Culture and Sustainability:
An Interplay on the New Made in Italy Landscape

Nadica Maksimova[*]   Flavia Piancazzo[**]

Università di Bologna (Italy)

Abstract

The current global interest and urge to propose alternatives to the predominant super-polluting and non-ethical fashion system require major attention to the unconventional fashion production models. Sustainable start-ups are often analysed as both circular systems and devices to re-activate local crafts, pointing toward not only the environmentally-friendly practices but also underlying the need to take better care of people, both as workers and consumers. However, little to no research is dedicated to the assessment of the holistic approach to sustainability of these born-responsible fashion entities. The analysis adopts the *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan* (2019) framework by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham and critically examines 60 born-sustainable brands in the Italian context. Through the analysis, it will be presented and discussed that born-sustainable does not imply a holistic approach, nor does it guarantee attention to the often-wrongly-separated environmental, social and cultural aspects of the sustainable agency.

Keywords: Born-sustainable; Earth Logic; Holistic Approach; Fashion and Sustainability; Italian Context.

*   ✉ nadica.maksimova2@unibo.it

**   ✉ flavia.piancazzo2@unibo.it

Introduction

The social consequences and environmental impact of fashion have been a topic of discussion for decades now,[1] yet there is still no evidence of fundamental shifts.[2] It seems that the need to expand production and satisfy much faster time-to-market rates, as a consolidated feature of the fashion system, is still the principal engine of the industry. "Fashion is falling short of ambitions to operate in a more environmentally and socially responsible manner" states the latest publication of *The State of Fashion* by The BoF. It says that "companies demonstrate progress in analysing and understanding their impact and in setting targets"[3] while the radical acts and institutional regulations[4] that would change the status quo are undoubtedly lacking. More problematically, the industry continues to approach its issues in a sporadic and isolated manner,[5] while "the complexity of the matter implies a need to address the system rather than the individual parts."[6] Although companies are expanding their awareness of environmental and social impacts, it is arguably difficult to fit the concept of sustainability into the current global fashion system, that is, "within its business aspects, production and consumption."[7] As it will be shown in the section *Fashion and Sustainability, an ongoing evolution*, when it comes to the so-called sustainable champions, or born-sustainable[8] companies, from the earliest publications on fashion and sustainability through cumulative works as well as single case studies, the focus has always been on showcasing the positive aspects of their practice.[9] To our knowledge, there is a significant lack in the analysis of the level of holistic integration in the born-sustainable fashion brands. And by holistic integration, we refer to the interconnectedness between the different aspects of sustainability.[10] Thus, considering not only the active and consistent improvement of the environmental, social, and cultural

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1. In the section '*Fashion and Sustainability, an ongoing evolution*' we are elaborating more in detail this on-going discussion. See Kate Fletcher, *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (London: Earthscan, 2008); Sandy Black, *Eco-chic: The Fashion Paradox* (London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd, 2008); Carla Lunghi and Eugenia Montagnini, *La moda della responsabilità* (Milano: FrancoAngeli s.r.l., 2007); For a more industry-based approach to sustainability see Francesca Romana Rinaldi e Salvo Testa, *L'impresa moda responsabile* (Milano: Egea, 2013), or the more recent work Francesca Romana Rinaldi, *Fashion Industry 2030: Reshaping the Future Through Sustainability and Responsible Innovation* (Milano: Egea, 2020). Also important is the seminal work by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion* (London–New York: Routledge, 2015).

2. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2021 [2019]), 20–25.

3. Sarah Kent, "BoF Sustainability Index 2021. The Sustainability Gap, How Fashion Measures Up," *Business of Fashion*, March 22, 2021, https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/sustainability/measuring-fashions-sustainability-gap-download-the-report-now/.

4. Crucial is the recent *Good Clothes, Fair Pay* campaign demanding living wage legislation across the apparel, textile and footwear sectors. For more information, see https://www.goodclothesfairpay.eu/, last accessed October 29, 2022.

5. As could be observed from the industry's highly diversified performance across six categories, see "The BoF Sustainability Index 2021," 5–6; or from the discrepancy in the scores per section in Sarah Ditty et al. *Fashion Transparency Index 2022* (Fashion Revolution CIC, 2022). 40.

6. See Fletcher, *Design Journeys,* XVI.

7. Anika Kozlowski, Cory Searcy and Michal Bardecki, "Innovation for a Sustainable Fashion Industry: A Design Focused Approach Toward the Development of New Business Models," in *Green Fashion: Volume 2. Environmental Footprints and Eco-design of Products and Processes*, eds. Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu and Miguel Angel Gardetti (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 150–172.

8. P. Demirel et al. "Born to be green: new insights into the economics and management of green entrepreneurship" in *Small Business Economy* (2019) 52: 759–771, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-017-9933-z, argue that "the born green companies follow an entrepreneurial path that fulfils the need for a greener and more environmentally friendly approach to business, providing practical and innovative solutions for social and environmental concerns." Taking a cue from their phrasing, we choose "born sustainable" instead of "born green" in order to underline that not only the 'green' thus the environmentally friendly aspects count as sustainable.

9. For positive brand examples, see Black, *Eco-chic;* Lunghi and Montagnini, *La moda della responsabilità;* Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen (eds.), *Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the Way We Make and Use Clothes* (London–New York: Routledge, 2011).

10. Emphasised as a crucial element by academics such Kate Fletcher, "Other Fashion Systems," in *The Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 15; Sue Thomas, *Fashion Ethics* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 3.

dimensions also thinking in systems[11] and taking into account the pre-existing linkages between these dimensions.[12] Having in mind the continuous focus on individual aspects and not on the overall picture, which is typical of the approach to sustainability of the fashion system,[13] with the present paper, we want to contribute to the academic debate on this topic with an in-depth reflection on the born-sustainable fashion brands. Through the lens of the *Earth Logic* values and landscapes proposed by Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham,[14] we strive to understand how sustainability is comprehended and reflected in the context of the Italian, born-sustainable brands. As it will be demonstrated on the following pages, when it comes to born-sustainable Italian fashion brands, there is much scope for improvement, mainly because even in the born-sustainable fashion brands, there is still a strong presence of the economic growth rationale[15] which impedes the holistic transition toward a more responsible, ethical and sustainable fashion system.

Fashion and Sustainability, an Ongoing Evolution

Theorizing fashion requires an in-depth consideration of its multiple aspects. Above all, it requires acknowledgement that fashion presents itself as a network of overlapping practices whose interaction delineates the characteristics of a given fashion system(s). The fact that fashion operates in many different systems, with fashion-related practices engaging with one another in a multitude of modes, makes the definition of "fashion" quite an endeavour. In order to resolve the impasse around the definition, and to lay the foundation for further exploration of the flaws of the current fashion systems, Alice Payne proposes a theoretical model to conceptualize any fashion system by synthesizing multiple perspectives in three facets: fashion-as-culture, fashion-as-change, and fashion-as-industry.[16] The three, unavoidably interacting with each other, compose also the dominant fashion system which, as Payne explains, has two main features: its economic hegemony truthfully following the evolution of capitalism, and the close relationship between fashion-as-culture and fashion-as-change, where culture is progressively being perceived as exclusively associated with change. The dominant system has its roots in pre-industrial Europe[17] and permeated the Western economic model in which industry capitalised on the fashion-culture and fashion-change axes,[18] particularly following the 1980s and the rise of Neoliberalism, thus the rise in attention on the self-determination and the sovereignty of the individual.[19]

The conceptualisation provided by Payne is particularly important in the context of the relationship

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11. As theorised by Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (London: Chelsea Green Pub., 2008), Chapter 7, 166–175. For more fashion-circumscribed theorisation, see Alice Payne, *Designing fashion's future: Present Practice and Tactics for Sustainable Change* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), Chapter 2, 13–38.

12. On the past-imprinted relations between the different dimensions of the predominant fashion system and the imperative to transition to present time and space interconnectedness, see Jennifer Whitty, "Fashion Systems of Earth Logic and Transition for This Time and Space," in *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, Vol. 8 n.4 (March 2021): 355–375. For historic data on individual sustainability-related practices see also Jennifer Farley Gordon and Colleen Hill, *Sustainable Fashion: Past, Present and Future* (London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

13. As discussed above, see footnote 5. To a certain extent, this is also visible in some academic works that often analyse the different dimensions separately. See Janet Hethorn and Connie Ulasewicz (eds.), *Sustainable Fashion: What's Next? A Conversation About Issues, Practices, and Possibilities* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2015).

14. See Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 27–68.

15. We refer to 'economic growth rationale' as intrinsic to "the system of consumerism and economic logic growth based on rapid product obsolescence and constantly increasing the throughput of resources that force the consumer's cycle of desire and demand." See Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 16–19.

16. Alice Payne, *Designing fashion's future: Present Practice and Tactics for Sustainable Change* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), 13–38.

17. Wessie Ling, Mariella Lorusso and Simona Segre-Reinach, "Critical Studies in Global Fashion," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol.9 n.2 (2019): V–XVI, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10066. See also Flavia Piancazzo, "Visions of non-Western Fashion," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol.11 n.2 (2021): 163–167, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/13850.

18. Payne, *Designing fashion's future*, 13–38.

19. On 'the organic crisis of Neoliberalism' see Ien Ang, "Beyond the Crisis: Transitioning to a better world?," in *Cultural Studies*, 35: 2–3 (March 2021): 598–615, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1898013.

between fashion and sustainability. In her book *Designing Fashion's Future*, Payne speaks of "the attribution of symbolic meaning to material clothing as fashion-as-culture" and specifies that even though in the dominant fashion system this element is predominantly framed around the consumer culture, the point of the fashion-as-culture facet is "the role dress plays in culture and meaning-making."[20] In line with this role, fashion as a cultural industry has always been a place of active engagement against all kinds of injustices. Even in the context of the dominant fashion system, where fashion can be understood as yet another cultural industry purely aimed at consumption incentivisation, we can think of Moschino's advertisement campaigns in the early 1990s[21] addressing both social and environmental issues or recall Kathrine Hamnett's political act from 1984.[22] The history of fashion is rich in memorable moments of activism with numerous runaways criticising issues of different nature.[23] However, and this is why the conceptualisation given by Payne is so important, fashion is above all a manufacturing industry encompassing all the ways in which human labour and technology produce clothing.[24] Unfortunately, this industry, relying on finite natural resources has numerous environmental and social consequences. Hence, the positive impact of fashion as a tool for activism must be put alongside the negative impact of fashion as an industry.

The early academic works written on the relationship between fashion and sustainability have focused on the analysis of the consecutive stages of the product lifecycle: textile production, sourcing, making, distribution, use, and disposal, providing essential information to improve each one of them.[25] However, the complexity of the matter implies the need to address the system rather than its individual components,[26] especially when planned obsolescence and over-consumption are the main drivers of the dominant fashion system. The problem of over-consumption is also addressed by some business scholars who propose 'mindful consumption' proposing a 'consumer-centric approach to sustainability'[27] which can be rather limiting because even though it is "premised on a consumer mindset of caring for self, for the community, and for nature, [which can] translate behaviourally into tempering the self-defeating excesses associated with acquisitive, repetitive and aspirational consumption"[28] it is still embedded in a system centred on production-consumption axes, without considering the possible practice-based approaches to sustainability.[29] Furthermore, it could be argued that the term 'mindful

20.   See Payne, *Designing fashion's future*, 16–17.

21.   Moschino advertisements, *Vogue Italia*, iss.499, March 1992, 135; iss.506, October 1992, 133; iss.510, February 1993, 91.

22.   The designer Kathrine Hamnett, during a meeting with the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984, wore a T-shirt with the statement "58% Don't Want Pershing" [a missile system]. Sarah Mower, "Katharine Hamnett, London's Activist Fashion Warrior, Is Back With a Sustainable Buy-Now Collection," *Vogue.com*, last accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.vogue.com/article/katharine-hamnett-launches-sustainable-buy-now-collection.

23.   We can think of Alexander McQueen Fall 2009 runaway — a celebration of the decay or the 'blast against the predicament in which fashion, and possibly consumerism as a whole, finds itself' as Sarah Mower putted it, see https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2009-ready-to-wear/alexander-mcqueen; or on the inclusive and more decentralised aesthetics in Jean Paul Gaultier's S/S 1994 Ready-to-wear, https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1994-ready-to-wear/jean-paul-gaultier, *Vogue.com*, last accessed November 2nd, 2022. On Margiela's critique of the fashion system see also Nadica Maksimova, "Thoughts on: The Anti-fashion — Deconstruction Revisited," *ZoneModa Journal* Vol. 10 n.1 (July 2020): 135–142, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/11284.

24.   See Payne, *Designing fashion's future*, 16–17.

25.   See Black, *Eco-chic*; Kate Fletcher and Linda Grose, *Fashion & Sustainability Design for Change* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2012); Gwilt and Rissanen (eds.), *Shaping Sustainable Fashion*.

26.   See Fletcher, *Design Journeys*, XV–XVIII.

27.   Jagdish N. Sheth et al., "Mindful consumption: a customer-centric approach to sustainability," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 39 (2011): 21–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0216-3; For more broad business approach to sustainability see also Anika Kozlowski et al., "Innovation for a Sustainable Fashion Industry: A Design Focused Approach Toward the Development of New Business Models," in *Green Fashion: Volume 2*, edited by Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, Miguel Angel Gardetti. Singapore: Springer 2016.

28.   Jagdish N. Sheth et al., "Mindful consumption," 1.

29.   Kate Fletcher, *Craft of Use: Post-Growth Fashion*. (New York: Routledge, 2016); Fletcher, "Other Fashion Systems"; For a broader understanding of degrowth practices, see Giorgos Kallis et al., *The Case for Degrowth* (Cambridge–Medford: Polity Press, 2020).

consumption' is paradoxical in itself. Similarly as is the case with 'sustainable fashion.'[30]

In fact, as might be expected, one of the most important elements, present in the pioneer works cited above,[31] is the evident paradoxicality of 'sustainable fashion'. This problem is addressed by Tham who, by relying on the concept of *Languaging* understood as "a continuous and co-dependent process of understanding through saying and defining, and by saying and defining, in turn, shaping our world," explains why "the attempts to change the intrinsic culture of the words 'consumer' or 'consumption' by transferring to their properties concepts like 'ethical' or 'conscious' are fundamentally wrong."[32] 'Sustainability' could not and should not be simply forcefully attached to fashion. Instead, we should change our approach, and, as Tham explains, by investigating the immaterial manifestations of fashion, "we might find sustainability latent within the capabilities and qualities of fashion."[33] Sustainability as a concept is inherently opposed to the capitalist and consumerist paradigm. The logic of unlimited and perpetual economic growth is not in tune with the natural flows;[34] thus, simplistic juxtapositioning of the concepts of fashion and sustainability is not possible.

What is possible, instead, is a paradigmatic shift towards the logic of the Earth. In order to bring the concept of sustainability and the predominant fashion system closer, the system itself has to be changed from within. The different dimensions of culture, industry and change should all be reinvented anew for the entire system to evolve. In their recent work, Fletcher and Tham propose a radical approach toward a more respectful and caring system.[35] They convey this radical approach through the scheme of the six holistic landscapes, "each [one] containing an imperative to reformulate industry away from the physical accumulation of goods and towards care and maintenance."[36] The fashion industry produces 150 billion garments every year.[37] There are 7.6 billion of us on this planet, 75% of the produced textiles are discarded,[38] and a question remains: Is there a reasonable need for so many textile products? The first landscape[39] or pathway, meaning our primary option, is to grow out of growth and simply produce *Less*. As human individuals, we all have different social and cultural backgrounds; we experience life in a multitude of manners, and we have different needs and aspirations. After all, we all live in different

30.   A term that is found rather problematic to understand even within the fashion industry. For more information on how people working in the industry define and operationalise 'sustainability' see Thomas Kerdon, "Cultures of Sustainability in the Fashion Industry," in *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 24 n.5 (2016): 715–742, https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1532737; Claudia E. Henninger, Panayiota J. Alevizou and Caroline J. Oates, "What is Sustainable Fashion?," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, Vol. 20 n.4 (2016): 400–416, https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-07-2015-0052.

31.   Black, *Eco-chic*; Fletcher, *Design Journeys*.

32.   Mathilda Tham, "Languaging fashion and sustainability: towards synergistic modes of thinking, wording, visualising and doing fashion and sustainability," *Nordic Textile Journal* Vol. 3 (1) (2010), 14–23, http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-33453.

33.   See Tham, "Languaging fashion and sustainability." On the immaterial manifestations of fashion and unconventional fashion practices see also Fletcher, *Craft of Use: Post-Growth Fashion*.

34.   As discussed in the seminal work by Donella H. Meadows et al. *The Limits to Growth; a Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). On the relationship between uncontrolled economic growth and climate crises, see also Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), Chapter two: Hot Money, 64–95.

35.   On the concept of 'care' and 'Thinking with Care' see María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 1–24 and 69–93.

36.   See Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 42.

37.   Orsola de Castro, *Loved Clothes Last: How the Joy of Rewearing and Repairing Your Clothes Can Be a Revolutionary Act* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2021), 166.

38.   "Around 80 billion garments are produced yearly, resulting in over 1.3 billion tons of fabric waste, and nearly 75% of this trash is abandoned untreated, potentially ending up in landfills or being burned." See Nidhi Sisodia and M. S. Parmar "Converting Texile Waste into Designer Wall and Floor Titles: A New Approach to Recycle Textile Waste," in *Sustainable Approaches in Textiles and Fashion: Circular Economy and Microplastic Pollution* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022), 149–164. As of November 15th 2022, according to the United Nations, world's population has reached 8 billion. See Tara Subramaniam, "Global population hits 8 billion as growth poses more challenges for the planet," *CNN*, November 15, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/15/world/global-population-8-billion-un-intl-hnk/index.html.

39.   For detailed elaboration on the 'landscapes' see Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 42–68.

climate conditions. Thus, fashion should be ideated, produced and practised in tune with the *Local* needs and conditions; it should come from a variety of places and in doing so it should respect and emphasise the *Plurality* of our existences, celebrating the variety of perceptions, ideas, and forms that humankind is conceiving and creating. The interconnections between the multiverse of local pluralities and the global unity should and must be very subtle, and above all respectful for the single and the group, be it human or any other species. To shift towards *Less*, *Plural* and *Local* fashion system(s), we will have to engage with new ways of *Learning*, *Governance* and *Languaging*. We will have to open up to new knowledge and skills, rethink organising fashion, change our mindsets, and be open to updated communication practices. For us to endure on this path of radical change, the following eight *Earth Logic* core values will be required: *Multiple centres* of attention and action; *Interdependency* between all of the diverse actors; openness to *Diverse ways of knowing*; *Co-creation* involving active collaboration, listening, dialogue and connection; *Action research* as the time to research without acting has passed; *Grounded imagination* as opposed to the fantasy of escaping the conditions of the world, concerned with how to join the world within its limits; *Care of the world* and *Care of self* as engaging with profound change would mean recognising loss[40] and 'staying with the trouble.'[41]

We are certainly witnessing academic efforts to stress the need for a holistic shift. However, the fashion system is still very much embedded in the consumerist paradigm. Investigating the performance across six categories of the industry's fifteen most prominent players, *The Business of Fashion* states that "fashion is falling short of ambitions to operate in a more environmentally and socially responsible manner." It says that "companies demonstrate progress in analysing and understanding their impact and in setting targets … (whilst) waste management and workers' rights are the weakest categories."[42] Although studies have shown that there is a significant "gap between incumbent fashion companies willing to innovate their business model toward sustainability and born-sustainable start-ups striving to make their business model replicable and scalable,"[43] some questions remain open on the so-called sustainable champions — the small, born-sustainable companies. In academia, born-sustainable companies are most commonly analysed as case studies, hence as research subjects suitable for investigation of positive practices[44] and analysis of the desirable *modus operandi*.[45] Still, when it comes to the holistic approach to sustainability, many aspects are not clear. How do these companies approach sustainability? Are they focusing only on individual aspects, or do they engage in a holistic mechanism, considering and improving the different aspects of the fashion system? Is their innate sustainability a true game-changer, or is it yet another business-as-usual practice dressed in green?

In order to provide answers to some of these questions and to better understand the born-sustainable fashion brands, in early 2021, we decided to conduct a qualitative analysis of 60 born-sustainable, Italian fashion companies, evaluating them in the light of the values and landscapes presented in the *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan*.[46] The following paragraph explains in detail our methodological approach.

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40.   See Fletcher & Tham, *Earth Logic*, 37.

41.   Understood as 'learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth'. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

42.   See Kent for BoF, 2021, 8–11.

43.   Todeschini et al., "Innovative and sustainable business models in the fashion industry: Entrepreneurial drivers, opportunities, and challenges," in *Business Horizons* Vol. 60 n.6 (2017): 759–770.

44.   See Black, *Eco-chic*, 2008; also see the case studies per chapter in Gwilt and Rissanen (eds.), *Shaping Sustainable Fashion*; also recently, Alison Gwilt, Alice Payne and Evelise Anicet Ruthschilling (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion* (London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

45.   See Grazia Dicuonzo, Graziana Galeone, Simona Ranaldo et al. "The Key Drivers of Born-Sustainable Businesses: Evidence from the Italian Fashion Industry," *Sustainability* Vol. 12, n.24 (2020): 10237, https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410237, investigating how internal and external factors contribute to the creation of a sustainable business, through a multiple-case study of born-sustainable Italian fashion brands.

46.   See Fletcher & Tham, *Earth Logic*.

Exploring Sustainability

The research project and, consequently, this contribution are built on a qualitative analysis of 60 sustainable, Italian fashion concerns which were chosen through a pre-research on different divulgative platforms whose purpose is endorsing sustainable brands. The initial selection was made by consultation of two main sources: The documentary of Italian, born-sustainable fashion realities "*Intrecci Etici*"[47] and the *White Sustainable Milan*[48] selection of sustainable brands. The latter also contained non-Italian brands which were not selected for further exploration because our aim was to focus on the Italian context. The sample obtained through these platforms was enriched by other realities the selection of which was informed by our previous knowledge. For a reality to be included in our research, it was necessary for it to be Italy-based and to declare a sustainable approach to fashion. We decided to remain as open as possible at this stage so to be able to observe the diversified modes in which fashion operates. With their annual *Fashion Transparency Index* that reviews and ranks 250 of the world's largest and most influential fashion brands and retailers on the basis of their annual turnover,[49] Fashion Revolution is doing immense work by systemically tracing and presenting the information/data that is "publicly disclosed on major brands' policies, procedures, performance and progress on human rights and environmental issues across the value chain."[50] Similarly, we also took in consideration only the information available by the brands on their official platforms, oftentimes cross-checking between what is being disclosed and what is perceivable in the product descriptions or product range(s). Much differently, however, we focused our research on the small realities that are usually perceived as sustainable champions and endorsed, oftentimes without an in-depth, systemic analysis, risking in that manner proliferation of limited and partial knowledge, which could lead to poorly-informed decisions. "Transparency is a first step; it is not radical, but it is necessary. Transparency is not to be confused with sustainability."[51] Thus, our objective is to go a step further and provide insight into what is and what can be understood as sustainable. Particularly in a context which is, to a certain extent, immune to critical investigation, exactly because it is generally speaking much better than the majority of fashion realities.

Once the pre-research phase was finished, the individual brands were catalogued in an excel form containing the brand's name, their website, link to the Instagram account, the brand's place of operation and space for our initial notes, we proceeded with the in-depth analysis. In this central stage of the analysis, the selected brands were re-evaluated and classified following a critical reading through the information available on their websites and social media. When available, sustainability reports and policy documents were also consulted and taken into consideration. The outcomes of this phase are entirely correlated to the amount of information shared by brands. Nevertheless, it is necessary to elucidate this passage: what companies state about their policy and values can be, in some cases, solely a part of the whole operation process behind their production, communication, commerce etc. Moreover, we were qualitatively evaluating also transparency, leading us to a well-grounded assessment of each brand. Since transparency seems to be a problematic point even for the born-sustainable fashion brands, it is necessary to bear in mind that the results shared below always refer to data that are publicly available and were subject to our critical analysis.

Now we proceed to outline the steps we took to critically analyse the selected brands. Consulting

47. See Lorenzo Malavolta e Lucia Mauri, *Intrecci Etici — La rivoluzione della moda sostenibile in Italia*, LUMA video. 8 aprile 2021.

48. *White Sustainable Milan* is the first Fashion Trade Show devoted to fashion-tech and dedicated to sustainability, technological innovation and digital evolution of the entire supply chain of the fashion sector. See 'About' section on https://www.wsm-white.com/en. Please note that the selection changes on annual basis. During our fact-checking process that was carried out in June 2022, we have noticed that some of the brand were not resulting as related to WSM anymore.

49. Except for the annual turnover of the companies, those are selected to equally represent also the different market segments including high street, luxury, sportswear, accessories, footwear and denim from across Europe, North America, South America, Asia and Africa. Furthermore, when companies are privately held, estimations are made based on publicly available information related to the brand that may give an indication of investment interests or media attention. For detailed information on the Transparency Index Scope and Methodology, see *Fashion Transparency Index 2021*, 27–36.

50. See Kent for BoF, 2021, 30.

51. See Kent for BoF, 2021, 3.

the available information, we divided the analysis into three parts: the assessment of the sustainability-related focus of each company, the evaluation based on the *Earth Logic* values and landscapes, and the analysis of the specificities of the production processes of the participating concerns. For the first part, we were choosing according to the following three features: *environmental* care, *cultural* or *social* responsibility. When there was more than one observable sustainability aspect, we were marking that brand as having *multiple* aspects, noting at the same time the aspects which were present. There were also cases when the focus of the company was not perceivable from the data available on the brand's online presence. In those cases, we marked *N.A.* meaning *not available*.

For the second part of the in-depth analysis, we took a cue from the values and landscapes presented in the *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan*, proposed by professors Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham. Aiming to investigate the levels of holistic integration of the different sustainability aspects in the context of born-sustainable fashion brands, it was crucial for us to understand whether or not the selected brands incorporate in their practice the above-explained *Earth Logic* values and landscapes (Table 1 and Table 2). For every brand, a *yes* or *no* evaluation was provided concerning the individual values and landscapes. It must be said that oftentimes there was a lack of information related to some values and landscapes, or there were cases in which the information was so partial that the classification, if assessed, would have resulted in forced, non-objective results. Therefore in our coding scheme we added also *N.A.* standing for *not available*. In our opinion, it was important to make note also of the data that were not available, since in this phase of the research the lack of information is considered a meaningful finding in itself.

The final part of the qualitative analysis was dedicated to the critical reading of the data regarding the brand's production practices. We identified five categories: *Circularity*, *Reuse*, *Sustainable Materials*, *Sustainable Processes* and *Ethical and Socially Responsible practices*, and for every single concern being analysed, we assessed whether or not they incorporate these categories in their practice. In this contribution, however, we will present the findings regarding the *Main Focus* and the *Earth Logic* values and landscapes only.

All of the data obtained through the critical reading of the brands' online space was later expressed in numerical data in order to facilitate their transformation in charts and tables needed for the referencing process, data analysis, reflection and conclusions that follow on the pages below. In June 2022, while writing the present contribution, we engaged in a fact-checking process. Given the changeable nature of fashion, the process aimed at detecting the possible changes that might have taken place since the last time we worked with these data. We went through all 60 brands, noting the relevant changes and updating the initial data when necessary.

The methodology applied in this research is to be understood as adequate for an initial pilot research, and as such, it has its own limitations. First of all, the list of the brands is not extensive, nor is it to be understood as a sample representing all of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands. Rather, this contribution is to be understood only as a starting point in the very-needed critical reflection on what sustainability is and how it is comprehended and practised in the context of the born-sustainable brands. From the perspective of future developments, it could be of interest to extend this analysis and transform it into an in-depth mapping of all born-sustainable fashion concerns in Italy and abroad. Including other brands and concerns that declare to be sustainable and ethical could be of great importance insofar it could generate some further reflections on how companies (should) approach sustainability.

Earth Logic LANDSCAPES		
	Less	Local	Plural
YES	23	28	11
NO	23	18	35
N.A	8	8	8
	Learning	Language	Governance
YES	24	14	26
NO	21	32	20
N.A	9	8	8

Table 1: Landscapes

Earth Logic VALUES			
	Multiple Centers	Interdependancy	Diverse ways of Knowing	Co-creation
YES	3	23	32	24
NO	43	23	10	22
N.A	8	8	12	8
	Action Research	Grounded Imagination	Care of the world	Care of the self
YES	43	35	40	0
NO	3	11	6	0
N.A	8	8	8	54

Table 2: Values

Talking sustainability: The Holistic Assessment of the Italian Born-sustainable Fashion Brands

Sustainable Agency, the Focus

The first task of the in-depth analysis was to try to define the main sustainability-related focus of each company by choosing among the following traits: *environmental*, *cultural*, *social*, *multiple* or *not available*. The final decision on each brand's focus was made once all of the available data were analysed. What brands present and advertise on their platforms speaks volumes about their understanding of sustainability. Brands were limiting the production volumes by concentrating themselves on a few clothing designs only, in a single or at most few product categories. Other brands were reusing garments or choosing limited and dead-stock materials, and in doing so were refusing to rely on virgin materials and precious natural resources. The post-consumption stage is generally related with the accumulation of waste material. Some brands are fighting against the cradle-to-grave model by introducing post-consumer actions and programs for in-house recycling or reuse. When exposed to these or similar actions, all contributing in one way or another towards safeguarding the natural balance, we marked those brands as having a focus on *environmental* sustainability. On the other hand, the brands that were more focussed on workers' rights, living wages, opportunities for marginalized groups etc. were selected as having a focus on *social* responsibility. The care and attention to the local traditions and the artisanal know-how may be the first association with cultural sustainability. Still, the processes that sustain cultural diversity are multiple and come in as many nuances as there are ways of expression. In this research, we have chosen to mark as focussed on the *cultural* aspect the companies adopting practices strongly embedded in the roots of the *locus* or that were exploring new pathways for creative expression. Clearly, in practice, these sections of sustainable action are all but neatly divided. There are cases when brands are engaging in multiple actions supporting only one aspect of sustainability, or they focus on a few actions only, but cover fashion sustainability more holistically, taking into consideration environmental, social and cultural sustainability. To make note of these variations, we also used the *multiple* label, which was later re-analysed in order to obtain a more precise understanding of the Sustainability-related focus of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands.

In this first part of the analysis, focusing on the sustainability-related focus, since no sufficient data for objective analysis was found, we marked with *N.A. – not available* the eight brands that during the qualitative analysis were evaluated as problematic in more than one aspect. Predominantly, those were brands that provide extremely limited information on their website, stating for example only the fact that their product is artisanally made in Italy or that they are focused on manufacturing excellence. Some brands were promoting multiculturalism but when looked at closely, they were just another brand taking inspiration from a non-western perspective.[52] We did not exclude them from the quantitative analysis because the fact that brands are presenting themself as sustainable but also lacking transparency, speaks volumes about the very persistent problems of the contemporary fashion industry, also because the brand was listed on one of the most prominent sustainability-related platforms in the Italian fashion context. An important observation in this regard is the fact that one of these eight brands was not in this group at the time of our first analysis. In early 2021, a footwear company was analysed and categorised alongside the major part of the brands. Problematically, during the 2022 reassessment, we found that the original company website did not exist anymore and we were redirected to a product page of the sneaker on a completely different brand's website.[53] What was even more problematic, the bio-sneakers, as they were called, were now only a single product in a range of numerous business-as-usual products.[54]

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52.   When talking about individual brands, a detailed case-study presentation is of crucial importance to the in-depth understanding of the brand's activity. Here, we limit ourselves to mentions instrumental for the explanation of our *modus operandi*. For a specific example, see "About us," *Waxman Brothers*, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://waxmanbrothers.com/pages/about-us.

53.   For the specific example see "Responsible Journey," Yatay, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://www.yatayatay.com/eu/responsible-journey.

54.   For more detailed information on this, see Golden Goose, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://www.goldengoose.com/

In the initial selection of 60 brands, there were also six brands found associated with sustainability in the pre-research phase, but later assessed as not suitable for further analysis since they could not be characterised as born-sustainable. Among these brands were some established names which were only working on isolated sustainability projects, declaring future targets about responsible practices or introducing actions for more responsible productions. A brand was excluded from further analysis because it was determined that in manufactures outside Italy. Another was counted out because we found a non-functional website and an IG presence exclusively devoted to small production, without any implication that it was a sustainable one. These six brands were excluded from the quantitative analysis, leaving us with a sample of 54 brands.

The analysis of the first *Main Focus* classification led us to the following results: more than 30% of the brands were exclusively focused on environmental issues, while 48% had more than one focus (Fig.1: I). After the re-analysis of the brands selected as *multiple*, we obtained new data set indicating that the environmental aspect is present in 44 out of 54 brands, while the social and cultural sustainability aspects are significantly less represented (Fig.1: II). It has emerged that 17 brands out of 54 are actively engaging in improving their social impact, and only 14 brands cared about cultural issues. An extremely significant data is the fact that we observed some changes in this category from the initial research in 2021 and the second analysis we did in June of 2022. There were cases, although only a few, where a brand has broadened its focus to encompass also societal and cultural aspects of sustainability.[55]
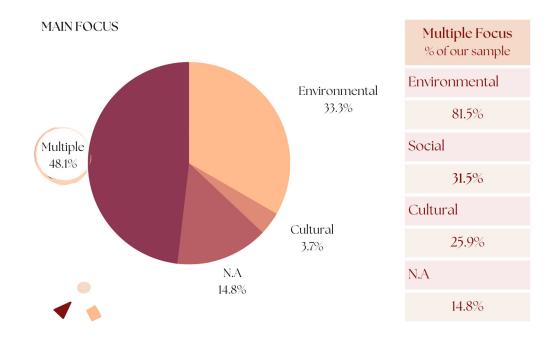

Figure 1: Graph Main Focus I and Table Main Focus II

Earth Logic Values

As stated in the *Exploring Sustainability* paragraph, the second part of the in-depth analysis was based on the values-explicit context and the holistic landscapes presented by Kate Fletcher and Matilda Tham. To

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it/it/stories/yatay-model-1b.html?nls=true.

55. One example is the brand Rifò, broadening their activities by ideating programs for social and economic integration of migrants and asylum seekers. For more details see project "Nei Nostri Panni," Rifò, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://rifo-lab.com/pages/nei-nostri-panni.

evaluate the Italian, born-sustainable fashion entities and to investigate their steps toward sustainability, we decided to start with the analysis of the values that are characteristic of a paradigm where the Earth comes first. By analysing the quantitative data it was clear right from the beginning that there are significant discrepancies in the *Earth Logic* values distribution (Fig. 2). For a brand to be ready to work following the logic of the Earth, it must demonstrate, above all, a propensity to create confidence and to encourage more voices to be heard. The attention to *Multiple Centers* is a multi-layered value in itself, encompassing many of the other values. It shifts from the human-centric and western views embedded in the economic growth rationale and opens a path for a revisited understanding of sustainability and well-being, including marginalised communities, while safeguarding nature and non-human beings. Understood in this broad sense, *Multiple Centers* value is present in, largely speaking, all of the brands. We can think of the actions to safeguard nature and non-human species or brand policies that go against the predominant, economic growth-led system. Still, the attention to marginalised and non-western perspectives does not come as a default, hence we decided to make our analysis even more circumscribed, assessing the *Multiple Centers* value strictly concerning the above-clarified meaning — linked to the attention paid to marginalised and non-western perspectives. Looked at in this manner, the *Multiple Centers* value shows the most noticeable flaws — only 3 brands out of 54 demonstrated an enacted awareness of the importance of the inclusion of marginalised or non-western perspectives. And by 'enacted awareness' we mean acknowledgement put in practice. The brands in question, engage systematically and have inclusion as a central aspect of their practice,[56] which is to be differentiated from the attention to marginalised aesthetics, the case of another analysed brand.[57] This lack of openness towards different viewpoints suggests a scarce proliferation of creativity, knowledge and the close-to-nature practices that are systematically held far from the mainstream ways of doing business. The lack of this value, however, does not imply false sustainability or greenwashing[58] in itself; in effect, as anticipated above, the poor attention to marginalised and non-western perspectives represents only part of what *Multiple Centers* value can refer to. The fact is that if we look at it more broadly, many more brands demonstrate attention to decentralisation of the thinking and praxis. Around 23 brands shift significantly from the economic growth logic,[59] while more than 80% of the brands show attention to safeguarding the planet's natural balance.[60] Ultimately, this value is very much linked to the Italian *modus operandi*, characterised by the production districts and the traditional know-how, but we will come to this again in the following pages. Significantly, among the few brands dealing directly with marginalized communities and inclusion by offering the best working conditions, there is a company that states a contribution to more than half of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda indicated by the United Nations.[61] It offers work to people in conditions of economic hardship, including migrants and asylum seekers, guarantees decent working conditions and encourages lasting, inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Another, among these companies, in its workshops offers employment and training opportunities to those who are most at risk of job exclusion in Italy, especially women.[62] A very hopeful example is the case of a third company, not assessed in this section last year.

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56. We would like to dedicate more space to critically discuss these brands and their practice. In this study, however, we focus on giving an initial overview, so the in-depth presentation of the positive, and the negative examples are excluded. For inspiration and more detail on these brands, please see "Quid Factory," Quid, https://www.quidorg.it/quid-factory/; "Chi siamo," Cartiera, https://www.coopcartiera.it/en/chi-siamo-2/; See also "Nei Nostri Panni," Rifò, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://rifo-lab.com/pages/nei-nostri-panni.

57. See "About," Nevertoomuchbasic NTMB, last accessed October 31, 2022. https://ntmb.it/it/pages/about-us.

58. In Sarah Kent, *The BoF Sustainability Index*, The Business of Fashion Ltd (March 2021), 44–45, greenwashing is defined as 'marketing that suggests a company or its products are environmentally friendly in a way that is misleading, exaggerated or not reflected in overall business practices'. For in-depth information, see also Toby Miller. Greenwashing Culture (London–New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-27.

59. See Table 1, Less Landscape.

60. See Figure 1, Focus on environment.

61. See "Ethics," Cartiera, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://www.coopcartiera.it/en/ethics/.

62. See "Quid Factory," Quid.

It stands out for a project born this year: a *cenciaioli*[63] (draper trade) school for people coming from migrant facilities in the area. A project conceived to combine the safeguarding of an ancient craft and at the same time create an opportunity for social redemption.[64]

Here, we would like to briefly mention the specificity of the *Care for the self* value, which although extremely important, was not analysed here mainly because the assessment of such value requires different methodology[65] (Fig. 2). The essence of this value is strictly dependent on acknowledging what it means to be a human today. As Fletcher and Tham explain: "Engaging with change means recognising loss — of species, of lifestyles and fundamental belief systems."[66] To be able to cope with that loss, we as humans, not only as agents within an existing frame, need to sharpen our resilience and engage in balancing it every day. This value entails emotional, spiritual, mental, physical, and social practices that could help us, our relationships and our collaborations.

Moving on to the more encouraging results, we can observe prominence in a few *Earth Logic* values. The most positive results are those regarding *Action Research* and *Care for the World*. *Action research* is a value emphasizing the act of fostering change with a series of connected activities: informative, generative, inspiring and transformative. The data show that 43 out of 54 brands are involved in some type of *Action Research*. As it can be seen in Figure 3, Chart I, more than half of the brands engage in multiple *Action Research* activities. That is why, as in the *Main Focus* assessment, we did an additional quantitative assessment to analyse the presence of individual actions. The results show that 30 brands were generating and sharing design and innovation, while 18 are dedicated to actions of societal transformation (Fig. 3, Chart II). What is worth mentioning is the fact that the prominence of the *Action Research* value is directly contributing to the evolution of the sustainability discourse. The generative actions do not only apply to the presence of best sustainable production practices, like circularity, reuse, and innovation in sustainable materials or processes. More importantly, those include also generating imagery and narratives of change and better futures. Closely related to that are the inspiring and informative actions undertaken by a great portion of the brands. Precisely, 24 out of 54 brands are actively expanding the spirit of agency and hope, by inspiring with their example (Fig. 3, Chart II). In the context of the *Action Research* value, it is important to underline that, in some isolated cases, there were brands boldly declaring transformative and generative actions even though there was no solid indication that those statements were entirely truthful. Fortunately, during the qualitative analysis, we have also found brands that were actively exploring renewed modes through which fashion can develop itself. One of the brands, for instance, is an inspiring example of a positive synergy between art, responsible garment offer, artisanal accessories production, design and customised product offer.[67]

Care for the World value is observable in around 40 brands of the sample. This comes as no surprise, if we recall that more than 80% of the brands had environmental sustainability as one of their main focuses. The notion of *Care for the World* brings a new consciousness to materials and crafts. It stimulates care and appreciation for the Earth's resources and it cares about workers' conditions and the earth's health. Throughout the analysis, we observed different approaches and business visions in the brand's caretaking of the world (Fig. 4, Chart I). From the sample of 54 brands, 25 focus on nature-related maintenance and respect, while 16 brands are focused on strengthening, expanding and invigorating the relations between humans, materialities, and the natural world. Another group of 12 brands are building their business with on-going attention to, and care for the local environment and the communities of the

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63. *Cenciaioli* is the name of the artisans from Tuscany who, more than a hundred years ago, invented the method of recycling old clothes. The brand in question combines the will to prevent the loss of ancient know-hows with the attention to environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

64. See "Nei Nostri Panni," Rifò.

65. *Care for self* is a value that goes way beyond the frame of the brand, and if we want to analyse it in the context of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands, we would have to, at least, engage in structured interviews and surveys with the professionals working for the brands in question. It is an idea that could lead to important insights and we are saving it for a possible research project in the future.

66. Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 37.

67. For inspiration and detailed info, see teeshare, last accessed October 31, 2022, https://teeshare.com/.

place of production. For example, some brands care about the development of the Italian region(s) in which they are located, so that the place can become a player in the fashion system and production centre of the new Made in Italy. And here we would like to stress that, similarly to what was discussed earlier with the transparency, the prominence of this, or any other, value does not imply sustainability in itself. The way forward is intrinsic to the Interconnectedness among the different aspects, while here we analyse and comment on the single values so to propose a critical perspective on the born-sustainable segment.

Continuing with the positive aspects, more than half of the brands were assessed as incorporating the *Grounded Imagination* and the *Diverse Ways of Knowing* values (Fig. 2). The *Grounded Imagination* value is concerned with "how to join the world within its limits and it starts with acknowledging the reality of our situation and commits to 'staying with the trouble'."[68] In our analysis, we marked as positive in this regard the brands which were challenging the predominant, capital-led system with their *modus operandi*. Brands were focussing on limited production, deciding to offer a couple of product categories, two or three models only, or to work with unique, artisanally-made exclusive pieces. Oftentimes the brands chosen in this category were stating the name of the individual behind a single product, thus acting against the industrialised and accelerated modes of business-as-usual. For many brands in this category, production was limited to the use of sustainable, upcycled or regenerated materials making in that manner a bold statement against the use of virgin materials and the deprivation of natural resources. For the 35 brands that were assessed as showing *Grounded Imagination*, "staying with the trouble" means working in the frameworks of a broken system but fixing, or better, restructuring them from within.

The *Diverse ways of knowing* is a value which implies developing fashion through direct experience, practice, and artistic exploration. It also means engaging with spirituality, traditional know-how and theory to deepen and explore what fashion system(s) could mean today. From the sample of 54 brands, 32 were showing at least one, but in almost half of the cases, multiple nuances of this value (Fig. 5). *Direct experience* and consistent *Practice* in a brand can help identify the flaws of the system and can incentivise fostering the innovative modes of fashion agency. *Artistic exploration* was also present in almost a third of the brands, but what is worth delving into here is the exploration of the *Traditional know-how(s)* as a way to access *Diverse ways of knowing*. Bearing in mind the rich history of the Made in Italy, it is no surprise that the *Diverse ways of knowing* as a value, when present in a brand, is oftentimes linked to the traditional know-how and the practice build-up through decennial work of the Italian manufacturing districts. According to Ranfagni and Guercini, the search for rarity that boasts many of the Italian luxury companies "activates a natural process of preserving social and environmental resources."[69] What we had the opportunity to observe was that the Italian born-sustainable fashion companies engage with the preservation of the social and environmentally-related traditions of the *locus* for different reasons. It is in our understanding that those 18 companies (Fig. 5, Chart II) have as main motivations the restoration of some nature-based and wisdom-led practices that were characteristic of their immediate environment but were almost lost under the burden of the invading modes of the growth logic-driven system. By reviving the traditions, these companies boost their local areas with new energy and enthusiasm, needed to restore the lost *Earth Logic* perception of the world.

In the same study, "the research for new sustainable raw materials is observed as affecting all the players involved in production, thus creating a *connective environment* where needs and values are shared with mutual understanding and the desire to build something together."[70] Strictly related to this is the *Co-creation* value that goes beyond knowledge exchange and entails deep concentration on collaboration and awareness, where the inputs combine synergistically to generate evolved ideas and understanding of

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68. See Fletcher and Tham, *Earth Logic*, 35. For further details on 'staying with the trouble' as opposed to the 'game over, too late' discourses see Donna J., Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Chapter 2, Tentacular Thinking, 30–57.

69. Silvia Rafagni and Simona Guercini, "Beyond Appearances: The Hidden Meanings of Sustainable Luxury," in *Handbook of Sustainable Luxury Textile and Fashion Volume 2* (edited by) Miguel Angel Gardetti and Subramanian Senthikannan Muthu (Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media, 2016), 51–71.

70. See Guercini, "Beyond Appearances."

the action in a given context. *Co-creation* involves dialogue and, above all, active listening to the other players, so as to go beyond the expected results. In almost half of our sample, even if resulting from different approaches, we found some points of convergence with this value. Some brands collaborate with small family-run companies and local entities,[71] actively listening to what these have to offer; in others, the promotion of ethical projects, or, for example, collaboration in the experimentation with new yarns and technologies could be translated into this aspect. We also found that initiatives including the community in the process of product design and planning were quite promising. The importance of this value, which, in the context of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands could be further developed, is that the synergistic collaborations in favour of sustainability often result in shared knowledge available to other companies, thus creating an important collaborative network.

Finally, the *Interdependence* value, similarly to that of *Co-creation*, is not particularly prominent. It underlines the consequential relationship between different parts of the system and refers to the underscoring of the effects that individual actions can cause. This value is of particular importance for the transition toward more respectful systems. In our analysis, we decided to mark as showing traces of *Interdependency* only those brands that are actively engaging in not only multiple layers of agency (social, environmental or cultural), but more importantly, are thoughtfully contributing towards the shift from the predominant mindset to a caring state where everyone is rethinking their actions to safeguard and protect others.
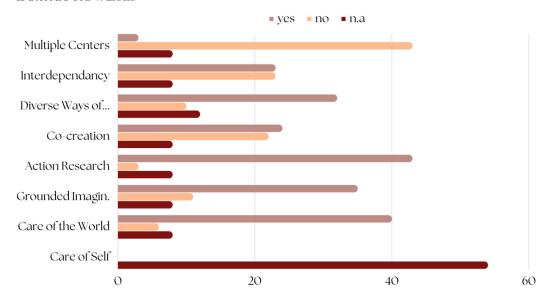

Figure 2: Chart Earth Logic Values

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71. For more detail on the small family-run businesses, local realities where the work of every single person counts and co-creation with local artisans, please see "Made in Italy," CASAGiN, https://www.casagin.com/made-italy/; "This is how we do it," Sartoria Vico, https://www.sartoriavico.it/pages/this-is-how-we-do-it and "Sostenibilità," ID.EIGHT https://www.id-eight.com/sostenibilita/, last accessed November 2nd, 2022.
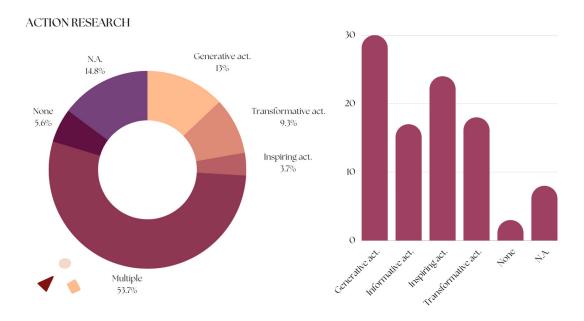
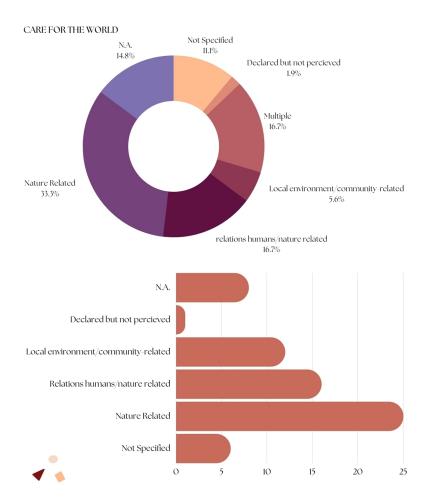Figure 3: Charts Action Research I and II
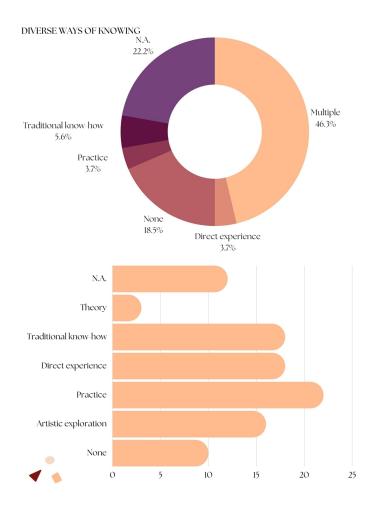
Figure 4: Charts Care of the World I and II

Figure 5: Charts Diverse Ways of Knowing I and II

Earth Logic Landscapes

During the analysis, together with the assessment of the presence of the *Earth Logic* values, we evaluated also the capacity of each brand to be placed within one of the holistic landscapes, with each of them containing an imperative to reformulate industry away from the physical accumulation of goods and towards care and maintenance.[72] The Landscapes consist of practices, capable of stimulating and creating a commitment, as well as the actions needed to reformulate the industry. These landscapes, as anticipated in the paragraph *Fashion and Sustainability, an ongoing evolution*, are *Less* (grow out of growth); *Local* (scaling, re-centring); *Plural* (new centres for fashion); *Learning* (new knowledge, skills, mindsets for fashion); *Language* (new communication for fashion); *Governance* (new ways of organising fashion).[73]

The *Less* landscape, as the word implies, "develops the thinking and practice of living with fewer fashion goods and materials."[74] This landscape is opposite to the logic of production and consumption in the fashion context, where the constant and always higher demand for new garments leads to negative effects. This being told, the attempt to position a brand in this perspective is almost contradictory. Still, in a context like this, in which brands declaring themselves sustainable are analysed, a high propensity towards the grow-out-of-growth logic is expected. One can imagine brands moving towards revisited practices including thrifting, sharing and gift economy, or stimulation of the informal hand-me-down channels. These future projections are appealing to those that feel *Earth Logic* close to heart but remain set in the future. At best, a couple of brands out of a sample of 54 were engaging in practices fully mirroring the *Less* logic. Nevertheless, the contextualisation of the analysis is crucial, and we found it practical to slightly broaden the boundaries of this assessment to include the brands showing a thoughtful planning of their actions, within their production practices. Therefore, we decided to include brands that have a very restricted offer, brands that put the focus on the offered experience rather than the buyable product. Brands involved in upcycling, recycling and textile regeneration were also included. And again, contrary to what one may idealise, only 23 of the examined companies could be positioned in the *Less* landscape (Fig. 6).

As could be observed in Figure 6, the landscape dedicated to updated *Learning* and *Governance* practices appears to be close in value to the *Less* landscape. The first landscape acts as a hub for all the activities that will help us learn the *Earth Logic* approach, and at the same time will stimulate us to unlearn the practices preventing the shift towards a more equal and balanced system, whose change is long overdue. In the assessment of the brands for this landscape, we took into consideration their agency in spreading new mindset(s) for fashion. The focus here is moving away from the production-commerce practices and moving towards a place where the brand as a collective structure, is taking the role of communicator and educator of positive change; the brand is an activist for a better future and facilitator for systematic evolution. In our analysis, the 24 brands that were identified as *Learning* positive were continuously educating the general public, they were stimulating care for the owned goods and offering repair programs. Brands deeply involved with social transformation or other practices such as regeneration and upcycling were also dedicated to community engagement to change the predominant mindset.

The *Governance* in *Earth Logic* implies a multitude of caring relationships closely linked to the learning and sharing of skills within the communities and with respect for natural balances. It goes way beyond governance, in the sense of business-as-usual arrangements, contracts and economic priorities. In our analysis, we assessed as inclined towards evolved governance models those brands that were consciously choosing to prioritise the community, the nature and the cultural heritage over the growth-led production practices and individual profit making. For the brands in question, the company was always meant to give back, to encourage new mindsets and to stand against the environmental, social and cultural "cradle-to-grave" practices. Clearly, there is much room for improvement, since only 26 out of 54 companies show traces of revisited governance models. Still, the brands that were positioned in the

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72.   See Fletcher and Tham *Earth Logic*, 42.

73.   See Fletcher and Tham *Earth Logic*, 43.

74.   See Fletcher and Tham *Earth Logic*, 44.

Governance landscape could lead by example, particularly when it comes to choosing traceability and transparency, prioritising small, family-owned production, or even providing the names of the artisans behind every step of the production, as it was seen earlier in the contribution. The new approaches to *Governance* were also seen in the decision to maintain the established ties with the local environment, and this characteristic is the focus of the next landscape.

The *Local* landscape is of particular importance to the Italian context. Localism favours the use of nearby resources, place-specific knowledge, and practices shaped by traditions. These characteristics are in tune with one of the most prominent features of Italian localism — the industrial districts, derived from the model of the *Bottega Rinascimentale*. What was noticed with the sustainable brands analysed here, was the upgraded revival of this model linked to the typical re-creative creativity that characterises the Italian *genius loci*.[75] The upgrade consists in the fact that these 28 brands, while reflecting the notion of scaling and re-centring, emphasize the localism in a sense of rooted identity and deep care for the community, as opposed to the superficial branding of an area, in this case, the well-established Made-in-Italy label. Brands invest in safeguarding the local traditions while being thoughtful about what the communities of that specific place need at a specific time. Thus, the economic ambition becomes secondary, while the district as linked to a specific geographical area is progressively reconstructing itself, opening for the dynamics of the 21st century, yet also remaining true to core values. This is somehow only a confirmation of what was discussed 10 years ago by Bernard Cova, when the artisan was individualised as the new emblematic figure of Made in Italy.[76]

Finally, positioning the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands within two *Earth Logic* landscapes was very hard. As could be seen in Figure 6, the analysed brands showed very limited convergence with *Plural* and *Language* landscapes. The first one is so broad that it would seem logical that most of the brands could be framed within this landscape. *Plurality* means setting fashion free from the predominant associations and narratives, and following that line, in one sense or another, it could be found in every brand analysed. Still, *Plurality* above all implies investing in non-western[77] perspectives, giving voice, and listening. It means decentralisation of both action and thought. When analysed in this much-restricted manner, only 11 brands were evaluated positively. This probably comes as a result of the strong local imprint we have just mentioned, resulting in companies not being able to decolonise their *modus operandi* also through new ways of thinking and doing research. Another weak point is the very poor language sensitivity of the brands involved in this research. Indeed, among the players in this analysis, only 14 brands (or 25.9% out of 54) were evaluated as language-wise positive and contributing towards an active languaging process, where the range of expression around sustainability is broadened so to include different cognitive styles and interests. The importance of this landscape is crucial as language, as Fletcher and Tham explain, "can intervene directly in our systems at the level of paradigms and can foster change through drawing attention, criticality and creativity to the language we use in relation to fashion."[78] The impossibility to position a large part of the analysed brands in these landscapes opens up questions which will be discussed in the following section.

Before moving to the conclusions, we would like to stress that the convergence towards the *Earth Logic* values, and particularly, the landscapes could be best discussed through case studies, hopefully subject of some future works on the holistic transition towards a more equitable and sustainable system.

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75.   Francesco Morace (ed.). *Estetiche Italiane, Italian Ways. Le sei tendenze del Made in Italy e la loro influenza nel mondo* (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 2004), 27–51.

76.   Bernard Cova, "Conclusione. Il Made in Italy: dopo i capitani d'industria e i creativi, gli artigiani?," in *Il made in Italy.* (eds.) Bucci, Codeluppi e Ferraresi (Roma: Carocci editore, 2011), 137–144.

77.   By 'non-western' we mean all those perspectives and voices that were systematically silenced, devalued or belittled in the course of the historic processes that led to creation of the predominant socio-cultural, economic and political paradigm. On the formation 'West and the Rest' discourse. See Stuard Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity*, eds. Stuard Hall and Bram Gieben (Cambridge–Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), 276–320.

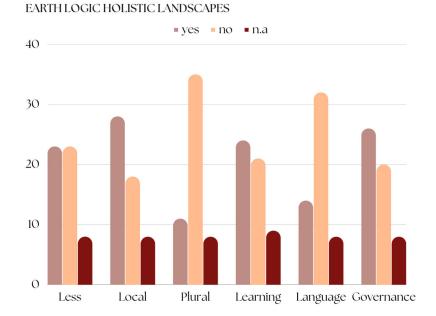78.   See Fletcher and Tham *Earth Logic*, 61.

EARTH LOGIC HOLISTIC LANDSCAPES

Figure 6: Chart *Earth Logic* Landscapes

Conclusion

The holistic assessment of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion brands led us to a few important findings that we would like to discuss in this closing section of this contribution. It is true that the discussed strengths, such as the multiple nuances of the values *Action Research* and *Care for the World*, distinguish the analysed born-responsible companies from others, less sustainable companies which practice business within the predominant, economic growth-led system.[79] Still, as stated in the initial paragraphs, our study aimed to investigate how born-sustainable fashion brands understand sustainability. We wanted to assess whether they focus on individual aspects only, or engage in holistic considerations, improving the different aspects of the fashion system. Sustainability should not be limited to a pure "technical fact" or an inevitable aspect of contemporary brand communication. Along this line, our starting stance is that a more holistic practise, taking into consideration environmental, social and also cultural aspects, is needed if not required if we want to effectively change the predominant system.

What we came to observe is that in the context of the Italian, born-sustainable fashion companies, the *Main Focus* is on the environmental issues, there is a positive trend for improved social agency, while the cultural aspects are significantly less represented. This current environmentally-centred approach is limiting and could not carry a systematic change in itself. Going back to the fashion theorisation proposed by Payne, we can observe that it is precisely this lack of broader understanding of fashion-as-culture that constrains us to the predominant, economic growth-led fashion system. This initial finding alone speaks volumes on the missed opportunity to use the fashion agency to bring about more profound, paradigmatic changes in the predominant system. We are so used to associate sustainability with environmental care that this thought process does not allow for broadened perspectives to be adopted. The holistic way of thinking, which includes respect for society, community and the non-human world, could inevitably contribute to a greater awareness towards underrepresented and little-talked-about topics such as cultural appropriation, thus leading towards shifting dynamics where culture is not exclusively associated with change, or with production-consumption axes in its complexity.

The *Earth Logic*-based analysis identified in a much more precise manner the strengths and more im-

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79.   Companies which, as could be observed in the *Fashion Transparency Index*, for instance, have the biggest negative effects. See *The Fashion Transparency Index 2021*, 19.

portantly the deep-rooted gaps in the models of born-sustainable fashion agency. The values-centred exploration underlined how the analysed sample of Italian, born-responsible fashion brands is focused on generating and sharing innovation while inspiring positive change. We saw a thoughtful approach towards nature and natural resources, and we observed the propensity to change the predominant system from within by choosing to "stay with the trouble" and to act in the local community, thus focusing on the place-specific needs and possibilities, yet with an openness towards the global dynamics. However, the framework of the holistic landscapes offered an important interpretative viewpoint. The data — in a way — reverberate in the sustainable brands and showed how the strategy of these companies seems to be far away from a multi-layered understanding of, and action toward, a sustainable and responsible fashion system. We came to observe that even though there is a propensity to act sustainably, the vast majority of the analysed brands still operate within the current and predominant paradigm characterised by a profit-based agency as opposed to the caring and respectful network of relations celebrating nature, humans and non-humans in all of their forms, shapes and appearances. What we traced are will and actions with the potential to change the *status quo*, even though there is still much room for improvement, mainly because the discussed issues should be addressed, or at least openly acknowledged all at once.

That being said, we can conclude on the note that born-sustainable does not imply a holistic approach to sustainability. What is lacking in the Italian context is a bolder and systemic interconnectedness aimed at proposing alternatives to the dominant paradigm. With all the positive elements, what is still missing is a proactive involvement in transformation evolved from care, respect and community. Hopefully, these could become the foundations of the new Made-in-Italy, a concept centred not only on the industry-circumscribed 'less bad', but committed to the systemic involvement of the unheard voices, the prospering of the endangered cultural practices and the artisanal know-hows which are gradually being forgotten due to the loss of cultural diversity, influenced by the hegemony of the capital-led economy.

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Nadica Maksimova – Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ nadica.maksimova2@unibo.it

She is a PhD candidate at the Department for Life Quality Studies at the University of Bologna. Her research interest is centred on the relationship between fashion and sustainability, with particular attention to sustainability-related content representations. Her current research focuses on the analysis of the sustainability discourse developments on the pages of *Vogue Italia* from its first publication in 1965 up to the present day. She is a member of the International Research Center Culture Fashion Communication and Journal Manager for ZoneModa Journal.

Flavia Piancazzo – Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ flavia.piancazzo2@unibo.it

She is a PhD candidate at the Department of Science and Culture of Well-Being and Lifestyles Doctoral Program at the University of Bologna. Under the advice of Professor Simona Segre Reinach and Professor Mariella Lorusso she is currently investigating the topic of cultural sustainability addressing the issues of cultural appropriation and racism in fashion. At the same time, she is Junior Fellow at the "Culture Fashion and Communication International Research Centre", DAR — Department of the Arts. She received her master's degree in Fashion Culture and Management at the University of Bologna in November 2019.