

Sustainability strategies and stakeholder relationships: A multiple case study in the fashion industry

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Abstract

The global need for sustainable business practices has intensified due to the growing environmental and social consequences of industrial activity. The fashion industry is a resource-intensive and polluting sector that poses significant challenges related to ecological degradation, labor conditions, and ethical consumption. Academics and practitioners are increasingly highlighting the necessity of examining how firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), incorporate sustainability and stakeholder involvement into their strategic plans. This study employs a multiple case study approach to examine the sustainability practices and stakeholder interactions of fourteen Italian fashion SMEs. The results indicate a broad commitment to sustainable manufacturing methods, encompassing consumer education programs, transparent supply chain management, and principles of the circular economy. This study enhances the literature by providing empirical insights into how SMEs in high-impact sectors operationalize sustainability. It emphasizes the significance of collaborative networks, openness, and trust in developing business models that are both responsible and resilient.

Keywords: Sustainability Strategies, Stakeholder Theory, Circular Economy, Sustainable Business Model, Fashion Industry

1. Introduction

Currently, sustainability concerns have risen to the top of the corporate agenda and are now an essential part of the conversation between firms and stakeholders (Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Fiorentino et al., 2016). Indeed, according to Stake-

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holder Theory (ST) (Freeman, 1984; Bertini, 1990) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Miolo Vitali, 1978; Velte and Stawinoga, 2017; D'Onza, 2022) approaches, an increasing number of firms recognize the relevance of combining the traditional economic performance with the latest environmental objectives and social values. Firms today acknowledge the necessity of identifying and resolving the concerns of their stakeholders to ensure that their decisions and operations are more socially acceptable (Green and Hunton-Clarke, 2003; Asiaei et al., 2021). The examination of how firms implement corporate and business strategies to effectively satisfy the requirements of stakeholders and enhance the quality of their operational environment is a critical area of emphasis in numerous industries. In particular, among the industrial sectors, the fashion industry is noted as one of the most polluting (De Brito et al., 2008; Thorisdottir et al., 2024). In this context, the textile sector stands out negatively due to high resource consumption, wastewater emissions, and chemical use across multiple production stages, impacting both the environment and human health (Gümüş and Akbal, 2011). Consequently, updating production methods and adopting cleaner production processes are required for ensuring the industry's long-term sustainability (Alkaya and Demirer, 2014).

Although there is a growing body of literature on sustainability and CSR, particularly among large corporations (Capurro et al., 2018; Vito et al., 2025), there is limited understanding of how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-enterprises implement sustainable practices and engage with their stakeholders. The Italian fashion industry, renowned globally for its design and manufacturing heritage, provides a crucial context for analyzing these issues; small firms constitute a significant portion of the Italian economy and fashion ecosystem (Abbate et al., 2024). This study investigates the engagement of Italian fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises with sustainability and their management of stakeholder relations.

In this sense, the purpose of this paper is to examine the fashion industry in Italy, with a focus on the textile and apparel (T&A) sector, from a sustainability perspective, and to examine how stakeholders respond to this commitment. According to the aim, the study posits the following research questions: How do Italian fashion firms incorporate sustainability into their strategies and business models? How do stakeholder relationships influence the implementation of sustainability initiatives in Italian fashion firms? Moreover, by considering the specificity of the Italian fashion industry's system: How do SMEs and micro-enterprises implement sustainability, and what challenges and opportunities do they face?

The research has been conducted through multiple case studies analysed by adopting the theoretical lens of ST. According to the research gap, we conducted

interviews with top management figures of Italian firms and micro-enterprises regarding their sustainability strategies and circular economy (CE) practices, and their interactions with key stakeholders, to highlight sustainable best practices that generate value for both the firms and the surrounding area.

The findings clarify the specific limitations faced by SMEs and micro-enterprises in achieving sustainability, such as limited resources and consumer awareness, while also highlighting the educational role these firms provide.

This research contributes to the existing body of literature in several ways. First, it provides empirical evidence about sustainable practices and stakeholder engagement specifically within Italian fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises, a sector that has been little explored in prior research. Second, the use of ST in such a context highlights the necessity of managing relationships with specific stakeholder groups to effectively execute sustainability programs, especially in smaller firms.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of sustainability in the sector under investigation. Section 3 details the methodology adopted for conducting the research along with the data collection process. Section 4 presents the findings grouped by key themes that emerged. Finally, section 5 concludes the study, presenting theoretical and practical implications, outlining limitations, and suggesting avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical background

The ST posits that in order to achieve competitiveness and profitability, the firm must prioritize the interests of its shareholders and other stakeholders by implementing firm-oriented policies and strategies, as well as making decisions that promote the well-being of stakeholders (Bertini, 1990; Freeman and Phillips, 2002). ST rests on the assumption that a firm's actions toward its stakeholders are inherently both strategic and ethical (Phillips et al., 2003; Friedman and Miles, 2002). In this sense, the ST is a leading, if not the most prevalent, framework in social, environmental, and sustainability management (Seroka-Stolka, 2023; Arlian et al., 2025). Reference to ST provides a foundational element for analysis in several publications about corporate sustainability and sustainability management (Perez-Batres et al., 2012; Shabbir, 2025).

Following this approach, sustainability strategies are developed when firms recognize the importance of moral and ethical values and integrate aspects of CSR into their business models (Epstein and Roy, 2001; Garzella and Fiorentino, 2013). Based on this definition, the concept of sustainability reflects the firm's degree of acceptance and adoption of socio-environmental issues and principles

in the strategic management processes (Sharma and Enriques, 2005; Lee et al., 2020).

The sustainability strategies refer to the concept of sustainable development as the capability of a process to maintain the reproduction of natural, human, social, and economic capital over time (Garzella and Fiorentino, 2014; Fiorentino et al., 2016; Capurro, 2021). Thus, environmental, social, and economic sustainability are three interwoven variables in this understanding; the economic sustainability must not be achieved at the expense of the other two dimensions (Garzella and Capurro, 2024). Therefore, fundamental for sustainable development is the recognition of the interdependence between the economy and socio-environmental interests (Donato, 2000; Capurro et al., 2024).

In this scenario, the T&A industry is indispensable for economic and social development (Zhao and Lin, 2019), but it represents one of the most environmentally harmful industries on Earth (Abbate et al., 2024; Thorisdottir et al., 2024). The international debate on sustainability within the T&A industry has evolved since the mid-1990s, initially prompted by concerns about child labour exploitation (Mora et al., 2014). The focus has been progressively expanded to encompass the whole life cycle of fashion products, from design to post-use disposal techniques. In this sector, the sustainability dilemma encompasses a multitude of complex and interconnected issues, especially including human rights and climate change (John and Mishra, 2023; Boersma et al., 2025). Production and consumption raise numerous concerns, which present challenges for economic, social, and political existence (Boström and Micheletti, 2016). In the T&A industry, the production processes utilize several resources, also including chemical constituents, with potentially severe environmental and ecological repercussions by generating trash and contaminating water and textiles (Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir, 2019; Jia et al., 2020; Panda et al., 2021).

The aforementioned challenges are widespread across the entire T&A supply chain (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014; De Felice et al., 2025). Firms are constantly researching the enhancements achievable at various stages of the production chain via innovations in processes and technologies (such as dyeing or finishing fabrics, as well as the creation of new fibers). Indeed, the CE approach – defined specifically in the field as “Circular Fashion approach” - guides the renovation of products and production techniques, and the development of supply networks to keep resources in a closed loop to improve both economic and environmental performance (Ashby, 2018; Cerchione et al., 2025).

In the fashion industry, sustainability increasingly involves the joint commitment of manufacturers, distributors, and consumers. Practices such as bartering, reuse, and recycling are gaining prominence, supported by digital platforms that

foster a shift from ownership to sharing (Belk, 2014). In response, firms are re-configuring their operations, governance, and communication to enhance safety, quality, innovation, and stakeholder engagement (Capurro et al., 2023). Moreover, in the current business landscape, competitiveness depends not only on internal change but also on the ability to build networks and collaborate across firms (Capurro et al., 2024). Thus, new approaches to managing firms' boundaries are required (Caputo et al., 2019; Capurro et al., 2021). Beyond the traditional "make or buy" logic, companies must develop boundary capabilities, i.e. the ability to coordinate resources, processes, and collaborations across multiple partners (Garzella, 2000).

This flexible management of inter-organizational relationships is now essential for competitiveness in more and more interconnected environments (Caputo et al., 2019; Capurro et al., 2024). Through effective networking and collaboration, firms can not only manage evolving boundaries but also generate shared value across the entire supply chain, creating benefits for both firms and society (Michelini and Fiorentino, 2012; Rong et al., 2021; Camilleri et al., 2023).

Networking also represents a strategic lever for strategic cost management (Shank and Govindarajan, 1993; Quagli, 1996; Michaels and Grüning, 2017). By sharing resources, knowledge, and infrastructures, firms can optimize costs across the value chain, reduce inefficiencies, and access economies of scale that would be unattainable individually. In the fashion sector, where cost pressures are high and sustainability investments can be expensive, inter-firm cooperation becomes a strategic lever for balancing efficiency with innovation (Zuhroh and Sunardi, 2019; Varley et al., 2024).

Furthermore, collaboration strengthens corporate reputation, which is closely tied to communication practices. In the fashion industry, where consumers and stakeholders pay increasing attention to ethical behaviour and transparency, being part of responsible networks allows firms to communicate shared sustainability efforts more credibly (Capurro et al., 2023). Strategic communication of such collaborations not only enhances brand legitimacy and trust but also amplifies the reputational benefits across the network (Lee et al., 2020).

Despite the relevance of these issues, the pathways and methods used to embrace sustainability in fashion firms lack coordination, especially in fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises.

3. Methodology

3.1 Multiple case study

The research follows a multiple case study approach: an empirical investigation designed to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its actual context, when the distinctions between the phenomenon and the context are not evident (Yin, 1981). Case study analysis enables researchers to gain a holistic understanding of complex phenomena (Noor, 2008) in a real business environment, where empirical evidence is obtained through a series of representative cases to improve the validity of the hypotheses. Although much of case study research concentrates on a single case, typically chosen because of its unique characteristics, the multiple case study approach enables the researcher to examine the phenomena in consideration through a replication strategy. This model suggests that if the majority of examples have similar outcomes, there may be significant justification for formulating a preliminary description of the phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The multiple case study approach enables the researcher to evaluate data and phenomena within distinct cases and contexts, thus assessing the significance of the findings (Gustafsson, 2017). This methodology facilitates an in-depth analysis of diverse experiences and practices, as it is exploratory, aimed at understanding the incorporation of sustainability into the business models and stakeholder interactions of Italian fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises.

3.2 Sample selection and data collection

The research sample includes fourteen Italian apparel firms within the fashion industry (specifically in the T&A sector), consisting of six micro-enterprises and eight SMEs. All firms examined have signaled a concrete orientation towards sustainability, favouring operational and manufacturing processes with a strong social and environmental commitment. Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the sampled firms. The selection process was guided by preliminary informal meetings and knowledge-sharing exchanges, which allowed the identification of firms genuinely engaged in sustainability and willing to reflect on their practices. This approach is coherent with the Italian fashion industry, where SMEs and micro-enterprises are predominant and personal networks and trust play a crucial role in establishing collaborations and accessing information (Collinson and Rugman, 2010; Poulis et al., 2013). The selected cases are characterized by explicit commitment and/or recent strategic shift towards sustainable practices and broader social and environmental engagement; in this way, the study ensures the relevance of the sample to the research questions and enables the exploration of both strategic and operational dimensions of sustainable transition in the Italian fashion industry.

The data was primarily gathered via semi-structured interviews with top management figures (i.e., entrepreneurs, owners, heads of production) aimed at identifying the tools and critical trends essential for innovating a business model to obtain sustainable and profitable growth. We adopted semi-structured interviews to allow for free descriptions, thus fostering an interactive discussion. This well-established approach emphasizes lived experience in management and social studies (Gephart, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013).

Table 1 - Information of selected firms

Case ID	Year of foundation	Products	Type	Interviewee's Role	
1	Firm A	2018	Clothing	Micro-enterprise	Owner and Legal Representative
2	Firm B	2012	Jeans	Micro-enterprise	Owner
3	Firm C	2016	Clothing	Micro-enterprise	Sole Director and Entrepreneur
4	Firm D	1988	Cardigan	SME	Owner and Legal Representative
5	Firm E	1936	Under-wear	SME	Managing Director
6	Firm F	2004	Trouser, belt and accessories	SME	Head of production
7	Firm G	2006	Clothing	SME	Head of production
8	Firm H	2014	Clothing	SME	Owner
9	Firm I	2007	Bags and accessories	SME	Sole Director and Entrepreneur
10	Firm L	2016	Clothing	SME	Sole Director and Entrepreneur
11	Firm M	2016	T-shirt and bag	Micro-enterprise	Owner
12	Firm N	2019	Clothing	Micro-enterprise	Owner and Legal Representative
13	Firm O	2019	Pregnant clothing	Micro-enterprise	Owner
14	Firm P	2014	T-shirt	SME	Head of production

To further strengthen the validity of the findings, a data triangulation method was employed, integrating secondary data sources with the original interview data. Secondary data comprised information from corporate websites and reports, published articles regarding the firms, project documentation, and internal corporate papers (Yin, 1981; De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). These sources provide more comprehensive contextual information for each case.

The interview structure was established using a protocol of open-ended questions to enable the respondent to articulate and convey experiences and observations freely. The document comprised questions categorized into three segments: background of the firm and interviewee, adoption of CE and technology innovation for sustainability and sustainable development initiatives. Interviews, conducted face-to-face and averaged around one hour, were recorded in one round from February to June 2024 and were transcribed to facilitate thorough analysis and prevent the loss of valuable information.

3.3 Data analysis

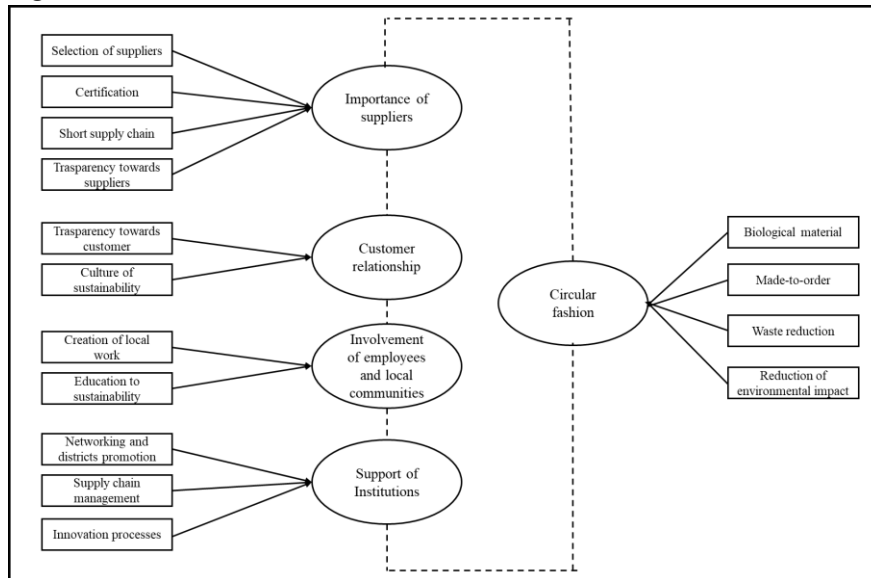
The transcribed interview data and acquired secondary data were analysed via content analysis (Krippendorff, 1989; 2009) to examine the behaviours and management practices of the sampled Italian SMEs and micro-enterprises involved in sustainable fashion production and the promotion of a culture of responsible consumption. To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings and contributions, triangulation of information (Mitchell, 1986; Bowen, 2009) from both primary and secondary sources was then carried out. Consequently, the results of the interpretation of the sources were analysed and discussed among the Authors, who formulated the contributions and implications of this article. Specifically, the data were examined to discern recurring themes and patterns associated with sustainability, CE, and stakeholder engagement, specifically with suppliers, consumers, employees and local community, and Institutions. Figure 1 summarizes the critical concerns pertinent to the fashion sector's transition towards sustainability. The findings about these topics are explored in Section 4.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Importance of suppliers

The selection of suppliers in the fashion sector is a widely discussed issue: its centrality in promoting a sustainable approach to production processes has been confirmed by existing studies and firm experiences (Winter and Lasch, 2016).

Figure 1 - Data structure overview



Source: our elaboration

Our results confirm the critical role of supplier relationships in the Italian fashion industry's pursuit of sustainability objectives. It is considered imperative to supervise the production chain with a focus on social and environmental standards to ensure compliance with sustainable manufacturing practices and labor conditions.

"In the firm, we follow every step of the production chain, without intermediaries, to have control and monitoring" (Firm B).

This is consistent with the current body of research that underscores the significance of supplier management in the promotion of sustainability in the fashion industry (De Brito et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, while the strategic role of suppliers in promoting sustainability is well established, the supplier management processes reveal significant complexities (De Brito et al., 2008; Treiblmaier, 2018). This issue is especially pertinent when considering the challenges that firms face in exercising effective control over their extended supply chains (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014; De Felice

et al., 2025). Sustainability transcends organizational borders, demanding attention to relationships within supply chains (Ashby, 2018). Therefore, the firms involved in the study have repeatedly stressed that having control of the entire production chain is highly complicated. The use of technological tools could enhance transparency in their supply chains. For instance, blockchain technology can furnish consumers with the necessary information to ascertain the provenance of a product (Cerchione, 2025). One may trace the production history of a specific garment, from the fiber to the end consumer, by tracking each stage of the supply chain (Treiblmaier, 2018). As clearly outlined by Firm N:

"Using a new technology, we have created an identity card attached to each product that tells everything, starting from the fabric and its certification".

Indeed, in the fashion industry, resources and raw materials needed for apparel manufacture frequently originate in distant locations; this aspect constitutes a risk for firms since it reduces the possibility of direct control over the supplier and working conditions. Considering these challenges, firms are forced to explore alternative strategies to ensure sustainability throughout the supply chain. One of the most common responses to this problem is the increasing use of external certifications and standards, especially in the context of sourcing materials from geographically distant or less regulated regions.

"The production of the fabrics is validated by the Global Organic Textile Standard and Fair Wear certifications. Our suppliers of material and organic cotton come from India, but also from Bangladesh and Turkey"(Firm C).

On closer inspection, the analysis confirms that the main objective is not to take advantage of a certification as a marketing tool, but rather the possibility to access the knowledge and tools of third-party organizations, which help offset the lack of internal resources. For instance, asserted:

"The basis of our research is the interest in finding partners and suppliers who can procure eco-sustainable materials. Our t-shirts have four certifications relating to the sustainability of cotton and respect for the workers who take part in the production process" (Firm P).

In addition to placing reliance on international certifications, firms in the fashion industry seek to minimize the length of their supply chains. The interviewees frequently emphasized the importance of identifying suppliers who are near the firm, as it enables the establishment of relationships of trust and collaboration that

are essential for the pursuit of continuous improvement. In addition, supplier collaboration contributes to strategic cost management by enabling firms to share resources, improve efficiency, and achieve economies of scale, while simultaneously fostering innovation in sustainable practices.. As Firm E has acknowledged, the supplier may be required to evaluate its production processes and resolve customer requests as a result of production overloads:

"Sometimes when we have production peaks, for example, in August we give some production phases to workers from neighbouring firms".

The involvement and collaboration with suppliers operating in the same geographical area or neighbouring areas reduces the complexity associated with the control activities of working conditions and generates value for the community and the territory in which the firms are rooted. In this sense, developing a network with local suppliers could be a strategic tool for managing risks, costs, and reputation.

"We work with Italian suppliers and manufacturers, and we always will. We have been collaborating for many years, and we work between very close Italian regions" (Firm N).

Additionally to geographical proximity, the effectiveness of a short supply chain also depends on the transparency of relationships with suppliers. As Firm P has observed:

"Transparency is a fundamental aspect that we require of our suppliers"

Indeed, the transparency towards suppliers is considered the cornerstone of relationships along the supply chain capable to create shared value (Winter and Lasch, 2016). The interviewed firms recognized the mutual exchange of information, values, and objectives as a critical node in the development of sustainable production chains and the promotion of alignment around values and principles to safeguard the environment and individuals.

"The fabrics are selected according to precise standards by trusted suppliers. The garments are made in Italy with a short supply chain 100% Made in Italy. The jeans are produced, cut, sewn, and assembled by small artisans and local firms, which are located within 35 km of the brand's headquarters. We have carefully chosen those who take care of our production chain every step, using organic or recycled cotton, natural yarns, washing and treatments without chemical agents and with the lowest environmental impact" (Firm B). Similarly, Firm E asserted: "Our firm has production in Italy. Once the materials are transported from abroad and then transformed into yarn in our country, the

remaining part of the processing is at 0 kilometers. We always try to have all Italian suppliers; where this is not possible, we choose European ones".

From the perspective of ST, the results emphasize that suppliers are not merely contractual entities; they are also critical stakeholders whose beliefs, behaviors, and well-being have a substantial impact on the firm's sustainability performance and reputation. The strategic choice of suppliers makes it possible to ensure constant alignment with corporate social and environmental values and standards, fostering greater strategic and management integration. Firms recognize the innovative potential of short supply chains to connect producers and consumers, thereby generating value for the local community and to improve oversight of working conditions. These empirical data support the notion that localized supply chains can improve interactions with a variety of stakeholders, including suppliers, the local community, and consumers, thereby facilitating the creation of shared value (Rong et al., 2021; Camilleri et al., 2023)..

4.2 Customer relationship

All interviewed firms have declared a significant effort in cultivating relationships with their clients, emphasizing mutual respect and trust.

Consumers today are more aware of the fashion industry's impact, expecting full transparency throughout the firm's supply chain. The origin, properties, and quality of the materials used are all factors that consumers are interested in, as well as the location and method of production (Chan and Wong, 2012).

"We explain to the customer in detail through the label or what materials the piece he buys is made of, and we always tell its story" (Firm G).

Indeed, firms need to provide comprehensive information about their sustainability commitment to enable individuals to fully understand the corporate behaviors and operational impacts. Firms are not just limited to publishing corporate information or documents, but they continually seek alternative digital formats, such as videos showcasing people's work and social networks, which promote superior usability and interaction:

"It is vital for us to be transparent with our customers. For this reason, both on the website and social networks, we provide specific indications on production processes and raw materials. On social networks, with stories, we bring our customers inside our factory and the workshops of artisans we collaborate with" (Firm P). On the same point, Firm M

states: *"The websites and social networks we use are the main channels to communicate our culture and our business practices. Furthermore, we are always available for comparison: we may receive specific questions via e-mail or instant messaging, and we are happy to answer individually or, even better, to take the opportunity to dispel any doubts by answering collectively to our community"*.

The interviewed firms consider transparency a strategic asset, which helps to strengthen the bond with customers and stakeholders and, therefore, creates added value. Transparent communication with customers plays a dual role: it not only informs consumers about sustainable practices but also reinforces the firm's corporate reputation. In the fashion sector, reputation is increasingly shaped by the perceived authenticity and consistency of the messages conveyed through labels, websites, and social media.

"Transparency with the customer is essential, and we communicate all our social responsibility initiatives, such as the enhancement and protection of the territory, collaborations for the development of low impact and 0 kilometers resources, and collaboration with protection organizations and associations of disadvantaged subjects aimed at improving inclusion" (Firm L).

Thus, to increase transparency about working conditions and production processes, firms aim to guide consumers towards a deeper understanding of sustainability, actively shaping their awareness and behavior in purchasing decisions. Indeed, the interviews have repeatedly highlighted how firms are engaged in actions to support the customer in gaining awareness of the social and environmental impacts associated with the production of clothing.

"The materials are certified, and each customer can see what environmental impact they have had" (Firm D).

The consumer's connection with the supply chain increases their knowledge of ethical and sustainable issues in fashion and helps create empathy and understanding with the social side of production (Chan and Wong, 2012).

"We push the customer to ask for transparency and to create a sustainable culture. We help the customer to request that the brands are responsible and from our point of view we give all the available information requested of us" (Firm B).

Such conduct fosters a commitment to promoting a culture of sustainability that increasingly supports the transition to responsible consumption practices.

"We started from the assumption that sustainability, as culture, must be communicated and brought to the market with its beauty. The customers can also see it on the website. Our keywords are innovation, sustainability, and beauty. We want to create a very close relationship with the consumer. Those who subscribe to our newsletter automatically receive a masterclass on free sustainable fashion and free shipping on the first purchase" (Firm M)

However, customers often lack the knowledge to assess garment quality, making it hard to distinguish market offers or evaluate prices. This is especially true for sustainable products, whose differences from traditional ones are not immediately visible. Therefore, clear, transparent, and continuous communication with customers is essential. Establishing a communication line with the end client that is transparent, direct, and continual is vital:

"We try to create a culture for our customers on the advantages of conscious purchases through communication on social networks, and events that involve children with workshops on the theme of reuse and recycling" (Firm O). Similarly, Firm B declared: *"Our firm has employees engaged on social networks, through photos that allow customers to learn about and be educated to make sustainable purchasing choices"*.

From the perspective of ST, the results confirm the relevance of fostering the development of a culture oriented towards sustainability in the final market to increase customer engagement and awareness and, consequently, to support the firm's growth. This enables the customer to participate, allowing them to gain insight into the firm's operations, assess and comprehend its behaviours, and contemplate the various aspects of the production process. Consumer trust can help firms improve their image, foster loyalty, and increase product sales.

4.3 Involvement of employees and local communities

According to the respondents, employees must communicate their social and environmental objectives and incorporate them into their daily routines.

"We are delighted to have collaborators who are informed, who believe in what we do and who are also committed to spreading the concept of sustainability" (Firm N).

Fostering sustainability in the decision-making process involves several internal changes with a strong impact on employees, routine management activities, and corporate culture (Capurro et al., 2018; Garzella et al., 2019). Top management plays a key role in defining strategies that support sustainability. They can

promote incentive systems for employees who develop innovative socio-environmental ideas, create “green” projects or cross-functional teams to improve sustainability performance, and implement programs to raise employee awareness of socio-environmental issues, enhancing internal communication about the benefits of sustainable actions.

Another essential aspect widely considered is the attention to job inclusion for vulnerable individuals and continuous personal and professional growth training.

"We have created a benefit corporation because we want to have a proactive attitude towards the area in which we work, so we immediately decided to dedicate part of our income to social and environmental investments in the area. We have chosen to plant a tree for each shirt we deliver. The territory is then managed by a social cooperative that looks after children with disabilities" (Firm D).

An additional component reinforcing the firms' sustainability commitment pertains to their interaction with the territory and local communities. The firms interviewed are involved in actions and initiatives to promote sustainable development, primarily to support entrepreneurship and education for a sustainable lifestyle. announced:

"Our firm is currently active in supporting initiatives with a hospital in the area to try to contribute and support certain departments during the COVID-19 pandemic. We strongly believe in collaboration and in trying to give a product that is sustainable at the same time, but also has a social value" (Firm M).

Thus, several firms in our sample are actively involved in promoting local development and social inclusion through innovative labour models. Indeed, the interviewees have repeatedly highlighted how important it is to create value not only for their employees but for the entire local context, supporting small artisan businesses, safeguarding jobs, and encouraging the acquisition and development of knowledge.

"We try to find local suppliers and transporters to ensure territorial development". Similarly, Firm I highlights: "Women in prison do the processing of our products. Our vision is to promote real work inside and outside prisons through training. We have managed to teach a new profession to women who have never worked, thus monitoring the social and environmental impact of their activities" (Firm P).

Moreover, collaborations with schools and other organizations in the local area are essential to promote convergence towards common objectives and to share of resources.

"Through newsletters, we work on consumer education. Furthermore, we collaborate in many events and organize lessons in schools where we meet and teach children to know the concepts of sustainability and CE". (Firm N)

These activities are an opportunity to establish relationships with local institutions and thus consolidate the network of relationships and presence in the local community.

From the perspective of ST, firms are driven by a general social objective, which finds expression in the desire to share the corporate culture and make their resources available to contribute to both internal and external growth, with particular reference to their employees and the local context.

4.4 Support of Institutions

Institutions are equally crucial in the global sustainability journey, as they create the regulatory, financial, and cultural framework necessary to support sustainable development in the fashion sector (Ertekin and Atik, 2020; Peleg Mizrachi and Tal, 2022). Institutional support becomes particularly important in promoting networks among firms and providing assistance to fashion districts, for instance, through grants, subsidies, and policy incentives. These interventions foster the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and projects, enhancing collaboration, innovation, and the overall dynamism of the sustainable fashion sector.

"Thanks to the regional grants, we were able to participate in collaborative workshops with other local brands. This not only expanded our network but also allowed us to develop new sustainable materials that we couldn't have afforded on our own" (Firm A)

Networking and knowledge-sharing initiatives serve as catalysts for research and development projects, while also helping to preserve specialized skills and professional expertise that might otherwise be at risk of extinction (Garzella et al., 2021). Indeed, Firm E highlighted:

"The Institutional programs helped us connect with experienced designers and local artisans. Without this support, much of the traditional craftsmanship in our district might have been lost".

In this sense, firms emphasized the role of institutions in fostering innovation processes. Institutional support could enable firms to experiment with sustainable

materials, innovative production processes, and new business models. This support not only accelerates the development and implementation of environmentally and socially responsible practices but also strengthens the overall competitiveness of the fashion sector.

"Thanks to the funding provided by the local development Agency, we have accelerated our R&D; this allowed us to test new eco-friendly dyes and production processes and to bring environmentally sustainable products to market faster" (Firm H). On the same point, Firm F declared: "Support from the regional Authorities helped our district create a shared innovation hub. Small brands that would have remained isolated can now collaborate, share resources, and jointly approach international markets".

Institutional support could strengthen firms' capabilities to adopt sustainable practices across their operations. Indeed, public and local programs could directly enable improvements in supply chain management, enhancing both social and environmental outcomes:

"The incentives from public programs allowed us to implement better traceability in our supply chain. This ensures fair labour practices and reduces environmental impact, which also strengthens our brand's reputation internationally" (Firm I).

Moreover, training and skill development were also mentioned as a direct benefit from institutional support:

"Institutional support allowed us to organize specialized training for our staff on sustainable production techniques. This not only improved efficiency but also increased employee engagement and pride in our sustainability mission" (Firm P)

Data analysis suggests that intensifying institutional efforts to develop tools for evaluating economic, environmental, and social performance would be highly beneficial, focusing on three levels: individual firms, the production chain, and innovative products for consumers. In return, institutions benefit from these actions through strengthened local economies, enhanced reputation, and the promotion of social and environmental objectives aligned with public policy goals, creating a virtuous cycle in which institutional support and corporate sustainability reinforce each other.

Ultimately, the interaction between institutions and firms highlights the centrality of stakeholders in driving sustainable development. By supporting networks, providing incentives, and facilitating knowledge exchange, institutions enable firms to address the interests of a broad range of stakeholders, including

employees, suppliers, local communities, and consumers. This stakeholder-oriented approach not only enhances social and environmental outcomes but also creates long-term value for both businesses and society, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is most effectively pursued through collaborative engagement among all relevant actors.

4.5 Circular fashion

The concept of CE informs the circular fashion model. Circular fashion model refers to a self-regenerative economy in which biological materials are integrated into the biosphere, and technical ones are designed to be revalued (Ki et al., 2021; Dissanayake and Weerasinghe, 2022). This approach considers processes of design, procurement, transportation, storage, marketing, sale, and product disposal; the reuse and recycling of products can potentially reduce waste and impact the environment (Shrivastava et al., 2021). The growing demand for a shift to a CE in the fashion industry has led firms to develop several initiatives for sustainability (Hvass and Pedersen, 2019).

"Our firm involves the customer in CE operations. We also sell seeds to be planted together with the shirt, and we have initiatives for the reuse of the product once its useful life is over" (Firm D). Similarly, Firm C: *"The customer returns the garment that is no longer used. The materials are regenerated by spinning and transformed back into materials by a weaving firm. We then buy the regenerated material for new productions. Our goal is to be circular from the beginning to the end of the process"*.

Indeed, the CE refers to a cyclical economy designed to self-regenerate by reusing the materials that have reached the end of the cycle and minimizing waste.

"We recover material destined for the landfill and transform it into fashion accessories". (Firm F)

According to these circular strategies, firms are rethinking the entire production cycle, from design to disposal, integrating regenerative practices that prioritize waste reduction, resource efficiency and responsible use of materials.

"We create t-shirts dyed with all agricultural waste following the ancient methods of painting" (Firm N). Also, Firm A revealed: *"We apply the CE in many ways and throughout the production process. We use fabrics such as milk fiber deriving from all the waste of the food chain, and we optimize by avoiding production waste as much as possible"*.

Additionally, to innovate with materials and reduce waste, many sustainable fashion firms are redesigning their production models. By adopting made-to-order and pre-order approaches, for example, they can better align production volumes with actual demand, thereby reducing natural resources used and waste and improving working conditions, distributing production loads over a programmable period, and avoiding seasonal peaks.

"We have the pre-order system on some products, so we first go to propose the sample and collect the order and produce what is requested. In this way, we avoid overproduction and try to reduce pollution" (Firm N). Likewise, Firm L noted: "We are a made-to-order organic artisan fashion brand, meaning the garments are packaged at the time of the customer's order. This minimizes waste to the maximum, as no production stocks are created, and allows for a wide range of customization". On the same topic, Firm P declared: "Our business model allows us to produce only after receiving the order from the customer. This happens especially for t-shirts or when pre-orders are planned. This mode allows us not to overload the warehouse and not to have a high number of unsold items".

Thus, numerous fashion firms concentrate their operations on mitigating waste and pollutants resulting from fabric manufacturing; there is an observable trend placing greater emphasis on the utilization of renewable, recycled, and low-impact resources in their production and packaging processes.

"The products are created respecting a supply chain that is as ecological and sustainable as possible. The traditional t-shirt requires a water consumption of around 3 thousand liters of water for a single t-shirt. Otherwise, our firm produces t-shirts by reducing water impact by 50%, consuming 1500 liters both for production and cultivation. No aromatic amines or plastic resins are used in the processing, nor heavy metals nor polished; therefore, they are 100% ecological and sustainable" (Firm M)

Moreover, the interviewed firms disclosed that their packaging is also manufactured from recycled materials in order to mitigate carbon dioxide emissions.

"We have eliminated all non-recyclable paper within the firm. We have replaced all plastic bags with bioplastic bags. These new packages derive from sugar cane. Each kg of plastic is created by macerating sugar cane absorbs 5 kg of CO₂" (Firm E).

Raw materials must be environmentally and human-safe, and the production and distribution of products must minimize all forms of pollution and emissions associated with production (Ashby, 2018).

"Our firm, instead of working with practically virgin materials, also works with materials that have already had a different economic life cycle" (Firm N).

Overall, the findings emphasize that sustainable fashion relies on a complex ecosystem of relationships involving suppliers, customers, employees, institutions, and local communities. In line with ST, these actors are not merely external counterparts but strategic partners whose needs, expectations, and behaviors directly influence the firm's capacity to pursue sustainability. Effective networking and collaboration across these stakeholders not only strengthen sustainability practices but also generate shared value along the entire supply chain. Moreover, firms that integrate strategic cost management with transparent communication are able to enhance efficiency, consolidate their corporate reputation, and build long-term trust with stakeholders. Taken together, these insights confirm that sustainability in fashion is best achieved through collaborative and network-oriented approaches, where economic, social, and environmental objectives converge.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the sustainability and stakeholder management practices of fourteen Italian fashion micro-enterprises and SMEs. The findings indicate that these firms are becoming proficient in incorporating sustainability practices into their business strategy and management processes. The findings highlight that sustainability in fashion is not confined to internal processes but is the outcome of a complex network of relationships involving multiple stakeholders across and beyond the supply chain. Specifically, the identified key themes encompass the effective management of supplier relationships, the creation of transparent and educational customer relationships, the involvement of employees and local communities, the support of Institutions, and the implementation of CE principles.

First, suppliers emerge as strategic partners in achieving sustainability goals, with firms placing growing emphasis on transparency, certifications, and geographical proximity to ensure compliance with social and environmental standards. Managing these relationships not only enhances sustainability performance but also contributes to strategic cost management by reducing inefficiencies, sharing resources, and fostering collaborative innovation. Second, transparent communication with customers is crucial in reinforcing corporate reputation and fostering consumer trust. By opening their production processes to public scrutiny, firms strengthen legitimacy, raise awareness of sustainable practices, and support

the development of a more responsible consumption culture. Third, the engagement of employees and local communities plays a pivotal role in embedding sustainability into corporate culture and generating social value. Initiatives that combine employee empowerment with community development highlight how firms can create shared value that extends beyond economic outcomes. Fourth, institutional support is revealed as a critical enabler of sustainability in the fashion sector. Public policies, grants, and collaborative initiatives foster innovation, preserve local craftsmanship, and encourage networking among firms, thereby multiplying the benefits for both companies and society. Finally, the transition towards circular fashion models confirms the growing importance of rethinking production and consumption logics. Practices such as reuse, recycling, pre-order systems, and innovative materials demonstrate the potential to minimize waste and environmental impact while creating new opportunities for value creation.

Overall, the results suggest that sustainable fashion is best achieved through collaborative and network-oriented approaches, where transparency, innovation, and stakeholder engagement intersect. Firms that succeed in integrating sustainability into their strategic and operational models not only improve efficiency and competitiveness but also enhance their corporate reputation and contribute to the creation of shared value across the entire value chain.

This study provides contributions to the literature on sustainability, CSR, and the fashion industry. From a theoretical standpoint, it enhances the application of ST by offering empirical evidence on how smaller firms in a specific, high-impact sector, such as Italian fashion, actively manage relationships with diverse stakeholder groups to advance their sustainability objectives. By highlighting the practices of sustainability and stakeholder engagement in this sector, the study offers insights into the actual practices, challenges, and motivations driving sustainability in Italian fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises, a specific and under-researched area.

This study also offers important practical implications. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that in order to effectively incorporate sustainability and disseminate virtuous behaviour throughout the supply chain, managers in fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises should adopt a proactive approach to stakeholder engagement. Indeed, the study demonstrates how the commitment of top management is necessary to guide the firm towards sustainability. From a policy perspective, the findings confirm that the institutions play a key role in the establishment of a social and cultural environment that is truly supportive. The institutions should support the establishment of networks of firms as it fosters the development and dynamism of the sustainable fashion sector. These interventions would also enable the recovery of professionalism and skills that are currently at risk of extinction, as well as the enhancement of the wealth of knowledge that is

present within small businesses that are unable to generate growth and innovation mechanisms and contribute to value creation processes.

This study presents limitations that offer valuable opportunities for future research; the sample consists of fourteen Italian fashion SMEs and micro-enterprises, hence limiting the generalizability of the findings. In this sense, future studies could expand to diverse contexts, adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, and include external stakeholder perspectives for a more holistic view. Further investigation is needed into the economic performance of circular business models and the role of digital technologies in enhancing sustainability, traceability, and transparency in resource-constrained enterprises.

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