

Article

How Italian Fashion Brands Beat COVID-19: Manufacturing, Sustainability, and Digitalization

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Abstract: COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on the fashion industry. Fashion brands had to restructure their value chains and refine their strategies to overcome the negative consequences of the lockdown. An analysis of the Italian fashion industry is used to examine how companies responded to the challenges of the pandemic and how they were able to find competitive solutions. Qualitative analysis is used to discuss the case of Italy, a country that was particularly affected by COVID-19. The research shows that companies invested in three different directions to overcome the obstacles posed by the COVID-19 emergency: refocusing on manufacturing, investing in sustainability (especially social), and relying on digital technologies (e.g., e-commerce and videoconferencing) to interact with remote customers. The theoretical and practical contributions of this study are discussed.

Keywords: global value chain; sustainability; COVID-19; manufacturing; digitalization; fashion industry

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 emergency has created enormous pressure on the textile and apparel value chain and the fashion industry as a whole. Being globally organized in terms of manufacturing activities—where most of the low- and mid-market products are manufactured in Asian countries [1]—this value chain has first suffered from the production stop due to the crisis in manufacturing countries, followed by the lockdown in the consumer markets. This negative situation has forced firms to approach the market differently, to rethink their products and supply chains, but it could also open new opportunities for the renewal of the entire value chain, especially in the fashion industry [2].

In recent years, the fashion value chain has undergone an increasing process of transformation related to the growing attention to social and environmental sustainability. On the one hand, firms are giving new strategic importance to manufacturing as a driver of value creation, and also in terms of sustainability, focusing on shorter value chains, redefining the international organization of production, and the competencies of suppliers in a circular economy framework [3]. On the other hand, firms with sustainability strategies (or Customer Social Responsibility, CSR) are also creating value beyond the economic sphere [4], within a stakeholder perspective (i.e., value for the local community and social engagement). In addition, digitalization has improved the management of relationships with customers and the ability to deal with international market demands. To what extent do such trends provide a competitive advantage in a crisis, such as the one COVID-19 represents, especially for global buyers located in advanced countries?

In the COVID-19 scenario, Western firms in the fashion value chain have started to redefine their strategies to overcome the negative consequences of the lockdown. Based on an analysis of the Italian fashion value chain, the paper aims to explore how firms—especially global brands—have responded to these challenges and found competitive solutions, while taking into account current trends at the value chain level (e.g., manufacturing of products for the health sector and increased attention to sustainable products). Using qualitative research based on case studies [5], the article discusses the case of Italy, a country that has



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been particularly affected by the COVID-19 emergency [6] and where the fashion industry is one of the pillars of the economy in terms of value produced and export results.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Manufacturing in Global Value Chains and the Pandemic

Studies on Global Value Chains (GVCs) have described the dynamics underlying the international fragmentation of economic activities and the global organization of industries [7]. The progressive relocation of manufacturing activities from advanced countries to low-cost countries has characterized the last decades, highlighting the advantages of an international division of labor between high value- and low value-added activities. Due to the cost advantages and increasing manufacturing capabilities, the production of a wide range of products has been carried out in the Far East and low-cost countries. From the point of view of value creation and appropriation, global lead firms have managed to control much of the value produced within the GVC in relation to the extreme of the smiling curve, R&D and design, branding, or retail [8,9]. At the same time, there is a massive concentration of production in low-cost and emerging economies, where China, in particular, plays a key role in supplying international markets with a large volume of products, either for other producers or conclusive for customers. The fashion industry has been particularly involved in this globalization dynamics [1]. The localization of fashion product production in developing countries allows global buyers to invest in high value-added activities, but also allows suppliers in these countries to benefit from participation in GVCs [10] through various forms of upgrading.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affected GVCs and constraints occurred at multiple levels. The trade restrictions imposed by the lockdown have reduced the ability of companies to reach their markets—domestically and abroad—but have also limited international productions. The degree of dependence on a limited number of suppliers and countries—in some industries more than in others, as demonstrated by studies on masks [11]—has prevented firms in advanced countries from supplying their customers due to reduced stocks and lockdown of distributions. Manufacturing processes and global supply chain management have been reduced in volume and geographical scope due to lockdowns and international limitations [12]. Similarly, the pandemic affected the firm's ability to reach its customers due to the interruption of distribution activities, specifically to final customers [13].

Despite the attention to value driven by intangibles, design, or brand management, COVID-19 has drawn attention to the importance of efficient and effective management of tangible assets (products) to create value for customers and the firm itself. During the crisis, it became clear how the location of production to the Far East (or more generally low-cost countries) has diminished the possibility of serving the domestic market in case of sourcing constraints, with high risks in terms of obsolescence of the products developed and produced, as in the case of fashion.

Due to the restriction on international flows of goods caused by the pandemic, there has been a renewed debate on the reshoring of manufacturing activities from low-cost countries toward advanced countries [14]. To reduce the risks from supplier disengagement and reduce the distance to final markets, scholars and practitioners are discussing how firms can reorganize their international activities to overcome these challenges. Recently, scholars have provided a few scenarios for the potential evolution of GVCs after the COVID-19 experience [15]. At a macro level, many advanced countries, such as Japan and Australia, have begun to reduce dependence on China through reshoring, pushing firms to reassess their location decisions for critical or strategic goods. At the business level, reshoring can be an option in conditions to be closer to customers and more responsive, but it could not always be a viable option to implement. Alternatively, COVID-19 could push firms to mix their sourcing opportunities within a still positive view of GVCs, where various countries differ in terms of location advantages, such as labor costs or institutional frameworks, as well as the degree of supplier specialization. Further investigation is

required on how control over manufacturing activities can facilitate the ability to address pandemic challenges.

At the same time, firms in the fashion industry, particularly in textile and apparel products, can be relevant actors during the pandemic. Control over manufacturing activities and the ability to produce directly—through vertical integration strategies—can be an advantage for firms in the pandemic and post-pandemic era. It is not only about reshoring, but the question becomes how manufacturing capabilities—specifically for high-cost countries—during the pandemic (and post-pandemic) may support the competitive advantage of the firm beyond the brand. Therefore, our first research question is: *How did fashion brands respond to the pandemic scenario in terms of production decisions, between product reconfiguration, and new market opportunities?*

2.2. Sustainability Strategies and the Pandemic

There is a growing interest in sustainability dynamics in GVCs [16–18] and the fashion sector is one of the industries that has invested many resources and attention in this direction. Environmental and social sustainability influences the strategies of global leading companies and shapes the development of GVCs [19], where sustainability is considered in terms of positive benefits (outcomes) toward the environment, as well as workers and society, generated by the firm, but is also considered as a process (environmental and social upgrading) [20,21]. In fact, according to GVC scholars, on the one hand, global buyers' strategies are becoming the drivers of environmental and social upgrading in value chains by pushing suppliers toward more sustainable products and processes. Global leading firms have developed standards and monitoring initiatives along the value chain to improve sustainability at the supply chain level, at the global scale, and specifically in developing countries [22]. Through sustainable supply chain management practices, global firms are improving suppliers' capabilities to design products and processes in a sustainable way, taking into account the environmental impacts of their business activities within the GVC framework. Furthermore, especially in industries such as fashion, sustainability is also considered from a social point of view [23], where the social upgrading of suppliers is a key dynamic to increase the value produced within the GVC and sustain the development of suppliers [24].

However, suppliers in GVCs can also develop autonomous initiatives to approach sustainability proactively [19], suggesting that each firm in the value chain can act to combine multiple goals—economic, social, and environmental—despite their potential underlying tensions [25]. Firms are investing in environmental and social sustainability strategies to increase the benefits generated by business activity beyond the shareholders' view, to include a broader perspective [4,24].

From a CSR perspective, social and environmental strategies transcend the supply chain, as the results achieved through the firms' sustainable behavior are also extended to local communities and society at large. External actors, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or the global society, also become a driving force to push firms toward sustainability [26–28], where such pressure may vary depending on the degree of internationalization of the firm (global or local, international civil society vs. local civil society). Sustainability actions have been aimed at strengthening the competitiveness of global buyers toward their markets, as well as aligning their business with other than economic goals, such as social and environmental ones, according to the triple bottom line framework [29]. Particularly when it comes to global firms, nongovernmental forms of private governance have been spread in different GVCs to generate social and environmental outcomes, often in developing countries and taking into account the viewpoint of the stakeholders [30]. Studies on governance and institutional theory suggest that firms investing in CSR can overcome the limits of public interventions and provide solutions to achieve sustainable goals through their private initiatives [31]. By adopting CSR strategies, the firm increases its involvement in society, both through its sourcing strategies and other social initiatives

implemented internationally and domestically. Additionally, firms use CSR initiatives to increase the relevance of their brand and align the brand values with the consumers' values.

How has the pandemic impacted this framework, particularly in the case of fashion? In the crisis triggered by the pandemic, firms that practice CSR may respond differently than other firms because they are looking at a broader outcome of their activities. More broadly, the pandemic has not only triggered negative economic dynamics, but also strong negative social impacts. Countries and policies have responded differently to the crisis (e.g., the Italian example). In this scenario, our second research question is: *How have fashion brands responded to the challenges COVID-19 posed to corporate sustainability behavior?* This question is particularly important because the tensions between economic, environmental, and social sustainability goals [25,32] may be further exacerbated in a crisis context, such as the pandemic.

2.3. Digitalization, Marketing, and the Pandemic

Due to restrictions on the exchange of goods and the management of relationships, the pandemic highlights the potential of digital technologies to connect with actors within value chains. The web revolution based on the development of online communication and sales channels has reduced the physical boundaries of the firm to reach its customers [33], by combining both breadths of contact and richness of customer interaction (depth) [34]. The emergence of brand communities has further reinforced this trend, allowing firms with strong brands to deepen their relationships with active customers and exploit the value of the brand through online co-creation processes [35,36]. Recently, scholars have also stressed how industry 4.0 technologies, such as big data, augmented reality, or artificial intelligence solutions, can support marketing activities [37], in addition to smart manufacturing [38]. By exploiting connectivity, marketing in the fourth industrial revolution can improve its key processes of co-creation (involving customers in product development), conversations (involving customers in interaction and meaning exchange regarding products and brands), collaboration (involving partners), and cognition (exploration and exploitation of distributed knowledge, as well as deep market analysis) [39]. Furthermore, the Internet and digital technologies related to Industry 4.0 (i.e., artificial intelligence) support the internationalization of the firm and its ability to reach foreign customers in both the business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) markets [40].

In this scenario, the proliferation of COVID-19 has further stressed the value of the firm's digital transformation of processes and more generally how firms can use digital technologies to manage their domestic and remote markets. Specifically, online commerce and social media-based communication have received a lot of attention for their opportunity to overcome the limits of retail for product sales and customer interaction [41]. According to research carried out by international institutions and practitioners, e-commerce sales increased during the pandemic, in different countries, and for a large variety of products. A survey promoted by UNCTAD [42] and carried out on consumers in nine countries (Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, South Africa, Switzerland, and Turkey) showed that e-commerce has increased from 6 to 10% in multiple product categories (among the most increased were products for personal care, ICT, and digital entertainment). In contrast, products, such as fashion goods, suffered from online expenditure, with a decrease in sales of about 43% (only tourism products and home furniture performed worse). Similarly, advanced technological solutions related, for example, to augmented reality and aiming at improving the customer's online experience may further support the constraints in accessing physical stores. Recent research [43] shows that customers can be positively motivated to purchase online if they have useful and enjoyable online tools that complete the purchase process.

Fashion companies have already invested in digital marketing strategies prior to the pandemic to address the new emerging smart customer profile [44] and to provide new digital experiences both online and in-store [45]. However, the pandemic has profoundly changed the competitive scenario for fashion companies from a marketing point of view [46].

The lockdown has reduced not only the possibility for customers to visit physical stores, but has also impacted the general demand for fashion products due to the limitations in the occasions for the use of fashion products (i.e., events, conferences, etc.). Furthermore, the halt in international shopping tourism has affected the sales of fashion brands associated with the main countries of production and destination for customers, especially in the luxury segment. The main spenders in China, the US, Germany, the UK, and the Russian Federation [47] have limited their travel movement due to COVID-19, with a general radical decrease in tourist flows. Apart from the challenge for firms to manage sales activities during the lockdown, another important issue—specifically for fashion firms that rely on customer experience and enhance customer relationship management to compete—refers to the need to maintain a connection with the firm's customers to not lose the investments made in the past by creating relationships with customers and their loyalty to brands. This aspect can be particularly relevant for luxury fashion brands that rely on advanced customer service and brand co-creation [48,49]. From this point of view, our third research question is: *How have fashion brands relied on digital technologies to manage their relationships with customers and markets in the COVID-19 scenario?*

3. Method

To reach our research purposes and answer research questions, a qualitative analysis was carried out to gather information on case studies of firms within the fashion industry in Italy that have developed specific strategies to address the challenges of COVID-19 at the market and production levels. Italy is one of the most important countries in terms of fashion products and culture, expanding its role in the global arena since the 1950s [50], and Milan has been considered a global fashion capital [51]. Fashion represents a key industry for Italian gross domestic product (GDP). With a turnover of more than EUR 80 billion and almost 500,000 employees, the fashion industry represents 8.5% of the turnover and 12.5% of the employment of Italian manufacturing. Compared to other countries, the Italian fashion industry is characterized by a small average firm size. In the European context, about one-third of the value added of the European Union (EU) is produced by Italy; about 77% of the EU's textile exports are associated with Italian companies and almost 70% of Italian fashion exports are positioned as high-end/luxury production [52].

As for the COVID-19 scenario, the lockdown has been characterized by several phases. The first lockdown started on 23 February 2020 and was limited to specific regions in Italy (Lombardy and Veneto); then, it was extended to the whole country starting from March 9. Further stricter measures were decided on March 11 (#Iorestoacasa—#Stayathome), closing most of the economic activities, including the retailing system. On 21 March, all manufacturing activities not considered relevant and necessary to face the pandemic were forced to close (fashion included). The lockdown period was in place up to 3 May, 2020. During the period from 9 March to 3 May, manufacturing activities were allowed to continue only with government approval, in relation to specific needs and requirements (i.e., supply within the healthcare value chain). From 4 May to 17 June, the so-called "Phase 2" was forced, allowing for a gradual resumption of manufacturing and service activities. From the end of June 2020, international mobility of persons was also allowed.

Our research focuses on the analysis of Italian fashion companies during the lockdown, especially from 21 March. We collected information on the leading Italian fashion companies by turnover (2018) according to Mediobanca (Table 1), taking into account their headquarters in Italy (Decathlon, Zara, and Luis Vuitton excluded) and their affiliation with Italy as a country of origin (Gucci). Special attention was paid to global brands due to their role in driving the GVC and their visibility in the industry. The sources of information considered were news in the general and specialized media, interviews with entrepreneurs for the press, and industry reports. Specific information related to company strategies was collected on company websites, company reports, and social media (posts on the company's official Facebook page mentioning COVID-19). Additional case studies of Italian fashion companies were conducted based on information from firms that actively

react to COVID-19 gathered from the news to enrich the scenario of strategies implemented by top fashion companies. On the basis of the case studies collected, we decided to focus further attention on the Manteco company. Consistent with [53], our objective is to examine Manteco's strategy as a specialized textile supplier engaged in the fashion value chain to explore how the pandemic has been experienced within the value chain and from the perspective of an Italian manufacturer. An analysis of sustainability and digitalization has been developed. The case study was conducted through both an interview with Marco Mantellassi (the CEO of the company) and the analysis of the website and social networks.

Table 1. Leading Italian fashion companies in 2018, by turnover.

Company	Turnover 2018 (EUR)
Luxottica	8,928,889
Prada	3,142,148
Calzedonia Hldg	2,302,772
Armani	2,108,772
Max Mara Group	1,597,294
OVS	1,457,154
Moncler	1,420,074
OTB	1,408,179
Dolce & Gabbana	1,349,254
Salvatore Ferragamo	1,335,269
Decathlon Italy	1,274,463
Valentino	1,223,690
Ermenegildo Zegna HoldItalia	1,159,254
Gucci	1,090,168
Zara Italy	1,024,139
LIR	996,571
LVMH Italy	982,619
Safilo Group	962,861
Benetton Group	956,676
Tod's	940,499

Note: turnover is in thousand euros. Source: adapted from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/610701/growth-of-top15moda-fashion-companies-turnover-in-italy/> (accessed on 26 October 2020)).

4. Results

4.1. The Italian Fashion Industry Facing the Pandemic

The Italian fashion industry has harshly suffered from COVID-19. According to industry analyses and forecasts provided by scholars [54] and practitioners, Italian fashion sales are expected to drop in 2020 between 26.9% (basic scenario) and 34.8% (negative scenario) [52], due to the lockdown and pandemic generally (the physical retail system involves about 300,000 employees). In April 2020, the manufacturing of fashion products (textile, apparel, footwear, and leather accessories) decreased by approximately 81%, while sales through traditional sales channels (excluding e-commerce) decreased by 83% compared to April 2019. The Italian fashion system also suffered from the interruption of shopping tourism, which in 2019, affected about 14% of international tourists in 2019.

In this scenario, the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana (The National Chamber of Italian Fashion—CNMI) promoted at the end of March 2020 a project called “Italia We are with you” [55], funded by EUR 3 million collected from its members and conceived as a large solidarity project to support the Italian health system during the pandemic. Through the project, CNMI provided medical equipment, other medical devices, and materials to hospitals and other medical centers (starting from the new COVID-19 hospital located in the Milan Exhibition area built in March 2020, specifically to face the pandemic). CNMI has leveraged its members to stress how the Italian fashion industry is close to the needs of the country. Each CNMI member contributes to the project by donating to the Civil Protection an amount not less than the membership fee provided by CNMI, the Fashion Brands not associated with an equivalent amount, and the Associations with what they collect. The

project has also benefitted from CNMI's international institutional relations with China, since many Chinese institutions, i.e., the China National Textile and Apparel Council, the China Fashion Association or the Italy–China Fashion & Creative Council, supported the needs of the health system by providing medical equipment and other initiatives in Italy and China. This initiative has been subscribed to by about 40 Italian brands and fashion members of the CNMI to demonstrate the commitment of the companies in this regard.

Beyond collective action as industry associations, Italian fashion companies have developed multiple strategies to cope with the COVID-19 constraints.

4.2. Manufacturing

An important first direction of investment has been on the manufacturing side to overcome the constraints generated by the lockdown concerning manufacturing activities. Many companies among the ones analyzed have decided to convert their manufacturing processes to produce products related to medical applications (tissue masks, protective visors, and medical gowns) at their Italian plants and leverage their Italian supply chain (Table 2). In addition to the leading fashion companies listed in Table 1, other firms have redefined their offers to cope with the challenges of the pandemic, as signaled by the news. Companies that invested in Made in Italy production—through proprietary factories and a network of specialized suppliers—suffered the most from the lockdown (i.e., in terms of a decrease in shareholder value) compared to more internationalized companies, such as Moncler, that have an international supply chain [56].

Table 2. Manufacturing strategies of Italian fashion companies during the pandemic.

Company	Manufacturing Strategy	Company Communication
Albini	Investment in product innovation: development of a new textile treatment enabling textile protection against viruses and bacteria (Viroformula™) (factory in Albino, Bergamo, Lombardy Region)	<i>"In this critical and uncertain period in which we are today, we decided not to stop: In contrast, we continued looking for innovative solutions and products, in order to face these new challenges. Because for us, innovation means interpreting the future, to improve our present".</i> Stefano Albini, President, company website.
Armani	Production of single-use medical overalls	<i>"The Armani group announces that all its Italian production plants have now switched to manufacturing single use medical overalls to be used for the individual protection of healthcare workers engaged in the fight against Coronavirus disease".</i> Facebook post, 29 March 2020.
Calzedonia	Production of tissue masks and medical masks (factory plants in Italy and Croatia and through outsourcing)	<i>"The Calzedonia group supports the activities of those who fight against the virus every day by donating surgical or protective masks to hospitals, civil protection, municipalities, nonprofit organizations".</i> Company website (English version by the authors).
Ermanno Scervino	Production of surgery masks (through a home-working network of tailors in Tuscany)	<i>"We have practically stopped since the end of February, we have only started the production of surgical masks to donate to health facilities, hospices, to anyone who needed them here in Tuscany and beyond. We have also sent them to Sicily and Lombardy. Our seamstresses, all those who still have a sewing machine, free of charge and with momentum, have worked from home night and day driven only by generosity and the awareness of giving a great help to stop the current emergency."</i> Interview with Toni Scervino, the CEO and co-founder Ermanno Scervino (Source: <i>IlSole24ore</i> , 20 April 2020; English version by the authors).

Table 2. Cont.

Company	Manufacturing Strategy	Company Communication
Ermenegildo Zegna	Production of protective hospital suits (plants in Novara and Mendrisio, Piedmont region, and Switzerland)	<p>“Today, as part of the Zegna Group’s efforts to help fight the global COVID-19 crisis, we have started manufacturing protective hospital suits for medical staff, with the aim of producing 280,000 units. These efforts will help provide urgently needed supplies to the Piedmont Region (250,000 units) and Canton Ticino (30,000 units), where we have converted a portion of our INCO plant in Novara and CONSITEX in Mendrisio to accommodate suit production. This is a collective effort made possible by the collaboration between the Zegna Group, Fondazione Zegna, the Piedmont Region, Italy, and Canton Ticino, Switzerland. Protective suits are constructed with a nonwoven fabric, produced by Pratrivero SpA in Biella, Italy” Facebook post, 14 April 2020.</p> <p>“We are proactively collaborating with the Piedmont Crisis Unit and the relevant authority of Canton Ticino to speed up the production process in an effort to meet the pressing need for vital medical supplies”. Facebook post, 14 April 2020.</p>
Ferragamo	Production of masks (Tuscany plants and supply chain)	<p>“To aid in battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, Salvatore Ferragamo is manufacturing and donating 100,000 TNT antibacterial masks and providing 50,000 pieces of hand sanitizers and 3,000 FFP1 masks to local healthcare units in agreement with the Region of Tuscany”. Facebook post, 24 March 2020</p>
Gucci	Production of about 1 million masks and 55,000 medical overalls (Tuscany supply chain)	<p>“ . . . On March 11 in Italy, Kering and its Houses made donations to the four main foundation hospitals in Lombardy, Veneto, Tuscany and Lazio. More recently, Gucci responded to a call to fashion companies in the Tuscany Region for surgical masks and medical overalls and aims to donate 1.1 million surgical masks and 55.000 medical overalls in the coming weeks, subject to relevant authorizations”. Facebook post, 23 March 2020.</p>
Herno	Production of masks and white coats (plant in Novara, Piedmont region)	<p>“Herno has chosen to aid in the battle against COVID-19 pandemic working, with less staff, only to produce and donate masks and white coats to the healthcare units in the Piedmont area in agreement with the local prefecture of police. Together, we shall make it through this time to work on future challenges”. Facebook post, 26 March 2020.</p>
Luxottica	Production of protective eyewear and goggles	<p>“ . . . The Company is also donating approximately 15,000 pairs of protective eyewear and goggles to emergency responders in the United States and Italy”. Company website, 21 April 2020.</p>
Marzotto group	Production of anti-viral textiles through the ViralOff® treatment (a partnership between Marzotto group and the Swedish specialized supplier, Polygiene)	<p>During the last days, Marzotto Group signed a partnership agreement with Polygiene, one of the leaders in the textile treatment sector, and already a supplier of treatments for masks and gowns, for the use of the innovative ViralOff® treatment. Through the collaboration between Marzotto Group and Polygiene it was possible to adapt the antiviral treatment, ViralOff, to be used on fabrics produced with natural fibers, such as wool, linen, and cotton. (. . .) Antiviral treatment will be used by all divisions of the Marzotto Group: Marzotto Fabrics, Guabello, Fratelli Tallia di Delfino, Marlane, Estethia/G.B.Conte, Opera Piemontese, Redaelli, Tessuti di Sondrio, Lanerossi, Linificio and Canapificio Nazionale, Nuova Tessilbrenta”. Facebook post, 22 May 2020.</p>

Table 2. Cont.

Company	Manufacturing Strategy	Company Communication
Miroglio	Production of surgical masks that can be customized through innovative printing methods (transfer printing) and a dedicated new manufacturing line (business unit M360 in Pollenzo, Piedmont region) The innovative production process has exploited the synergies between the business unit M360 and Sublitex (a company specializing in transfer printing)	<i>“Thanks to the new machinery we have purchased, we have started a new line totally dedicated to the production of printed surgical masks” (M360 Business Unit manager). Press release on 8 September 2020 (English version by the authors).</i>
Pompea	Production of innovative surgery masks (masks with a filter), the P.Mask. The innovation of the product is based on the use of innovative technology water repellent HeiQ Eco Dry and the special filter (Q-SKIN developed by the parent company Fulgar) (Mendole, Mantova, Lombardy region)	<i>“Pompea, Italian brand of hosiery and underwear has chosen to do its part to face the current emergency COVID-19, converting a slice of its production to the realization of masks with filter for common use made and produced entirely in Italy: P.Mask”. Fulgar company website (English version by the authors).</i>
Prada	Production of 110,000 masks and 80,000 medical gowns to be distributed in the Tuscany region up to April 6 (factory in Perugia, Umbria region, and Tuscany supply chain)	<i>“Prada, at the request of the Tuscany Region, started on Wednesday, March 18 the production of 80,000 gowns and 110,000 masks to be used by the region’s health personnel. The plan provides for daily deliveries that will be completed on April 6”. Press release 23 March 2020 (English version by the authors).</i>
Safilo	Production of safety glasses and face shields (factories of Santa Maria di Sala, Venice (Veneto region), and Lenti—Brembate di Sopra (BG) (Lombardy region)	<i>“#united4eyecare is Safilo’s global corporate initiative that embraces all the activities put in place in different countries by Safilo and its brands for the production and donation of safety glasses, goggles, and face shields for health care professionals. Eyesight care and protection have always been at the heart of what we do: In this moment of emergency, Safilo has gathered resources to support and equip front-line health workers around the world. We are united for our communities. We are united for eyecare”. Facebook, post 21 April 2020</i>

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

4.3. Sustainability

We also observed a strong relationship between the pandemic and the sustainability strategies of Italian fashion companies. As mentioned above, the whole Italian fashion community of companies, through the initiative “Italia We are with you”, engage in order to support the increasing requests from the health system and, more generally, the public needs for Italian society. In addition, tightly linked to manufacturing strategies, Italian fashion companies have also developed specific initiatives addressing the social needs of the local communities they belong to, as well as of the entire country. Many of the strategies implemented at the manufacturing level (see Table 2) have also been oriented to address new production for social purposes. Almost all the case studies presented above have donated masks, medical overalls, safety glasses, and face shields to hospitals and medical infrastructure, other public institutions (i.e., schools), or NGOs. In the case of brands operating in Tuscany specifically, companies respond to an explicit request by the Tuscany Regional Government to produce masks based on TNT material (“Tessuto Non Tessuto”—Nonwoven fabric) “made in Tuscany” [57], which are developed by textile companies of the Region, representing an important textile cluster in the Italian and global scenario, and tested in cooperation with the University of Florence.

In addition to production reconfiguration, consistent with their sustainability strategies, the investigated companies have also carried out socially-oriented initiatives (Table 3) connected to the communities and the companies that are embedded or operating. Compa-

nies have invested to increase the safety of their workers, and in some of the cases analyzed (i.e., Tod's), the firm also decided not to pay dividends to shareholders. It is important to highlight that these social (charity) initiatives are driven by a strong link between the founders and entrepreneurs of fashion companies and the territorial context in which they have developed and grown their business initiatives.

Table 3. CSR strategies of Italian fashion companies during the pandemic.

Company	CSR Strategy
Armani	Donations in favor of the Civil Protection and the hospitals Luigi Sacco, San Raffaele, Istituto dei Tumori (Cancer Institute) in Milano and Spallanzani in Roma, to which Giorgio Armani had made other direct contributions to the hospitals of the cities most affected by the epidemic, Bergamo and Piacenza, and to that of Versilia, for a total amount of EUR 2 million.
Calzedonia	Donations of masks are only addressed to cope with public needs (public institutions and NGOs are the only receivers of the masks; they are not for sale).
Dolce & Gabbana	Donation to the Humanitas University based in Milan to support a study coordinated by Professor Alberto Mantovani, scientific director of the institute, on the responses of the immune system to the coronavirus.
Ermenegildo Zegna	Collaboration with the public authorities in the Piedmont region and Canton Ticino, where the company is located.
Fendi	Donation of 50,000 masks to Rome (Roma Capitale) to address the needs of teachers in primary and secondary schools in the city.
Gucci	"Gucci calls on its global community to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic, after donating 1 million euros to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund of the World Health Organization in partnership with Facebook to monitor and collect data on the spread of the virus to strengthen ICUs around the world, supply protection equipment to health personnel, and accelerate the creation of vaccines and therapies. Join us and donate now to the United Nations Foundation's COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund in support of the World Health Organization on.gucci.com/GucciCommunity__." Facebook post, March 26 2020.
LIR (Geox and Diadora brand)	Mario and Enrico Moretti Polegato, presidents of Geox spa and Diadora, respectively, have donated EUR 1 million to the Veneto Region to help manage the health emergency dictated by the Coronavirus.
Luxottica	"Protect Our People" initiative (shipping masks directly to the home of any employee who needs them). Donation of hundreds of thousands of disposable face masks to hospitals, public institutions, and partners in regions where Luxottica has a large presence. Donation of about 15,000 pairs of protective eyewear and goggles in the US and Italy. Through the Leonardo Del Vecchio Foundation, EUR 10 million have been donated to Lombardy (a new hospital in Milan). Donation of thirty hospital ventilators to local communities of Lombardia, Veneto, Trentino, Piemonte, Abruzzo, and Puglia (areas where the chairman and the company have "roots"). The colors of the Italian flag have illuminated the facade of Luxottica's main plant in Agordo and its headquarters in Milan (to link with other citizen initiatives and as a sign of resilience). This initiative has received lots of appreciation from customers and citizens (in Agordo and beyond).
Marzotto group	Donation of 150,000 masks to the Italian Municipalities where the group operates (five plants in Vicenza (Veneto Region), two plants in Biella (Piedmont region), and two plants in Sondrio and Bergamo (Lombardy Region).
Moncler	EUR 10 million was donated by Moncler to start the project promoted by the Lombardy Region for the construction of a hospital center inside the former Milan Trade Fair.
Piquadro	Participation in the donation initiative promoted by the Milan Foundation aimed at supporting A.R.E.U (a regional company in Lombardy focused on reusing and recycling).
Prada	Research-oriented donation through PROTEGGIMI ("Protect me") as part of the Prada Group's commitment to scientific research, with the aim of exploring the role of science in contemporary society. Donations have been directed to the IRCCS San Raffaele Hospital in Milan for research on the relationship between COVID-19 and gender.
Tod's	The Della Valle family, owner of Tod's group, also decided on behalf of its employees to donate EUR 5 million to establish financial funds (named "Sempre con voi"—"Always with you") to the families of health care staff who lost their lives in the fight against COVID-19.
Valentino	Donation of EUR 2 million: 1 million to support the Sacco hospital in Milan for the safety of medical personnel assisting patients and 1 million made available to the Civil Protection for the immediate purchase of basic necessities, including lung respirators, and to support the Civil Protection in all the Italian regions in which it operates.
Versace	Donatella Versace, creative director of Versace, together with her daughter Allegra Versace Beck, donated EUR 200,000 to the San Raffaele hospital in Milan (intensive care department) as a personal donation.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on companies' press releases, websites, and media news.

As Remo Ruffini (the President and CEO of Moncler) stated to justify Moncler's donation of EUR 10 million to the new COVID-19 hospital in Milan:

"Milan is a city that has given us all an extraordinary present. We cannot and we do not want to abandon it. It is our duty to give back to the city what it has given us until now." [58].

Similarly, Giorgio Armani presents his view on Milan:

"... I chose Milan to build life and work, private and public, where to live and where to make the Armani world live. I continue to choose Milan because even when it trembles it does not let itself be overwhelmed. Because it thinks about tomorrow, living today without stopping. Because it does not know the word surrender. For all this Milan is so dear to me and for many of my colleagues. Wouldn't this be an opportunity to join forces to make sure that everything we love about Milan is once again in the eyes of the world?" [59].

According to the CEO of Marzotto Group, Davide Favrin:

"At this difficult time, we wondered what we could do for the territories where our factories are. During the years, we have given so much to these territories, but we have received even more. The donation of masks is a small sign to try to give tangible aid to the families of our employees and to all the people who live in the communities in which we have been present for many years. It is definitely a difficult time, but we will be able to react." [60].

4.4. Digitalization

In terms of investments in digital solutions to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, fashion brands working with final customers in Italy and abroad have used their e-commerce solutions already established prior to the pandemic. However, a few companies have carried out some innovations to solve the problem of physical distance from their customers, as well as to reinforce customer engagement (Table 4).

Table 4. Digital strategies of Italian fashion companies during the pandemic.

Company	Digital strategy
Armani	Live streaming of the event "Milano Moda Donna" to reach Chinese customers. The company also started a strategic collaboration with Yoox-Net-a-Porter for the "Next era" project that provides complete integration between online and offline purchases.
Biagiotti	Live streaming of the event "Milano Moda Donna" to reach Chinese customers.
Ferragamo	A virtual showroom, photos, and interactive images in a 360° version of the products, in a reserved and protected cloud environment reserved to buyers.
LIR (Geox and Diadora brand)	Online appointment via the website in any of the retail stores to have a safe, guided, and personal experience in the store, avoiding any concerns related to COVID-19.
Miroglio	E-commerce of masks directly from the website Progettto360.com.
OVS	Online appointment via the website in any of the retail stores to have a safe, guided, and personal experience in the store. avoiding any concerns related to COVID-19.
Piquadro	Videoconference with a sale consultant that is in the store and can showcase all the products. The client has the option of buying online and having the product delivered at home, buying online and collecting the product in the store, or buying and collecting the product in the store.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the company's websites and media news.

In order to promote innovative and customizable masks, the Miroglio Group, through its M360 business unit, set up a new e-commerce section on the company website (<https://www.progettto360.com> (accessed on 28 October 2020)) to sell the new products. Through online rich content, the company was able to communicate the quality and variety of customized textiles the mask was made of, in addition to shipping free of charge in Italy.

The international retailer OVS innovates the distribution process through the initiative "Chat and Buy with the OVS store", where the customer can call, or video call the store

through WhatsApp, to be supported in the purchase process. The salesperson in the store is able to show and comment on all the products in stores that the customer could eventually buy and then receive at home directly from the store. Additionally, OVS allows potential customers who visit the OVS website to be supported by the salesperson in the store for additional purchasing guides [61]. The Geox group developed a similar and easier process. Potential customers interested to visit Geox stores could book, via the website, an appointment in any of the retail stores to have a safe, guided, and personal experience in the store, avoiding any concerns related to COVID-19. Piquadro, a specialized manufacturer of leather bags and accessories, decided to invest in an innovative combination of e-commerce and physical stores. On the company website, the client can set up a video conference with a sales consultant that is physically located in the store. In this manner, the consultant can present all products and their features, mimicking the experience the client could have in-person [62]. In the intention of Piquadro and Marco Palmieri, the company's CEO, this solution could overcome the "cold nature" (as he defines it) of the e-commerce process. E-commerce sales increased by 23.5% in the first six months of 2020 [63].

Digital technologies also become particularly important for reaching potential markets abroad. The Digital Fashion Week [64], organized by the CNMI, as well as the Altaroma Digital Runaway (15–17 September 2020), are designed to overcome any physical distance from potential customers (both B2B and B2C), by allowing fashion companies to arrange live streaming of the runway show to present their new collections. Similarly, the new project Pitti Connect [65] aims to become an advanced platform that enriches and prolongs the buyer–supplier relationship to expand it through digital solutions, such as virtual showrooms and much more (smart scouting, innovative network beyond physical constraints, safe online content sharing, agenda setting, real-time data analysis and monitoring, and special online and live content).

Giorgio Armani and Laura Biagiotti have used live streaming solutions to reach their Chinese customers during the pandemic (live streaming) for the Milano Moda Donna in China (in February 2020). Salvatore Ferragamo has developed a virtual showroom based on the Hypen-HSL technology that allows buyers and partners to consult and view technical data sheets, photos, and interactive images in a 360° version of the products, in a reserved and protected cloud environment that is easy to be use.

4.5. The Manteco CASE Study: An Example of High-Quality Manufacturing, Sustainability, and Technological Innovation

Manteco was founded in 1943 by Enzo Anacleto Mantellassi with the name "Lanificio San Marco" (Saint Mark Wool Mill, Prato, Italy) and was based in Prato, a small town on the outskirts of Florence, Italy, and one of the famous textile districts in Italy. In 1971, the company changed its name Compagnia Tessile Mantellassi (Mantellassi Textile Company, Prato, Italy), in short Manteco, and is now run by the third generation of Mantellassi, Matteo, and Marco.

In the 1980s, Manteco started its international expansion opening commercial offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Los Angeles, but it was in the 2000s that the company decided to invest in two different as well as integrated areas: product innovation and sustainability. In terms of product innovation, they tried to reinvent fabrics, especially wool. In 2008, Manteco introduced Bybye, a carded wool double fabric with additional binding. The main idea was to design a fabric that adapts to the needs of contemporary life and, at the same time, could enhance the natural properties of wool, combining comfort, elegance, and performance. The fabric is now available in 270 different colors, giving the fashion industry a great level of freedom and creativity for garment design. Bybye has become a matrix for the definition of several new high-quality wool-based fabrics.

In terms of sustainability, in 2014, Manteco adopted its Green Zero Waste policy, which aims at saving and regenerating the waste produced during production processes. This strategy was applied both intensively and extensively. The great effort in sustainability led to the development of Project43, an innovative and traceable circular economy project, and

it became the world's first company to ever apply life cycle assessment on wool, obtaining certification by ICEA. The reusing of wool, which was already something in the DNA of the company from its early beginning, was brought to a new level of quality. In doing so, the company was able to mix new production machines (Industry 4.0) with artisanal work and skills. Fabric is the result of the combination of both innovative technology and human hands. In the same logic, Manteo bought and restored a series of abandoned warehouses to expand the company without new land use.

Innovation and sustainability were the cornerstones of the strategy that the company adopted to face the consequences of the pandemic. In terms of innovation, the company focused on digital communication (website and social media) to consolidate its brand and present all the work performed for recycling, product traceability, and sustainability in production. As Marco Mantellassi, the CEO of the company highlights, "It is fundamental to communicate what we have been doing. Digital storytelling is crucial to develop a brand and introduce the final consumer to the quality of the fabric". The objective of the company is to raise awareness among the consumers about the importance of sustainable yarns and the high quality of the production. In addition, the company developed a digital archive where buyers could log in to view high-quality images of the fabrics and to deep dive into the technical features of the production of specific garments.

In terms of sustainability, the company decided to work closely with its suppliers to compensate for the reduction in global demand for garments due to the pandemic [66]. Marco Mantellassi pointed out that "*without our suppliers, we cannot do anything. We are a community and we wanted to help them in a very difficult moment*". Although there were only a few orders from fashion companies, Manteco placed orders like it was business as usual to its subcontractors to keep them financially healthy and ready to operate in the case of recovery of the market. In fact, after the lockdown, the company and its suppliers were ready to serve the market without any difficulties or downturns in fabric production. This social dimension of sustainability was implemented during the pandemic and is something the company will communicate in the future.

5. Discussions

We analyzed the strategic reactions to COVID-19 of 25 (24 and LIR that include Geox and Diadora) major Italian fashion companies. If we consider all three different strategies (Table 5), the fashion companies invested mainly in manufacturing and CSR, while digital initiatives were quite rare—fifteen companies out of twenty-five opted for new strategies for manufacturing (such as product reconfiguration and/or innovation), fifteen out of twenty-five for CSR, and just seven out of twenty-five for digital strategies.

Table 5. Strategies of Italian fashion companies during the pandemic.

Company	Manufacturing		CSR	Digital	Total Strategies for Company
	Product Reconfiguration	Product Innovation	Social Sustainability	New Customer Relationships	
Albini		New textile treatment			1
Armani	New product line (single-use medical overalls)		Donation (funds)	Live streaming/E-commerce	3
Biagiotti				Live streaming	1
Dolce & Gabbana			Donation (funds)		1
Calzedonia	New product line (tissue masks and medical masks)		Donation (masks)		2
Ermanno Scervino	New product line (medical masks)				1

Table 5. Cont.

Company	Manufacturing		CSR	Digital	Total Strategies for Company
	Product Reconfiguration	Product Innovation	Social Sustainability	New Customer Relationships	
Ermenegildo Zegna	New product line (protective hospital suits)		Public engagement with local authorities		2
Fendi			Donation (masks)		1
Ferragamo	New product line (TNT masks)			Virtual showroom	2
Gucci	New product line (masks and medical overalls)		Donation (funds)		2
Herno	New product line (masks and white coats)				1
LIR (Geox and Diadora brands)			Donation (funds)	Online personal assistant	2
Luxottica	New product line (protective eyewear and goggles)		Donation (masks and funds) Public engagement		2
Marzotto group		Anti-viral textiles through registered treatment	Donation (masks)		2
Miroglio	New product line (customized surgical masks) and a dedicated new manufacturing line	Innovative printing methods for mask customization		E-commerce	2
Moncler			Donation (funds)		1
OVS				Online personal assistant	1
Pompea		Innovative surgery masks (filter and material)			1
Piquadro			Donation (funds)	Videoconferencing/ personal assistant	2
Prada	New product line (masks and medical gowns)		Donation (funds)		2
Safilo	New product line (safety glasses and face shields)				1
Tod's			Donation (funds)		1
Valentino			Donation (funds)		1
Versace			Donation (funds)		1
Total Companies per Strategy	11	4	15	7	

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Overall, the most adopted solution by the companies, with eleven out of twenty-five, was to invest in at least two strategies, while thirteen opted only for one strategy. Notably, Armani was the only company to be able to invest in all three strategies at the same time. In addition, if we combine the two most common strategies (manufacturing and CSR), six companies adopted both.

The favor toward manufacturing and CSR strategies could have different explanations. First, this choice could be related to a short-term, tactical, and defensive move by the company. In Italy, to avoid the lockdown, companies have to demonstrate to be part of what was identified by the government as an essential supply chain such as food, healthcare, and logistics. Manufacturing masks was a clever turnaround to be considered part of an essential supply chain and to obtain permission to be open for business, preventing the company from the negative consequences of a prolonged lockdown. The immediate advantage for the company is linked with the possibility of serving international markets that were not interested in strict laws to contain the pandemic (i.e., the US market) and, at the same time, to develop a strategy for the future after the lockdown. Second, the ease of implementation of these two strategies may have played a major role. Being in the fashion business, it was relatively easy for those companies to convert part of their production to specific garments, such as masks, because of their knowledge of the textile supply chain and their competence and skills.

The easiness of implementation is also relative to the CSR initiatives that are completely limited to the social sustainability strategy, such as donations. Although we do not want to disregard the great generosity of the donors, donations are the result of a unilateral decision (the company, very often the founder personally or her family) and a straightforward process. It is interesting to notice that the receivers of the donations are institutions that are geographically close to the headquarters of the company, such as Milan for Armani or Rome for Fendi. There is a concentration of donations to Milan and Lombardy in general that can be explained by the fact that the majority of fashion companies have their headquarters in the region and, at the same time, that area was one of the most affected by the pandemic. Those donations wanted to be a concrete help in supporting the healthcare system and other crucial services in the first wave of COVID-19. As deserved, these donations received a lot of attention from the media and the general public and were considered an important contribution to the community. The positive effects on the company and brand awareness are without a doubt. However, it is not a surprise that more complex and difficult-to-implement CSR strategies, such as environmental sustainability, were not adopted as a response to the pandemic because they require more time and effort from the company and, more importantly, they require preparation and could not be improvised. As the Manteco case study pointed out, the adoption of an environmental sustainability strategy requires specific investments in both product and process innovation that cannot be realized overnight.

The easiness of implementation also played a role in digital strategies. Few companies (only six) invested in this direction, and they opted for the virtualization of the cornerstone of the fashion industry: the runway show. In a short time, the answer to the challenge posed by the pandemic was to replicate a well-known formula, the show, in the digital world. It was definitely the fastest way to reach the clients who could not attend the show. In fact, the social dimension of these events (before, during, and after the show) was crucial for brand awareness and the success of the collection in a pre-COVID-19 era. The possibility to recreate, in the digital world, the same social bubble that pops up during fashion week is not easy although, in the past, social media (influencers on Instagram) were incorporated into the fashion show. The respect of physical distancing imposed by the pandemic may be hard to overcome with the virtualization of an old format and may require more innovation that usually takes time and a lot of effort.

However, fashion companies are taking the challenge of the pandemic as a way to think more strategically about their business. For example, Albini and Marzotto group decided to innovate their core production, textile, adding new features, such as protection

from the virus. This may not have easy penetration in the market in the short term, but it could be a very important asset in the near future, especially, as is almost the case, the second wave of the pandemic will hit European and American markets. Consumers could require not only fashionable but also safe clothing from virus, in addition to the entire healthcare system that will require specific solutions for the protection of personnel. This request could continue even after the pandemic has ended, in relation to the fact that consumers could be scared of a new wave of contagion. It is important to notice that this important product innovation was possible because those companies had maintained local investments in manufacturing. This may lead the company to partially reconsider its sourcing strategy to have significant manufacturing capability in the home country. It is not clear whether this leads to an important wave of reshoring, but it is more likely that companies understood the importance of more strong control on quality and manufacturing processes, which has been proven critical to face the pandemic.

Similar strategic thinking could be found in the use of digital technologies. Ferragamo and Piquadro demonstrated how digital solutions could redesign the relationships between the company and the clients. Due to the flexibility and information richness of the digital objects, these companies were able to provide a better service to their clients and enrich the overall experience for the customer.

As we already noticed, sustainability is not considered a strategic option by fashion companies to respond to the threat of COVID-19. This does not mean that companies are not doing anything on sustainability, but that they did not focus on this strategy to face the pandemic. It is likely that, in the future, companies will focus on sustainability, as several prominent scientists and important international organizations have pointed out how the pandemic is the result of the great imbalance caused by human activity on the environment. As fashion has been recognized as one of the most polluting industries [67], we expect that companies will adopt a clearer strategy in the next few months because they need to attract the interest of consumers.

6. Conclusions

Primum vivere, deinde philosophari. This well-known Latin proverb underlines, especially under critical circumstances, the necessity to solve (literally to survive) a problem and then, when the peril is over, to critically analyze (literally to do philosophy) the question. This describes quite faithfully what actually happened in the fashion industry. As our analysis pointed out, the majority of fashion firms reacted to the challenges posed by COVID-19, focusing mainly on product reconfiguration (i.e., mask production) activities and social sustainability (donations). Both actions were characterized by a combination of tactical advantage and easiness of implementation. Supply chain and manufacturing skills were at hand, as well as the relationships with local institutions that were involved in the donations. This does not mean that those actions were not remarkable and useful for the survival of the companies. On the contrary, these short-term and tactical moves are a sign of the solidity and capability of the companies. Using all the resources at hand, especially during a critical event such as a pandemic, is of capital importance: *primum vivere*.

However, the COVID-19 crisis was used by a smaller number of companies to make even more long-term-oriented strategic decisions. Investments in product innovation and digital technologies are not just a response to a threat but are a way to redesign internal processes and imagine new market opportunities for the company. We expect that this proactive approach will be adopted more broadly in the near future: *deinde philosophari*.

The research contributes to advance, mainly focused on the fashion industry, the theoretical knowledge about firm responses in turbulent times, highlighting the different roles of manufacturing, sustainability, and digitalization. Product and process innovation in terms of manufacturing adaptation [11] allows the company to avoid the negative consequences related to a crisis event and to take immediate advantage related to the possibility of diversifying target markets and going abroad. At the same time, considering the supply chain [14], from the point of view of suppliers, staying local seems to be crucial

for the survival of companies. In relation to the need to face the world health crisis; the (innovation) strategies implemented at the manufacturing level have been shown to be coupled with social purposes, especially in a short time. Instead, considering sustainability strategies [4] that include environmental sustainability, they are difficult to put in place in a short time due to their complexity, because such strategies require greater involvement and readiness by the company and more time and effort; thus, the company looks at it as a long-term goal. Finally, the research confirms the key role of digital technologies, in both the short- and long-term, in supporting and redesigning relationships with clients [12] and markets during a crisis and turbulent times. Therefore, it is essential for a company to invest in digital technologies to be ready to deal with future crises.

In terms of managerial implications, our analysis underlines three main points. First, the company must reconsider its supply chain strategy. Local manufacturing was crucial for the survival of the companies because it gave them the opportunity to adapt to both a new demand from the market (masks were out of stock at that time in Italy) and from the regulators. In addition, these manufacturing skills gave the company the opportunity to innovate the product. With great probability, without manufacturing all companies would be shut down during the lockdown. Second, social sustainability is important to increase brand awareness and emotionally reconnect with consumers in critical moments, such as a pandemic, where attention to the fashion industry must be reduced. Third, digital technologies are still a missed opportunity, and the management of fashion companies should invest more in this direction. That is even more true if we consider that fashion companies will have difficulty reaching consumers, as they did in the past. COVID-19 seems to be around longer than expected, and more structural solutions are needed to deal with this new reality.

The research has some main limitations. The study is limited to an Italian fashion company and to its strategies during the pandemic. This limitation could be offset by expanding the sample, including fashion companies of other countries (a larger study) and the observed period (a longitudinal study).

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