon to assume precise moral responsibilities based on socially shared ethical principles, capable of creating, through wise and far-sighted strategies, a sustainable value for all the actors of the 'web of life'.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how the involvement of organizations operating in the fashion industry is necessary to "build" lasting sustainability, as it is capable of integrating growth with competitiveness, environmental protection and social development. This is due to the extraordinary synergies that can arise from the structured adoption of paths marked by sustainability, the inclusion of diversity and the promotion of local development-oriented dynamics.

Keywords: Diversity management, fashion industry, inclusion, sustainability building.

Abstract

Negli ultimi decenni, le molteplici pressioni determinate dal contesto estremamente complesso in cui le organizzazioni si sono trovate ad operare, hanno imposto cambiamenti incessanti nelle politiche gestionali e strategiche, per affrontare e, quindi, individuare nuove soluzioni ai possibili problemi.

Il mondo della produzione e, in particolare, quello della moda è chiamato ad assumere precise responsabilità morali basate su principi etici socialmente condivisi, capaci di creare, attraverso strategie sagge e lungimiranti, un valore sostenibile per tutti gli attori del 'web della vita'.

Lo scopo di questo contributo è evidenziare come il coinvolgimento delle organizzazioni che operano nel settore della moda sia necessario per 'costruire' una sostenibilità duratura, in quanto capace di integrare la crescita con la competitività, la tutela dell'ambiente e lo sviluppo sociale. Ciò è dovuto alle straordinarie sinergie che possono nascere dall'adozione strutturata di percorsi improntati alla sostenibilità, all'inclusione delle diversità e alla promozione di dinamiche orientate allo sviluppo locale.

Parole chiave: Diversity management, industria della moda, inclusione, costruzione della sostenibilità.

Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century were characterized by heated debates, in many countries, about the effects that economic activities have not only on the natural environment, but also on the social context. The major changes taking place with which organizations and institutions must necessarily confront require responsible behaviour, especially from a socio-environmental point of view, in line with organizational, managerial and strategic choices, both locally and globally.

In particular, attention was paid to entrepreneurial activities, that, representing the highest expression of human behaviour on an economic level, determine a multiplicity of effects that reverberate on the community. A central role is therefore to be attributed to businesses communities, that, through the production of goods and services, contribute to ensuring technical and economic progress, but at the same time cannot ignore their own environmental and social responsibilities (Frey, 2012). Today, more than in the past, civil society manifests a wide and articulated range of requests and, therefore, needs, which range from the demand for greater transparency and reliability of the information conveyed to the request to respect certain moral principles.

Consequently, the introduction of an ethical dimension in the actions of companies gives them social legitimacy. This not only through the full satisfaction of legal

obligations, but also, and above all, through proactive behaviour, aimed at investing in human capital, in social cohesion and in the enhancement of the natural environment. As a matter of fact, alongside the traditional production function, which still represents the constitutive element of their being and operating, companies are asked to give greater impetus to sustainability, with a view to simultaneously enhancing economic, human and natural capital.

Similarly, stakeholders today are asked to be more involved in adopting behaviours in line with the principles of sustainability and, above all, to acquire proactive and coherent attitudes in the relevant processes for the purposes of concrete social innovation. This implies an expansion of responsibilities and horizons for companies, through the adoption of ethical principles in the governance of management activities. In other words, the affirmation of ethical values in economic activities (such as respect for human rights and the dignity and health of workers, equal opportunities, the absence of discrimination against women and minorities, etc.).

For that reason, sustainable business is an open system that aims at creating an extended, shared and long-term value for the entire stakeholder network in which it is inserted and from which the social and environmental demands come.

In the new, managerial judgement, the implementation of a fertile and lasting relationship with stakeholders acquires a decisive role and is declined through the implementation of tools, management and governance activities, in line with the specificities of each organization. These represent the expression of the acquired awareness of the importance of the heritage of intangible resources – such as image, trust and reputation – in making profits and in the ability to compete (Proto and Supino, 2009).

Precisely in this context, the many initiatives undertaken in recent years by organizations operating in the fashion industry should be located, those organizations called to pursue socially qualified economic purposes, through the implementation of an integrated management of the different aspects relating to economy, environmental protection, improvement employment conditions and equity, inclusion and social cohesion.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the constraints and opportunities that characterize the actions of organizations in the fashion industry, engaged in the creation of a socially responsible economic pattern. Therefore, both the main problems related to the actions of the companies in the sector and the main operational models and tools through which socially sustainable policies are implemented have been explored. It has

emerged that this set of tools is difficult to adopt by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), that represent the cornerstone of the European and Italian production fabric. SMEs in the fashion sector are often characterized by a concrete social commitment, albeit unrecognizable, as the entrepreneur carries out social interventions considering them expressions of his/her own sphere rather than that of his/her own organization. This can be seen in the case of the “Passaro Group” analysed in this paper. Therefore, SMEs can be the engine of change processes and promote sustainability as a correct, fair and transparent form of creating value for all stakeholders.

Main issues on the holistic dimension of sustainability in the fashion sector

The fashion sector has an extremely complex and globalized production chain based on a system of international economic relations. On a national level, it represents an important reality in terms of turnover, added value, number of employees and companies, contributing significantly to the image of the Made in Italy in the world. With a turnover that exceeds 80 billion euros and almost 500,000 employees, the fashion supply chain represents 8.5% of the turnover and 12.5% of employment in the manufacturing industry in Italy (Montanino et al., 2020).

The fashion sector is, therefore, an engine of economic and social development and it is called to respond to some major issues: environmental sustainability, and the enhancement of human resources, product quality, the search for guarantees and information on the history of the product, transparency and traceability of the supply chain. This is due to the fact that it presents great critical issues both in its environmental and ethical-social dimension. This sector, in fact, exerts a strong pressure on the ecosystem at every stage of the life cycle of the products manufactured. In particular, it uses natural resources (such as soil, water, energy sources, etc.) but also chemicals such as pesticides, fertilizers, growth stimulants and defoliant in cotton production and is responsible for environmental degradation, reduction of land productivity, loss of biodiversity, water pollution and resistance to pathogens. According to a recent study by the Nordic Fashion Council, the fashion industry represents the second most polluting industry in the world, after the oil one (Andriola, 2016).

Every year around the world about 8,000 different synthetic chemical agents are used to transform raw materials into textiles, most of which are poured into drinking water streams (Greenpeace, 2012). Many chemicals, such as azo dye, phthalates, nonylphenol and ethoxylating agents (NPE), are bioaccumulative and, therefore, toxic, persistent and can

enter the food chains becoming more and more dangerous for the organisms that occupy the upper trophic levels.

As regards the social dimension, the fashion system is characterized by a widespread relocation of some manufacturing phases to suppliers in emerging economies, where legislation and controls in the social field are often less stringent than what happens both in Italy and in Europe.

In some areas of the world, the economic and social conditions of many workers are very critical as they work and live in difficult hygienic-sanitary conditions and are forced to endure unsustainable working hours. Added to this are the numerous discriminatory behaviours that women in the sector suffer. Moreover, it should be mentioned the lack of attention by many organizations operating in the fashion sector to issues such as gender equality, female empowerment and the inclusion of diversity.

The health emergency from COVID-19, by reshaping the times of life and work and the same urban geography, has further aggravated the situation for women. In particular, in Italy, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis have tragically highlighted the weaknesses of the increasingly absent welfare system, starting from the lost jobs and the growing wage gap, up to the increase in unpaid care jobs.

Based on these considerations, in order to guarantee their survival, organizations in the fashion industry must manage the risks that may affect the organization's reputation and, consequently, the loss of market share. For this reason, they must necessarily include in their institutional purposes also socio-environmental objectives.

There are many requests from heterogeneous types of stakeholders, that, together with the complex dynamism of the competitive context, have led to a redefinition of competitive strategies, management approaches and organizational structures. Strategies aimed at the recovery and strengthening of some elements of cohesion based on economic, social and environmental sustainability in the territorial context of reference through a path that guarantees high social quality and stimulates companies to introduce 'sustainable models' in their strategies and policies. The belief that companies that achieve positive results in the environmental and social field can only achieve better economic results, activating virtuous circuits in terms of productivity, competitiveness and image in the medium-long term, is now widespread. Furthermore, promoting a corporate culture, inclusive, cooperative, comprehensive and respectful of the particular needs of the personnel, guarantees companies greater creativity, innovation and flexibility within the organization.

Pathway to promote sustainability and inclusion in the fashion sector

The operational tools through which socially sustainable policies are implemented in companies in the fashion industry are multiple and act on the supply or demand side. They are aimed at implementing three strategic guidelines relating to the social responsibility of the fashion system: economic, environmental, socio-cultural and institutional sustainability.

Each of these guidelines can be ‘implemented’ using a multiplicity of tools according to the logic illustrated in Figure 1.

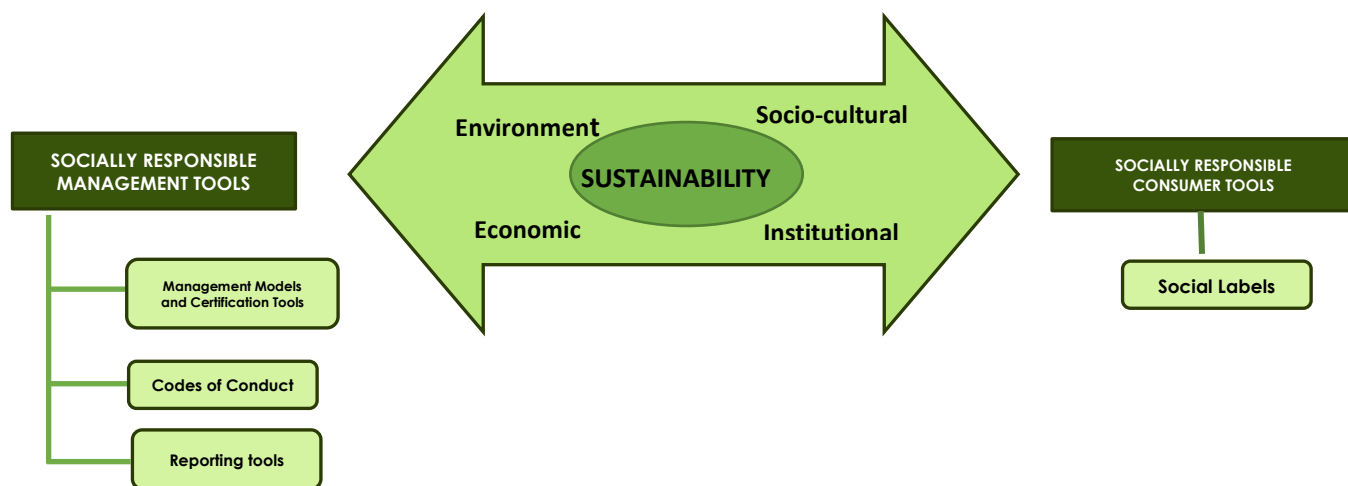


Fig. 1 - Tools for the implementation of socially responsible strategies

These tools must be implemented in ways capable of promoting cultural, managerial and organizational innovation paths based on a continuous dialogue between the company and stakeholders. They can be grouped into two main categories that can act on the demand side and on the supply side (businesses and other actors in the supply chain). The first are tools for socially responsible consumption, that aim at promoting more sustainable and fair development, influencing the purchasing decisions of consumers, distributors, business owner and other operators. They generally manifest themselves as labels and /or brands that certify that the production and marketing of products has met

some specific criteria, such as Ecolabel (certifies that the product or service has a reduced environmental impact throughout its life cycle), OEKO-TEX® Standard 100 (is a control system that takes into consideration the potentially dangerous substances that could be contained in the final product and then come into contact with the final customer / consumer), Global Organic Textile Standard - GOTS (guarantees the production and products of organic origin), etc.

Other tools on the other hand, are intended to support companies in integrating the principles of sustainability and social inclusion into strategic and operational processes. Among them, it is worth highlighting:

- The codes of conduct, which intervene in the identification and establishment of the principles of responsible behaviour.
- Reporting standards, which, through the identification of indicators and measurement techniques, aim to bring the results that the organization has managed to achieve to the attention of all stakeholders. The best known and most widespread are the social report, the environmental report, the sustainability report and gender balance.
- management and certification standards, on the basis of which an external certification is generally obtained that certifies the application of the organization's ethical, social and environmental commitment within decision-making processes and company operations. They represent a lever to improve the quality of organizational processes and the efficiency in the use of resources, as they allow not only an easier and more efficient identification and management of environmental and ethical-social risks, but also a broader and more active involvement of stakeholders and an improved organizational effectiveness through a rational collection and analysis of information on operations, as well as better coordination between the various organizational units.

The standards that organizations can adopt are many and among the most common and widespread in the fashion sector it is possible to mention ISO 9001 (relating to Quality Management Systems), ISO 14001 and EMAS (Environmental Management Systems), SA 8000 (Social Responsibility Systems) and ISO 45001 Occupational Health and Safety Systems. These systems require the organization that decides to implement them to define policies and practices of ethical and social responsibility, through the setting of targets and processes, the definition of roles and responsibility, the implementation of training courses and measurement and reporting mechanisms.

In May 2021, ISO 30415: 2021 - Human Resource Management - Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) was issued by the International Standard Organization (ISO), which

allows organizations to start a process of continuous improvement of inclusive capacities and enhancement of diversity. D&I in its embryonic form entered companies as a support of corporate social responsibility (CSR) towards inclusive corporate culture at all organizational levels (ISO, 2021).

This standard fills a regulatory gap and sheds a light on a young sector such as Diversity & Inclusion, and therefore also on gender diversity. Today organizations will be able to demonstrate through an international standard their commitment to the ability to enhance diversity in a work environment (gender, race, sexual orientation, culture, disability, etc.), promoting its inclusion. ISO 30415: 2021, therefore, promotes a sustainable action of the company, in terms of protection of human rights and the promotion of equal opportunities, in which part of its essence and purpose lies.

All the tools analysed, although attributable to some macro-types, mostly represent the outcome of the creativity and spirit of experimentation of large companies, which, by determining an incisive impact on the economic, political and social context of reference, were the first to feel the need.

In fact, they sometimes spontaneously decided and, at other times, suffered real pressure from different categories of stakeholders (employees, environmental associations, consumer representatives, etc.) and, therefore, decided to move towards the creation of a 'multidimensional' value, characterized by the integration of the economic value with the social one.

A careful analysis of national and international dynamics shows that the orientation of business organizations towards social responsibility inevitably reflects the size of the company; in fact, the adoption of the related tools is very low among SMEs, while, on the contrary, it represents a prerogative of larger organizations. The reasons are attributable to a multiplicity of contributing causes, among which it is worth highlighting that SMEs, on the one hand, show a lack of knowledge of the practices and tools that can be adopted and, on the other, they perceive an excessive difficulty and burden. As a matter of fact, the correct implementation of paths aimed at social responsibility require adequate specific skills and high organizational capacity, together with a strong focus on adequate and incisive communication policies: all factors generally absent in smaller organizations. These factors are also accompanied by others, including the limited availability of financial resources, which makes SMEs less inclined to make plans and investments with returns in the medium-long term, as the implementation of correct and effective strategies of social responsibility requires.

Consequently, the tools through which socio-environmental responsibility is now declined, are essentially conceived by and for large companies, it has therefore proved difficult to adopt by SMEs which constitute the backbone of the productive pattern of the fashion sector. Furthermore, the organizations in this sector have characterization elements, among which a more reduced average consistency, in terms of number of employees, the relative equity and financial vulnerability as well as the prevailing family-type structure.

However, some surveys aimed at analysing the socio-environmental behaviour of SMEs have shown a fair attention to aspects related to social responsibility (Molteni & Lucchini, 2004). The analyses, based on real behaviours towards the main stakeholders, rather than on the formal adoption of tools (code of ethics, environmental certifications, sustainability report, etc.) allow us to affirm that the organizations in the fashion sector often engage in socially responsible behaviour. These organizations have strengths, consisting of real peculiarities capable of facilitating paths oriented towards a broader sustainability (Proto and Supino, 2009). Just think of the strong and immediate recognition of the entrepreneur figure and his/her central role in making decisions, the flexibility and ease of adaptation to changes in the reference context. In addition, interpersonal relationships are characterized by extensive involvement with a strong emphasis on human and personal values, thanks to the widespread ability to develop a pattern of positive relationships according to the informality typical of small-scale contexts.

They substantially materialize in a marked attention to the needs of employees and those of the territory; attention that most of the time derives from the value system that guides the actions of the entrepreneur-owner, or of the reference family in the case of family businesses.

Furthermore, the deep roots in the local socio-economic context of small and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion sector allows them a close link between business and territory, a bond that nourishes informal relationships and forms of mutual aid. Even the production districts often have a social value, which transforms them into basins for the development of technical and commercial knowledge, entrepreneurial culture, educational and training structures, services to workers and their families.

Social commitment, therefore, exists in this fragmented universe, although it does not manifest itself through the formal tools of CSR, and is expressed through a pragmatic, more intuitive and informal approach, mostly aimed at the local environment, often

characterized by occasional and above all, lacking any structured links with the overall business strategy.

Sustainability and inclusion in SMEs: the case of Passaro Group

In Italy, several organizations in the fashion sector adopt a strategy aimed at creating shared value and use multiple corporate welfare tools and actions. Actions in favour of employees, based on training, income, prevention, health, time saving and reconciliation programs between work and private life. In this context, the Passaro Group is a reference model, which has activated important synergies at the organizational level, based on forms of sharing values, on mutual trust and on the search for the common good. This in a context, such as the current one, characterized by profound transformations both in the traditional structure of work and in families, but also by strong economic and social criticalities.

In the Italian fashion system, made up for the most part by SMEs, the Passaro Group, located in the heart of the medieval centre of Cava de' Tirreni, near Naples and the Amalfi Coast, it is a representative reality of the sector: it is a family business, led by female leader Pinella Passaro, with about 50 employees, all women (Passaro Group, 2021). The never-ending evolution of the economic and social context has imposed on Passaro Group uninterrupted changes in the policies and in the management and strategic decisions of the organization, in order to achieve performance with wider boundaries, as capable of including other aspects than those of mere economic nature. Therefore, Passaro Group has assumed precise economic, environmental and moral responsibilities, based on socially shared ethical principles, in response to a series of pressures and requests coming from the community and the territory, as well as from the institutional and economic world.

This is in order to create a real good corporate citizenship, aimed at offering guarantees, protection and support for the well-being of the community in which it operates.

The company management, aware of the impact of its activities on society and the environment, has tried to achieve a correct integration between the company's economic objectives and social objectives, through voluntarily and consciously adopted policies. Passaro Group recognizes that the responsibilities deriving from the exercise of its business extend beyond the protagonists traditionally considered (management, shareholders and creditors), to also include a wider circle of holders of widespread

interests (workers, suppliers, consumers and the whole of society in general) that is, all those who in various ways are affected by the consequences of company policies.

For several decades, the company has tried to get closer to local communities through philanthropic initiatives (philanthropy business) such as money donations, charities, job creation programs. Through these tools, Passaro Group has implemented the first forms of social intervention, aimed at pursuing social objectives and at the same time at spreading a positive image in front of consumers, workers and members of society in general.

Recently, management has rethought corporate strategies in a socially responsible key. Therefore, it has undertaken initiatives that would allow the organization to strive towards sustainable development, through a trade-off between economic performances and environmental and social performances. This is in order to internalize and make tangible the social dimension of the organization through careful consideration of the expectations of the members of the community and the identification of objectives compatible with the interests of the stakeholders.

Therefore, it defined the social policy with the related objectives, planned the necessary actions to achieve them, defined suitable procedures also for the selection, qualification and monitoring of suppliers and sub-suppliers, activating a virtuous circle, aimed at the involvement of a growing number of companies in the 'ethical path'.

Passaro Group provided for the involvement of civil society in the process of monitoring the conduct of the company. This was done through interviews with local organizations, trade union representatives and other interested parties. Management has consciously chosen to include social and ethical values among the objectives to be pursued, regardless of any economic benefits that this may entail. It is in this way that aspects relating to the environment, institutions, the centrality of the person and human rights, or the transparency of information and financial transactions, are the subject of risk management strategies.

Although the range of services offered is very varied and strictly connected to the system of values found within the organization, it is possible to outline a taxonomy that essentially identifies the following areas of intervention:

- 1) Social security and health insurance;
- 2) Professional support;
- 3) Work organization and time saving;

4) Support for genders, generations and socialization processes (Supino & Malandrino, 2011).

The insurance, social security and income support area is made up of contributions of a financial nature paid to the employee to encourage the purchase of support services, such as, for example, supplementary pensions and insurance policies; implementation of medical prevention campaigns and check-ups in the company or at clinics.

The area of professional support concerns psychological and professional counselling, retraining and professional reorientation programs, authorisations to complete studies, refresher courses. These actions are particularly important and qualifying, in terms of increasing individual, transversal and not just specific professional skills.

The last two areas of the organizational welfare devices constitute, more markedly, the archipelago of actions strictly linked to the work-life balance. The area relating to work organization and time saving sees the organization committed to granting greater autonomy to the worker for the management of working hours, through multiple solutions aimed at adopting flexible working hours (such as vertical or horizontal part-time contracts, the provision of supplementary leave for family needs, the activation of teleworking and job sharing methods to identify solutions to contingent problems, such as, for example, returning from maternity). Time saving initiatives also include the activation of mobility plans, such as car sharing, carpooling and company parking. The area of support for genders, generations and socialization processes includes devices for children such as, for example, information on local services.

Passaro Group employs flexible organizational solutions, implementing modalities of exchange between the professional and private spheres, which express forms of synergistic collaboration between workers and entrepreneurial needs. There is therefore a space of co-responsibility and strengthening of the individual-organization relationship that can only positively influence the enhancement of human resources: an increasingly strategic asset and one of the main sources of competitive advantage. This is to lead the organization to improve its performance in a holistic perspective.

Discussion

The new consumption paradigms resulting from the COVID-19 crisis have accelerated the process of changing demand preferences in the fashion sector. Even before the pandemic, consumers showed a greater propensity to purchase economically and socially sustainable products. Therefore, organizations operating in the sector have adopted models based on the circular economy and on less dependence on the global value chain. These models also enhanced a more artisanal approach, which proved to be more resilient to shock. In addition, integration initiatives and respect for diversity have been favoured which are strengths also at the level of employer branding. As a matter of fact, they not only improve the image of the company, but also contribute in terms of business performance, since in an environment where everyone feels comfortable and can express their uniqueness, people are subjected to less stress and work better.

The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience PNRR (April 2021) was recently launched to encourage the many initiatives on the subject of inclusiveness and gender equality. This plan defines gender equality as one of the main priorities in terms of social inclusion and focuses on the need to create a system that accompanies and incentives companies to adopt adequate policies to reduce the gender gap in all the most critical areas.

One of the initiatives envisaged is the certification of equality that can support the companies in reducing the gap between women and men in terms of equal wages (with equal jobs), career opportunities, and maternity protection. Those initiatives are already undertaken especially in SMEs operating in the fashion sector, albeit in an inconspicuous way, as their concrete social commitment is often characterized by an almost 'intimate' declination, an expression of the ideal drive of the entrepreneur, who carries out social interventions considering them expressions of his/her personal sphere, rather than that of the company. Many managers in the sector are aware that social commitment is not a point of arrival but a starting point that is realized when the pursuit of ethical, social and environmental values finds official consecration in the acts that define the methods and purposes of activity exercised (Rinaldi & Testa, 2013).

From these considerations, the need emerges to promote corporate behaviours capable of effectively combining responsibility and competitiveness through innovative approaches of sustainability and inclusiveness, designed specifically for organizations in the fashion sector, which do not imply the dissemination of «standard practices» (Molteni & Todisco, 2007). They will have first to provide an action of information and awareness, able to highlight their potential and the repercussions on competitive performance. Thus,

creating a stable, systematic and planned link between socio-environmental commitment and enhancement in a communicational key of what has been achieved.

Sometimes it is precisely the lack of propensity for communication, especially that towards the outside, which obscures the social commitment of SMEs, making them ‘silent operators’ of sustainability and inclusiveness. Greater dissemination, transparency and communication of good practices and socially responsible behaviour could represent an important multiplier, capable of generating a sort of ‘domino effect’, in a context, such as that of SMEs, in which imitation and interpretation are important methods of managerial and organizational innovation.

Furthermore, the need for a collaborative approach also emerges between the business community, policy makers and institutions to remove the factors that can affect the adoption of models that create shared value and guide systemic change towards sustainability objectives (Citterio & Lenzi 2005).

Institutions can, as they are trying to do, promote the principles of social responsibility through a series of actions, ranging from the promotion of dialogue with and among the various stakeholders, to the use of economic incentives and/or rewards for socially responsible companies, up to the preparation of guidelines for the ethical behaviour of companies in the sector (Sica et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The transition to an ecologically and socially sustainable economy has led to the emergence of new demands, characterized by more articulated and complex elements, attributable to the sphere of ethical and social needs. Companies of specific moral responsibilities have therefore called upon the fashion world to contribute to the realization of this sustainability through the hiring.

The commitment made in the search for paths aimed at sustainability and diversity in the dynamics of growth and competitiveness of organizations in the fashion sector could become an important lever of qualitative differentiation, able to feed their intangible resource assets. Among these, the high level of motivation of the staff, the reputation among the social interlocutors and, more generally, a renewed image of ‘Made in Italy’, accompanied by an enriched value system characterized by credibility and good reputation, in which social commitment represents a key factor of competitiveness and differentiation.

Among the most important future challenges in the still evolving scenario of inclusiveness and sustainability in the fashion sector, there is undoubtedly that of finding the right balance between codification and experimentation, a balance able to satisfy the needs of greater clarity, transparency and comparability in time and space, without imprinting characters of excessive standardization or behavioural flattening.

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Daniela Sica is a PhD in Commodity Science and lecturer in Quality Management and Control of Tourist Service in the Department of Management and Innovation Systems at the University of Salerno. Her research is mainly focused on the sustainable production process, Quality Management Systems and Corporate Social Responsibility. Daniela Sica is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: dsica@unisa.it

Daniela Sica è dottoressa di ricerca in Scienze Merceologiche e docente in Gestione e Controllo della Qualità dei Servizi Turistici presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Aziendali, Management and Innovation Systems dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno. La sua ricerca si concentra principalmente sul processo produttivo sostenibile, sui Sistemi di Gestione per la Qualità e sulla Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa. Daniela Sica è l'autrice corrispondente e può essere contattata a: dsica@unisa.it

Benedetta Esposito is a PhD Student in Big Data Management in the Department of Management and Innovation Systems at the University of Salerno. Her research is mainly focused on Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability and Circular Economy in the agri-food sector.

Benedetta Esposito è dottoranda in Big Data Management presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Aziendali, Management and Innovation Systems dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno. La sua ricerca si concentra principalmente su Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa, Sostenibilità ed Economia Circolare nel settore agroalimentare.

Maria Rosaria Sessa is a PhD in Management and Information Technology and Research Fellow in Commodity Science in the Department of Management and Innovation Systems at the University of Salerno, where she teaches Quality Management and Control of Tourist Service. Her research mainly focuses on developing quality and environmental management systems, Corporate Social Responsibility, environmental assessment tools, and competence certification.

Maria Rosaria Sessa è dottoressa di ricerca in Management e Information Technology e Research Fellow in Commodity Science presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Aziendali, Management and Innovation Systems dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno, dove insegna Gestione e Controllo della Qualità del Servizio Turistico. La sua ricerca si concentra principalmente sullo sviluppo di sistemi di gestione della qualità ambientale, sulla responsabilità sociale d'impresa, sugli strumenti di valutazione ambientale e sulla certificazione delle competenze.

Ornella Malandrino is a Full Professor of Commodity Science at Salerno University, where she teaches and conducts research on quality, sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility. She is the Inter-departmental Observatory director for Gender Studies and Equal Opportunities at the University of Salerno. The main research topics focus on Corporate Social Responsibility, on the sustainability of production processes and on quality management systems

Ornella Malandrino è Professoressa Ordinaria di Scienze Merceologiche presso l'Università degli studi di Salerno, dove insegna e conduce ricerche su qualità, sostenibilità e Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa. È Direttrice dell'Osservatorio Interdipartimentale per gli Studi di Genere e le Pari Opportunità (OGEPO) dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno. I suoi principali temi di ricerca vertono sulla Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa, sulla sostenibilità dei processi produttivi e sui sistemi di gestione per la qualità

Stefania Supino, Full Professor of Commodity Sciences at San Raffaele University in Rome, is director of the Department of Human Sciences and Promotion of the Quality of

Life. The main research topics focus on Corporate Social Responsibility, on the sustainability of production processes and on quality management systems

Stefania Supino, Professoressa Ordinaria di Scienze Merceologiche all'Università San Raffaele di Roma, è Direttrice del Dipartimento di Scienze Umane e Promozione della Qualità della Vita. I suoi principali temi di ricerca vertono sulla Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa, sulla sostenibilità dei processi produttivi e sui sistemi di gestione per la qualità