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LUXURY FASHION AND EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND LIMITS OF THE ITALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Why has Italy not caught up yet with the luxury, fashion higher education system locomotive?

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A cultural and social phenomenon, Italian luxury is the emblem of style and excellence in craftsmanship. The Made-in-Italy sector – clothing, leather, and jewellery – holds a significant role in the global luxury world and represents a significant part of high-quality, authenticity, and heritage in the international market. Made-in-Italy brands have extended their operations from the original clothing, leather, and jewellery to accessories, perfume and cosmetics, tourism and hospitality, and household and design that, through time, have acquired a more relevant position globally. Luxury Made-in-Italy is certainly the emblem of the entire country in global business and has evolved through the years in line with the new challenges and evolutions imposed by the market. Sustainability in its social, economic, and ecological dimensions but also its innovative one.

At present, the fashion and apparel sector employ more than 575,000 people². Mediobanca indicates an employment growth of 26, 7% in the leather goods sector and up to 22, 4% in clothing in the past years. The last decade has witnessed a steady growth in the global attractiveness of Italian fashion brands. Luxury fashion and Made-in-Tuscany play a critical role in the fast-growing global luxury context. Tuscany's *savoir-faire* - mainly in textile and leather craftsmanship and jewellery - has a unique position in the luxury scenario, with one-

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² Centro Studi Confindustria Moda, *Highlights – il settore tessile, moda e accessorio nel 2019*, luglio 2020.

third of European top fashion brands being either Italian or manufactured in Italy. The quality of the finishing and the textiles is challenging to compete with. Even if the industry is dominated by renowned family brands that are nowadays often integrated into global conglomerates such as Kering or LVMH, most of the supply chain relies on small and medium family businesses. Today their survival is vital both to the local labour market and to maintain a legacy of craftsmanship which has played a fundamental role in the contemporary luxury industry.

Consequently, we increasingly need to pay attention to human resources and capacity building in this industry. Appropriate policies aiming at the survival of excellence in craftsmanship techniques are becoming particularly urgent. Recently, to appropriate the heritage and the legacy of that unique know-how, the leading foreign luxury conglomerates have been very active in acquisitions of those small family manufacturing businesses. If the know-how is not maintained and better embedded in the local context, the foreign-controlled Made-in-Tuscany is risking a vacuum-cleaning effect with serious long-term consequences on local employment.

The present pandemic adds to this picture both new challenges and new opportunities. As a recent article in the Financial Times argued, «the country responded forcefully and creatively» to the pandemic, but «the whole ecosystem will have to ramp up» to overcome its long-term implications. Initially, the Covid-19 pandemic caused a country-wide shutdown of manufacturing premises. A recent report of the 2020 IRPET³ evidenced the decrease of 4.478 jobs from 140.837 at the beginning of 2019 to 136.359 at the end of 2020, mostly affecting women and personnel under 35 years, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Made-in-Italy. The late reopening could not stop a dramatic decrease in profits, which has not been related just to a fall in consumption but has been the consequence of more profound changes in consumer behaviours. This is now more clearly oriented towards responsible fashion shopping, which translates into purchasing less and purchasing online. If the new digital and responsible orientation was already there in the pre-Covid years, the pandemic context has undoubtedly accelerated the need for the fashion and apparel Made-in-Italy industry to go digital or at least to integrate the physical and digital dimensions of the relationship with the market (the so-called phygital approach). Going digital is vital to keep the positioning on international markets and compete in the millennials' digitally-savvy global market while struggling to survive the Covid-19 impact.

Made-in-Italy and in particular Made-in-Tuscany is an internationally celebrated reference to unique art, culture, and crafts, but this country-of-origin label is also a unique mark of guarantee for the quality of fashion craftsmanship. Paradoxically, the opportunities linked to Made-in-Italy and the Italian lifestyle have been increasingly attractive to international professionals wishing to build a career and reside in Tuscany. However, it does not seem to be

³ IRPET, *Il mercato del lavoro ai tempi del Covid-19*, <http://www.irpet.it/archives/55057>

equally appealing to the young nationals, who fail to see professional growth opportunities despite its international attractiveness. Consequently, we are facing challenges also for the survival of its legacy. According to ICE⁴, Made-in-Italy fashion, textile and leather exports in 2019 represented 11.9% of the total Italian exports representing 56.484 million Euro with a 6.2 % growth for 2018. The apparel sector employed 176.000 in 2017, with the clothing and apparel sector projected to reach a value of 42 billion USD by the end of 2020: projections that the Covid-19 crisis is putting on hold. With its mix of established foreign holdings and family businesses, job opportunities in Italy and Tuscany are diverse and unique. However, the local higher education system does not seem to provide an appropriate response to the needs and opportunities that the Made-in-Italy fashion sector is showing. There are significant exceptions, namely the educational initiatives promoted by PIN (Polo Interuniversitario di Prato) through EU-financed training projects focused on the development of new professional figures, IED, Istituto Marangoni, and by Polimoda. Still, much more could and should be done.

Lately, privately-owned (increasingly foreign owned as the Milanese NABA or Marangoni) fashion schools in Italy have expanded their offerings, increased their business, and the number of students enrolled. Most of them are still lacking consistency in the academic structure compared to other international academic institutions. Italian fashion schools still require tying themselves more closely and coherently to the business world to better align managerial and technical talents to the market's requirements. They are also demanded to structure pedagogically consistent curricula while innovating their engineering and updating teaching methods with a dedicated - and not only an occasional - faculty to ensure a comprehensive follow-up and professionalization of those talents, especially from the managerial perspective, in the current highly digitalized and sustainability-sensitive context.

The challenges associated with fashion education started to be consistently addressed in 2018 at the Summit *Moda. L'Italia fa scuola* organized by the Centre for Italian Fashion in Florence – CFMI, the association that controls Pitti Immagine. The Summit evidenced the crucial role of Higher Education for Fashion and Made-in-Italy and in the years to come. However, in the White Book presented at the Summit *Imparare la moda in Italia*, commissioned by the Italian Ministry for Economic Development in 2017, different challenges and limits of the Italian Higher Education System in luxury fashion and Made-in-Italy emerged. From the ongoing changes in the field and the adequacy of the curricula to the market's need to the limited attractiveness of our academic programs internationally and in the variety of their offer.

The study started a first mapping of the existing courses in fashion from a technical and managerial perspective and at the same time a reflection on the need to develop and innovate

⁴ Rapporto ICE, *L'Italia nell'economia internazionale 2019-2020*, consultabile alla pagina https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/BOOKLET_2807_1955_low.pdf

in the system, to promote and transfer the programs abroad but also to establish a regulatory system for programs accreditation. The White Book analysis evidenced the need to reinforce capacity-building in fashion at secondary and higher education levels to avoid the brain drain phenomenon and encourage the development of future talents in the field. Furthermore, nowadays, that need, after almost five years, is requesting a consistent and structured development plan and specific concrete responses urgently.

Fashion and Made-in-Italy are our country's heritage and treasure, and unfortunately, the education system is not sufficiently capitalizing on that. International students or Italian that choose to continue their education in Italy could count on a fashion environment in our territory that is an open-air laboratory of testimonials, heritage to learn. However, without an appropriate academic educational path, the ecosystem appears incomplete for an appropriate innovative educational offer.

As a recent article from Il Sole 24Ore⁵ evidenced in an in-depth mapping in the sector, it appears that both Italian private and a few public, academic institutions are increasing their focus in training in luxury and fashion as far as the technical-creative part is concerned, but none yet sufficiently for the different functions linked to the acquisition of managerial skills in the field. The current academic offer in the Italian scenario is based above all on an offer coming from the private fashion school sector, in some cases still weak in research and academic consistency of their curricula and structure, picturing them as kind of *boutique schools* instead of academic institutions and mainly with a primary focus on the technical-creative part. Consequently, there are still evident bounds to the positioning of public and private Italian educational offerings in the fashion and luxury sector at an international level due to a multiplicity of factors. Indeed, the lack of a diversified offer for luxury and fashion in most of the Italian academic institutions - that could ensure a variety of management courses and specializations in a solid academic context - in synergy with the business world is an endemic barrier to a solid positioning and attractiveness of the Italian Higher Education system at national and international level in the field. However, also the limits of private academic institutions where the lack of official recognition of diplomas and the volatility in the pedagogy and academic solidity arises questions not only concerning the innovative pedagogical positioning but also about the development of appropriate professionalizing paths on multiple international locations that can compete with the type of transnational programs offered beyond the Alps or in Anglo-Saxon models. Models that are offering an increasing presence of innovative undergraduate and graduate management specializations in luxury or fashion in most business schools in France - in partnership with foreign institutions or *in solo* – and

⁵ <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/a-scuola-moda-mappa-corsi-italia-leader-creativita-meno-forti-management-AERvF3kE>

professionalizing technical paths at the high school level. Moreover, those specializations are often part of a broader focus on luxury and fashion with research centres, diversified programs in luxury and fashion managerial and technical functions, and spin-offs, offering capacity-building updating training to businesses.

The global higher education scenario shows Italian and foreign talents responding positively to academic programs in the fashion and luxury sector operated by foreign academic institutions not necessarily in the cradles of excellence in fashion or luxury as Italy but at least ensuring pedagogical paths responding not only to the needs and challenges of the market for new technical and creative figures but also managerial ones. And the limits of the pedagogical offers in the luxury and fashion field are not only having a negative impact on the higher education system and the *brain drain* but also on the Tuscany luxury and fashion manufacturing clusters' innovativeness. Educational needs are not just related to the craftsmanship techniques of the Made in Tuscany. The ongoing evolution in the luxury fashion scenario is tightly linked to the new digital management orientation of the fastest-growing markets (especially in Asia) and the new consumer segments (the millennials). In such a complex and challenging context, some innovative entrepreneurs are trying, by capitalizing on the legacy of the local craftsmanship and know-how, to propose innovative responses, but they seem to have done it in isolation. Such strategies require specific technical skills and to develop higher education programs, training talents to acquire the know-how required to operate or venture into the new digitalized luxury context. In this respect, the current educational offer's weakness in Italy appears to be even more significant and especially worrisome.

It becomes essential for the Tuscany fashion and apparel industry, especially to SMEs, to develop a capacity-building ecosystem that would allow them to move into an innovative and highly qualified business environment, where updated competencies and skills are like those associated with digitalization and sustainability - are required. In doing so, the acquisition of new talents with the specific know-how to drive them towards the new processes associated with sustainability and digitalization is a crucial challenging step, mainly when sometimes even the companies' culture is not fully supportive of a *talent factory* perspective. Again, there are remarkable exceptions. To mention a few: the legacy of recycling techniques reinterpreted in responsible cashmere creations in an appropriate digitalized context by Rifò or the application of advanced R&D for innovative textiles and trendy creations by Es'Givien. These cases justify the confidence that something can be done for a better and more reliable future of our territory's excellencies.

The textile district of Prato has been regenerating textile fibres for more than a century, and Rifò project was born to revalue this artisan process that allows reusing clothes often considered as waste. Rifò brand took up this process and adapted it to the new needs of the market,

specializing in cashmere fibres and the regeneration of old jeans, a different way of seeing the fashion industry, encouraging sustainability in luxury and fashion. Es'Givien has become an innovative reality as regards eco-friendly fashion. The sisters Gaia, Nives, and Vivilla Zampini have decided to take a radical approach to sustainability in a family business context. They started with *Ilfashionbelloebuono*, an initiative launched in 2014 to create a «network of shared value» involving institutions, third sector realities, and businesses in awareness-raising, innovation projects in favour of crucial social gender or discrimination-related issues. Lately, by incorporating circular economy principles into their fashion house's production systems, which means not only recycled materials and reducing waste but also switching to renewable energy sources. In this perspective, Es'Givien has entered a partnership with Enel X, part of the Enel Group, to orient its production towards a circular model. Indeed, these realities are only a microcosmos of the numerous opportunities that luxury fashion and Made-in-Italy ecosystem could offer to our talents.

Made-in-Italy manufacturing is a vital part of the global luxury industry, but its present strength should not lead us to overlook the challenges ahead. The answers to these challenges are, first and most of all, in the local availability of highly qualified, technological, and managerial savvy human resources. The local higher education system must understand it and must act fast. If this happens, the acceleration of the innovation process dramatically linked to the pandemic may yield a positive result. It will turn a challenging situation into an opportunity, both for the higher education and the fashion system, that will respond with a new generation of highly locally qualified Made-in-Italy and Made in-Tuscany talents.