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Italian Furniture Sector SMEs: Sustainability and Commercial Ethics

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11.1 Introduction

In the past, furniture was an expression of a familiar social and national culture (Trabucco 2017). Each piece of furniture was designed in collaboration with the customer and was created by skilled artisans, true artists; consequently, many small and medium-sized enterprises were set up. The choice of furniture was important since it was significant; this

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means that the pieces of furniture should last in time and so they had to be solid, resistant, classic, and steady as resembling family stability.

In contemporary societies, mass consumption has standardized furniture production, favoring functional furniture at lower prices, and furniture often lost their characteristic as durable goods. They are intended to be used for short periods and then scrapped, creating understandable ecological problems.

Modern customers' attitudes seem to be compulsive and unstable, which is a sign of a prevailing mood on things that led people to change or replace objects they bought instinctively, without thinking through it. This has also changed the complicated relationship between the design and the economy (Trabucco and Ricci 2017). This different role of furniture also depends on the new social arrangements and especially on the disaggregation of families in many countries (Cerrelli and Invernizzi 2017). The temporary nature of living together means that many families are not willing to invest large sums in furniture.

In this social context, both the manufacturing sector and the furniture trade are looking for a dimension based on new values, such as respect for the environment and sustainability principles, which have become an important point of reference for the global market. As the sector is growing, also considering the positive trend of the international economy, the production and sale of eco-friendly furnishings based on an ethical market becomes a "must" today. The global trade of products, in particular, has risen 4,9% and, in this area, the commerce of furniture has increased, on average, by 3%; some of the global players of the world market are China, India, and the United States. Italy is one of the main exporters thanks to its products being esteemed especially for their design, despite the Chinese competition. (Migliaccio and Rossetti 2018). Therefore the objectives of the chapter are:

- To explain the changes in the production and distribution of furniture
- To describe the environmental and sustainability risks typical of the production and marketing of furniture
- To present ethical principles that can improve the production processes of furniture and the relationships between sellers and customers,

through the development of clear and mutually advantageous business relationships

- To outline some business cases taken from the Italian context useful in international ones

This Italian sector is a typical example of production through SMEs (www.mondopmi.com; Dell’Era et al. 2018): it shows a prevalence of 99% of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, with less than 250 employees and a turnover of less than 50 million euros. The sector is characterized by 79% of micro enterprises and 17% of small ones. The medium-sized ones are only 3%.

The aims of this chapter will be achieved through some considerations based on an updated conceptualization of literature reviews and references. Some evidence is provided for theoretical development, derived from the long experience in the furniture sector of one of the authors of this chapter, Luigi Umberto Rossetti. Many of our considerations, therefore, can be thought of as the result of a multi-year qualitative survey based on the daily presence in the Italian market. It is certainly representative of wider Western markets that are in constant relation with the Eastern ones. A study has been implemented, drawing it from direct experience; it is related to some choices of primary Italian companies regarding the ethical certification. The analysis of the Italian industrial and commercial reality will be particularly useful for the theoretical development and for the conclusion that will be generalized to the internal context.

11.2 Literature Review, Hypotheses and Research Questions

Regarding the main aims of this chapter, we can distinguish the most relevant scientific contributions related to three fields: firm size problems, considering that in Italy, as in other countries, production takes place in SMEs; sustainability and the relations with the ethical principles of

environmental protection; marketing, in particular ethical marketing that safeguards the relationship between supplier and customer.

11.2.1 Firm Size

In Italy, as in many other countries, especially in developing countries, the economy is characterized by SMEs. International literature has focused on the strengths and weaknesses of structures that can be classified in the first or second group according to investments, turnover, employees, etc. (González-Benito et al. 2016; Robinson and Stubberud 2015; Gray and Mabey 2005; Camuffo 2003). In small businesses, the entrepreneur continuously contacts the employees and encourages collaboration among them. In the big ones, however, the depersonalization of human relationships and the fragmentation of work can cause frustrating and sometimes conflicting situations. In small businesses, entrepreneurs centralize their decisions and directly control employees. The deliberative process is extremely fast. In big businesses, however, decisions are decentralized and sometimes bureaucratized and paralyzed, so the control is also more complex.

Furthermore, small business have no economies of scale in supply and sales. The bigger ones, on the other hand, get raw materials at lower prices and therefore can sell at competitive prices. Small companies can, therefore, only be competitive by offering a better nonstandardized quality. Similar problems arise in financial resources involving also large companies that face a lower cost of money as well. Some specialized studies about the furniture sector precisely focus on this topic. SMEs have greater difficulties, for example, in making use of artificial intelligence (Seseni and Mbohwa 2018a). Similar conclusions are reached by the same authors (2018b) with respect to the use of big data. Similarly they do that with empirical investigations in the same area of South Africa. Therefore, they conclude (2018c) that SMEs, operating in the furniture sector, can hardly take advantage of the typical benefits of the fourth industrial revolution under way: the problems, which SMEs face, range from lack of skillful employees to safe financing. There have still been some surprising results from the African continent (Tanzania). Isaga et al. (2015)

analyzed the relationship between the motivation to start an own business, on the one hand, and the firm's growth on the other hand. Three indicators of growth, namely, employment, sales, and assets, were used for measurement. The results suggest that pull factors are more important in order to start the businesses than push factors. Furthermore, the study found out that pull factors are positively related to the firm, whereas push factors are negatively related to firm growth.

Related studies have also been developed in Indonesia. Patria et al. (2019), for example, analyzed the issue of sustainability by examining companies that are able to survive the challenge of limited timber material sources and other constraints. Likewise, in Indonesia, empirical models describe the relationship between the industrial competitive pressure, the capability of management, the competitive strategy, and the company performance (Omsa et al. 2015). Furthermore, empirical evidence from Indonesian furniture SMEs allowed to examine the relationship between knowledge stickiness and a firm's innovative capability (Indarti 2012). In Europe, the studies concerned Turkey (Kepenek 2013, who analyzed socio-technical issues in youth employment in SMEs) and Italy, also compared with Spain and Finland on the theme of innovation and performance in SME furniture industries (Otero-Neira et al. 2009). The research confirms that innovation positively affects business performance.

Still in the Italian context, the study by Balocco et al. (2008) on the diffusion of e-Business applications in SMEs of Italian industrial districts, and the most recent one by Dell'Era et al. (2018), analyzed collaborative practices between SMEs and designers in the Italian furniture industry. The outsourcing of some services, like designers, allows significant savings. Therefore over 80% of the product portfolio is conceived by external designers.

11.2.2 Sustainability

First of all, considering sustainability is relevant in decision-making related to furniture industry due to its raw material deriving from forests, a very important feature for people due to its economic, social, and

environmental benefits (Putri et al. 2014). Suppliers have to evaluate and analyze some alternative decisions associated with harvest and/or conservation of forests. Decision-making becomes complex, because it depends on flexible forest age classes, variable demand, tree life cycle, and the uncertainty of illegal logging. However, it may be facilitated by using multicriteria decision-making method, particularly useful to evaluate sustainable development of the wooden furniture industry (Azizia et al. 2016).

Decision-making is also affected by modern techniques, such as IT, as pointed out by Murmura and Bravi (2018). De Mello and De Mello (2018) suggest a detailed analysis of the practices of social responsibility and sustainability as strategies for industrial companies in the furniture sector, through case studies on companies located in Brazil. The results highlighted the importance of social responsibility and sustainability once these themes became part of these companies' values. Concerning the importance of ethical principles, we can refer to China's children furniture market that presents a high-end, niche segment with potential growth for both furniture producers and wood material suppliers (Wan and Toppinen 2016). In recent years, the opportunities for eco-friendly furniture market have increased in Greece and Cyprus. Papadopoulos et al. (2014) investigated the demand for ecological furniture, business strategy, and the planning of the introduction of eco-furniture products. However, the attention given to sustainability and customers by individual entrepreneurs is not sufficient. According to Pinch and Reimer (2015) the government must play a more central role in this process.

The theme of sustainability has been borne out by specialized studies about the condition of continents like Asia (Ratnasingam and Ioras 2003) or about specific nations. In Thailand, for instance, the analysis by Thipsri and Syers (2013) shows that learning the orientation of companies positively affects innovation advantage and firm sustainability. Malaysia is one of the countries in which there is a great concern about the conservation of woody plants, used especially for producing rubber. Furthermore, even though it is not strictly related to furnishing, the contribution by Hromatka and Savage (2010) is useful to examine alternative ways of preserving forests by developing alternative sustainable techniques. Conversely, Australia, is looking for wood waste management practices

and strategies in order to increase sustainability standards in its wooden furniture manufacturing sector. The main aim is to avoid wasting wood by favoring recycling. This can reduce costs and increase the turnover at the same time. Other ways to achieve this goal can be using the Geographical Information System for connecting the producer of wood waste with buyer, improving green supply chain management (Susanty et al. 2016).

The Italian context requires particular attention, especially considering the importance its furnishing industry has achieved from an economical point of view (Gargiulo and Zoboli 2007; Gargiulo et al. 2004; Dal Bosco and De Martin 2011). As shown by sustainability reports (Borga et al. 2009), the production of furniture mainly developed in small and medium-sized companies progressively tends to follow the logic of sustainability. Research refers to a wider and comprehensive sector about the “green” value chain practices in the furniture industry (Handfield et al. 1997). Eco-efficiency in “extended” supply chains can be understood and measured (Michelsen et al. 2006), as well as the sustainable strategies (Iritani et al. 2015). Sustainability can also characterize the modularity of products (Caridi et al. 2012), especially to furnish places like offices (Carter and Zhang 2006; Anjum et al. 2005) and classrooms (Cornell 2002) where there is a great concern about creating a healthy and ergonomic environment.

11.2.3 Marketing

A concise analysis of the literature on marketing and furniture market trends must begin from the study by Grod (2010). It ideally fits into a strand of studies started a few years earlier (Bumgardner et al. 2000). It follows the original proposal by Tunitskyi (2009) who describes the peculiarities of using the “ROMI” methodology regarding the efficiency and determination of the investments in the marketing of furniture enterprises-importers. The literature of the following years multiplies the analysis of the furniture sector marketing with clear references to specific countries. For example:

- Asikhia (2009) offers reflections on a case study of furniture making business, focusing on marketing decisions and small businesses in Lagos state
- Petersen and Pham (2011), instead, focus on the Vietnamese furniture sector, with the following research question: does export marketing engagement by manufacturers pay off?
- Pongpeachan and Mumi (2013) investigate the effects of strategic human capital by focusing on the marketing innovation and the success of 779 furniture export businesses in Thailand.
- Nupus et al. (2016) study the effect of social capital on the product innovation and marketing performance in Indonesian SMEs
- Pangemanan and Walukow (2018) outline the marketing strategy analysis for SMEs in the furniture industry in Leilem, the Regency of Minahasa

Recent studies focus on common issues: the dominant theme in globalization is the advent of e-commerce and its effects on broader marketing strategies. With reference to the furnishings, some reflections proposed by Ismail et al. (2017) are useful: this study, based on Actor Network Theory (ANT), highlights that internet marketing is a means that links buyer and seller. Olšiaková et al. (2017) propose the possibility to use new, innovative forms of marketing communication in furniture industry, such as Guerilla Marketing, Viral Marketing, Content Marketing, and many others that allow to gain a competitive advantage in the furniture market.

Only recently some marketing logics have been linked to the broader theme of sustainability and the principle of clear relationships with customers. We can point out the essay by Namsawat and Rugwongwan (2020) about the application of environmental marketing to the furniture sector. The research shows that consumers from Thailand have awareness of environmental impact and are willing to purchase environment-friendly furniture. The idea of a product service system that aligns with environment-friendly furniture is a new concept that should spread everywhere. In this new perspective it is also necessary to update the mix of marketing communication tools as recently proposed by Loučanová et al. (2018) with reference to an empirical research in

Slovakia: a mix of marketing communication can decrease the costs for competition in the market and it can share the message more effectively.

A brief note must be made on the packaging of furniture, in regard to the protection of the products and communicative effectiveness through the labels, which identify the pieces of furniture and their characteristics. However, ecological problems relating to disposal are also highlighted. Literature has often focused on packaging resistance testing (Connolly et al. 2003), or even on the use of the latest products such as polyphenols and many other products used in furniture (Sherman 2014). Although they are marginal, there are also some papers that explain the ontological themes related to the packaging, for example, the essay by Tacla et al. (2007).

11.2.4 Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the relationships between consumerism and the furniture sector, mainly focusing on ethical aspects and linked to the broader theme of sustainability, above all in SMEs. The furniture supply chain has a significant impact on environmental sustainability considering the origin of raw materials, and the need to dispose packaging and used furniture. The research hypotheses are:

Hypothesis One: the production and distribution of durable products has suffered the effects of consumerism, which has changed its original characteristics.

Hypothesis Two: the sector of furniture production and trade is the emblem of consumer mutation that has affected the production and distribution of durable products.

Hypothesis Three: the production sector of furniture trade needs to adapt its behavior to the ethical standards that safeguard the environment and create constructive, transparent, and respectful relations with customers.

Therefore, some research questions arise:

Research question One: What are the relationships between culture, society, and furniture?

Research question Two: What is the new role of furniture? Is furniture still a durable product for the consumer?

Research question Three: What ethical problems does furniture production pose? In particular, is the production of furniture coherent with the ecological requirements of conservation of natural resources?

Research question Four: Do furniture and its packaging comply with the ethical standards of ecology, considering the disposal needs?

Research question Five: Is it possible to design furniture in compliance with the ethical principles that combine efficacy, efficiency, profitability of industrial and commercial companies, and also environmental sustainability?

Research question Six: What role did Italy play in the production and trade of furniture, and what role does it play today?

11.3 The Wood-Furnishing Chain and Its Environmental Impact

The wood-furniture production chain, often made up of small and medium-sized companies, includes the “upstream” sectors (wood industry for furniture and construction, semi-finished and furnishing components) and “downstream” of the furniture industry (consumption of furniture for use of lighting equipment and furnishing accessories) (Gargiulo et al. 2004).

The production is characterized by a complex cycle because it consists of many parts that often use different materials in terms of composition and nature. In the supply chain the following phases can be identified (Sala and Castellani 2011):

1. Acquisition of raw materials
2. Production
3. Packaging
4. Transport
5. Assembly
6. Maintenance

7. Disposal or recycling

Within the supply chain it is difficult for the same company to manage all the processes: some SMEs, in fact, focus on the typical phases of production, others focus on the assembly phase. Each phase causes a different environmental impact that depends mainly on the used materials. The most relevant ones related to the theme of sustainability are analyzed below.

11.3.1 Raw Materials and Their Production

Among the most commonly used raw materials are: wood, wood-based panels, paper, plastics, metals, upholstery materials, leather, glass-fiber fabrics, granites/marbles, compounds. The furniture of industrial production is generally made of:

- *Panels of wood particles*, such as chipboard, are manufactured from pressed wooden shavings that are bonded with resins and glues (Ferrante 2008). They can have different thickness. Panels can be finished with laminated or veneered materials.
- *Honeycomb*, on the other hand, is a frame structure made of solid wood supports, on which the veneer is attached (Giordano 1999). This structure makes the piece of furniture light and non-deformable and it is mainly used for medium-high-level wardrobes.
- *Medium-density fiber-board* (MDF) is made of waste woodworking materials which are processed in ground. It is widely used because it is consistent, easy to shape, and water resistant.
- *Blockboard or multi-layer wood* is a panel produced from the union of strips or solid wood glued and pressed panels. It is used for the construction of high-quality furniture.

The risks for environmental sustainability are already connected to the first phase of the acquisition of the above-described raw materials that may lead to the cutting of forests (Piccardo 2015) and the consumption of energy. There are also some problems related to the

production of the various components and their disposal at the end of the life cycle. The impacts during their use are less relevant. The materials used for furnishing have a more or less strong environmental impact in relation to the context they are part of, and they also depend on the correctness of their use. However, all the components must have two specific requirements necessary for the protection of the environment and human health:

- Suitability for use without risks
- Recyclability and easy eco-disposal

For wood and wood panels, we can identify the following critical environmental issues (Davoli 2001): emission of woody dust; polluting effects derived from gluing and painting often made of formaldehyde, halogenated compounds, and solvents; water waste poisoning coming from paint—spraying booths; noise pollution produced by the companies; environmental degradation from processing or packaging waste. All mechanical workings with removal materials, carried out with machine or manual tools, produce wood dust derived also from accessory operations such as dusting of processing pieces and workwear; emptying of containers; cleaning of purifiers, machines, and places; displacement of materials, etc. Formaldehyde is a colorless gas characterized by a strong, pungent odor. It has long been used in the production of building materials and also for household products. Its presence in pressed wood, like in honeycomb, plywood or fiber panels, glues, printing fabrics, and insulating coverings, has been widespread for long. Its fumes are dissolved quickly in air and in water.

11.3.2 Packaging

Packaging allows the movement of the product in time and space: its main function is therefore to contain, protect, and allow handling and delivery of any goods. In some cases, it is also a “means” to communicate with the user (packaging). In the furniture sector, the “operational” functions have priority over the “communicative” functions, although they

are significant. The primary (for sale), secondary (multiple, which groups several products), or tertiary (for transport) packaging of furniture must meet specific requirements and technical standards that in some continents are specifically regulated¹:

- The parts of primary packaging must be separable to facilitate their differentiated disposal. Propellants must not be used. The plastic parts must be eco-sustainable.
- The paper, cardboard, or plastic packaging should mainly consist of recycled material.
- Producers and users are responsible for the correct and effective environmental management of packaging and packaging waste that must be disposed, also through specialized companies.²

In some countries, the specific departments of the public administration organize separate waste collection systems for recycling, forbidding disposal into landfills. The furniture seller has an ethical duty, sometimes also imposed by the regulations, to collect all the packaging and to properly handle and dispose of it. If the internal staff deal with the delivery, collection and disposal are freely made by the seller. If we have recourse to third parties, it is subject of bargaining. Disposal taxes are explicitly or implicitly charged to the customer.

Packaging waste can produce an environmental impact. First of all, it can be dangerous or no longer widespread (Di Maro 2016). Among the most used materials (Pravisano 2008) there are: polyethylene, protective films, polystyrene, bubble wrap, cardboard, paper, adhesive tape, pallets, nylon bags, etc. Another classification identifies packaging to be disposed in relation to risks in water, air, soil, fauna and flora, the landscape and in relation to the risk of noise pollution.

11.3.3 Disposal

The furniture must be designed in a way that in can be dismantled at the end of its life cycle, so that its components can be re-used, recycled, or recovered. All the parts, in particular aluminum, glass, plastic, and steel,

must therefore be separable from the wood. Concerning products such as sofas, chairs, armchairs, and in general those containing fabric covering, the minimum environmental criterion of textile products is applied. The same parameter is applied to polyurethane padding; it must respect ethical and environmental principles regarding the substances contained in the foams. The used furniture to be scrapped is freely collected by traditional sellers while large-scale retail trade (LsRT) requires a financial contribution, sometimes in relation to the place of collection (Ikea 2018). So, waste storage becomes expensive while waiting for disposal into authorized centers, as it is in Italy (Pierobon 2012). The conditions of the rejected wood must be checked for the possibility of recycling. Even plastic parts, if possible, must be recycled. Particular attention must be paid to varnished products, which are potentially polluting, and similarly glues and adhesives, which should not exceed certain limits.

11.4 Furnishing Sector and Its Recent Evolutions

The furniture market has never been homogeneous and constant because it depends on the needs and income of consumers, as well as on fashion trends. Over time, external appearance, design, and modality of construction are changed, but the functions aimed at satisfying the primary needs are always the same. In fact, bedrooms, children bedrooms, living rooms, modular kitchens, entrances, tables, chairs, beds, mattresses, etc., have always been produced. Currently, for example, there are some recognized “styles” in furnishing sector (Castrignano 2014), they are: minimal, shabby chic, classic, underground, pop and young.

In recent decades, industrial production has led to the abandonment of unique handcrafted productions, even if safeguarding excellent quality products: however, above the functionality often prevails over aesthetic. Standardized mass production, compared to handcrafts, presents a few imperfections and can also be sold through e-commerce at low prices. In recent years, the international economic crisis has encouraged low-cost purchases at outlets, neglecting quality, durability, and aesthetic appearance. However, there are still rarer handmade productions with unique,

exclusive pieces of furniture, made of precious raw materials that guarantee excellent resistance. Moreover, they are produced through manufacturing processes with low environmental impact, obviously in the face of high prices.

The spread of industrial production has also changed the distribution channels where small traders endure at the side of dominant large-scale distribution. The former are more flexible and dynamic, even if they tackle higher management costs. Consumers, therefore, can choose among different information and supplying channels: social media, newsletters, online sites, portals, reviews, and “physical” shops, which are still the only ones which let check the quality of products directly. Therefore, the low-cost online distribution has reduced the product catalog of classic retailers that are focused on complex or qualitatively superior furniture arrangement. e-Commerce allows, in some cases, the direct relationship between producer and consumer, avoiding the transition through sale stores, so that prices can be reduced further. Online purchases are therefore constantly growing (De Luca et al. 2015): even in the furniture sector we can note the widespread tendencies of the younger generations who prefer modern, comfortable, and fast digital channels

Table 11.1 Comparison between organized large-scale distribution, traditional stores, and online stores

	LsRT	Traditional shop	Online shop
Investments for products in exposition	High	Medium/high	Absent
Investments in communication	High	Medium	Low
Internal personal use in deliveries	No	Some	No
Personal training for sales	Yes	Yes	Absent
Technical training of personnel	Low	High	Absent
Separate transport and assembly costs	Always	In some cases	Always
Standard quality products	Low	Medium/high	Low/medium
Customer service	Low	High	Absent
Disposal of products	Absent	Almost always	Not expected
Disposal of assembly residues	For a fee	Free	Not expected

Source: (our elaboration)

(Stone et al. 2005). Table 11.1 shows the comparison between organized large-scale distribution (LsRT), traditional stores and online stores.

For the purpose of reacting to the online challenge, the traditional warehouse-showroom with pieces of furniture exhibited in different departments is evolving: it cannot be just an exhibition center, but a store organized to provide advanced services. Small entrepreneurs will be able to endure the combined challenge of LsRT and the web by providing specialized services.

11.5 Commercial Ethics and Eco-Marketing

11.5.1 A New Professionalism in Sales

The recent economic crisis has reevaluated the commercial profession of the seller, despite the evolution of the digital reality that allows the consumer to acquire information about products and markets. The seller has become significant in a furniture market that has also suffered from a “crisis of distrust” (Vespasiano and Simeoni 2013). Regenerating trust between buyer and seller has been the main objective in various sectors and also in the furnishing one where it has been necessary to restore the relationships on ethical principles. For a long time, trust, reputation, and ethics have been considered marginal for the success of a sale. Following the transition from a financial and industrial crisis to a political and social one (Aleo and Alessandri 2014; Crivellaro et al. 2012), ethics has assumed a strategic role and has imposed the shift from short-term profit to long-term business economy (Passeri and Mazzi 2013, Farinet 2015), through a management characterized by conscious and morally perfect attitudes.

Initially, the Western companies with their well-known brands have enhanced their image, underlining the quality and prestige of their products that justified a higher price. However, these policies have not been sufficient, forcing operators to transform ethics into a powerful sales and commercial differentiation tool. This was an alternative to a competition based only on the material aspects of the product (price and functional characteristics) that has underestimated intangible elements such as

communication, customer relationship, and values that a brand or a product can express. The seller's activity has always been considered as an individual skill for communicative and experiential talent, rather than as a professional competence (Aleo and Alessandri 2014). It has always been judged suspiciously by consumers because of its notoriety for opportunistic or even illicit behavior. Even in the furniture sector, some companies have rejected ethical principles, but today they are reevaluated considering that customers pay more attention to environmental impacts and above all to the interlocutor's reliability, which is a necessary condition to protect the corporate image, in order to obtain competitive advantages and, therefore, to retain the consumer.

11.5.2 A New Function of the Labels

Among the ethical principles, greater clarity about the quality of the product can be obtained from its label. Also in the furnishing sector, labels are used to certify environmentally friendly manufacturing, following socially responsible criteria and supporting through this way conscious purchases (Colletti 2017). This type of label is subjected to controls by external certifiers that verify the respect of strict pre-established rules. Furniture, therefore, can be characterized by environmental labels, typical of special products or even of product brands and social certification, or aimed at a correct disposal. Environmental labels can be mandatory or optional. Mandatory labels are typical of potentially dangerous products, such as some packaging and appliances included in modular kitchens related to their consumption to encourage savings, reducing polluting emissions (Capra 2010). For example, the optional eco-labels, according to the European legislation, can be classified into three types (Ispra 2018):

- ISO 14024, assigned by independent external certifiers that control all phases of a product's life cycle (Life Cycle Assessment) fixing some minimum performance levels to be respected
- ISO 14021 (self-declared environmental claims) made by producers, importers, or distributors in self-declaration on the environmental value of their products, hoping for truthful and verifiable information

- ISO 14025 (Environmental Product Declarations) finally contains all the environmental information and potential impacts (conception, manufacture, use, disposal)

Furniture sector is also characterized by further exclusive labels. Wood and wood-based materials, in fact, must be made respecting the traceability identifying their origin. For this verification, for example, there are the following labels (Oberti [2014](#)):

- Chain of custody certificates (e.g., Forest Stewardship Council, Program for Endorsement of Forest Certification or equivalent)
- Internationally recognized certifications issued by certification bodies or by government authorities (Origine et Legalite des Bois, Smartwood)
- Government attestations proving the traceability of the supply chain (management licenses or approved management plans)
- Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade legal certification issued to fight the illegal cutting of trees and its associated trade (German et al. [2010](#))

Other additional specifications:

- Ecological panel (made from 100% recycled wood chipboard, pallets, shavings, or even old furniture, tree pruning, packaging, manufacturing residues and fruit crates, in compliance with the rules for energy saving)
- Leb ecological panel (it has a higher guarantee for consumer health because it is 100% made of certified recycled wood material with a lower emission of formaldehyde)
- Idroleb ecological panel (it had lower formaldehyde emissions and it is water resistant)
- Real wood (it distinguishes wood from the imitations)
- Made in Italy—Italian furniture (it identifies products and production processes, verifying their compliance with the requirements of the reference technical standards, in addition to the “Italian origin” of materials and semi-finished products)

11.6 Italian Experiences

The Italian furniture system is characterized by the prevalence of SMEs operating in industrial districts and by the high degree of outsourcing that makes the specialized subsupply an important link in the production chain. The recent increase in turnover of large-scale retailers has introduced new environmental problems: land consumption, paper waste for catalogs, exploitation of underpaid workers (especially immigrants), etc. With the goal of lowering the costs for making furniture available to everyone, globalization has introduced important commercial policies aimed at a process of global aggregation, imposing systemic standards that damage important productive and cultural identities.

The Italian furniture industry is one of the sectors most affected by globalization (Vignoli 2018). In Italy, the market has always been segmented, offering products of low quality and price and, on the other hand, of refined design and excellent quality. The current growth of the market is the result of a progressive restructuring that has led the wood companies to implement less and less strategies based on cost containment and flexibility, increasingly oriented towards quality and service, with attention for an exigent and aware consumer. In Italy, also in compliance with strict national or European regulations, the productions have been directed towards natural materials and technologies: non-tropical woods coming from sustainable crops, treatments and paints that are not harmful to health, and non-toxic glues, above all. However, the degree of diffusion of ethical values and especially of the principles of environmental sustainability among the main manufacturing companies is not yet clear (Verde 2017). A symptom of this diffusion could be the acquisition of labels, ecological brands, or certifications that are obtained complying with certain standards being common to European Union countries. They can be divided into three groups:

- Quality certifications. They are obtained by implementing the UNI EN ISO 9001: 2008, which is offered to every business process of any sector and size, manufacturing or services.

- Environmental certifications gained respecting the ISO 14001 voluntary compliance rules, applicable to any company (D'Incognito 2004), easily integrated with other environmental compliance verification systems (ISO 9001, BS OHSAS 18001, ISO 50001). In order to obtain the certification, a depth environmental analysis investigating the impact of all emissions and assessing if the company policies are truly geared towards environmental protection is necessary.
- Certifications related to health and safety at work gained according to the BS OHSAS 18001 standard, applicable to any company (Fantini and Giuliani 2015). The standard specifies the requirements for an optimal Occupational Health and Safety Management System (SGSSL), which is also useful for improving company performance.

The agencies that certify the compliance with the rules are independent and included in a list managed by Accredia (Italian accreditation body). Then, we carried out a sample empirical analysis to quantify the number of companies which have these certifications. The first fifteen Italian companies, with turnover volumes in 2017, were the subjects of the survey (Pambianconews 2018). The results of the empirical research are shown in Table 11.2, which also specifies the accredited company that issued the certification and also the certificate number.

The quality certification ex UNI EN ISO 9001, despite being the most widespread, is in possession of only four companies. Only five companies have opted for an environmental certification UNIENISO14001; four of them for the BS OHSAS 18001 certification. The results are therefore very worrying: in Italy few companies invest in certification, inspection, or environmental testing systems, although the phenomenon is growing slightly (Mandurino 2017). From a first exploratory survey to be formalized and completed, however, the number of companies that implement and communicate voluntarily second- and third-level certifications is high. Among the most widespread ones are: ISO 50001 (Energy management systems), Ecological Panel F **** (Panel systems with lower formaldehyde emission), FSC or PEFC (certifies the implementation of sustainable forest management methods), and CSQA (certifies that the product complies with the technical document).

Table 11.2 Research outcomes: Accredited Italian companies

N. Company	UNI EN ISO 9001 : 2008		UNI EN ISO 14001		BS OHSAS 18001	
	Certification body	Certificate number	Certification body	Certificate number	Certification body	Certificate number
1 Natuzzi	Bureau veritas Italia	200919	Tuv Italia	50 100 12316 Rev.003	Tuv Italia	50 100 14114 Rev.001
2 Poltrone Frau Group	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 Poltrone Sofa	-	-	-	-	-	-
4 Molteni Group	Dnv	93324-2011-AQ-ITA-Accredia	Dnv	107867-2011-AE-ITA-Accredia	-	-
5 Scavolini	Sgs	IT17/0779	Sgs	IT04/1333.01	Sgs	IT18/0017
6 Gruppo B&B Italia	Csi	SQ164081-ICILA	-	-	-	-
7 Lube	Tuv	-	-	-	Tuv	-
8 Poliform	Csi	SQ174239-ICILA	-	-	-	-
9 Veneta Cucine	Tuv	50 100 3599 Rev.006	Tuv	50 100 11052 Rev.003	-	-

(continued)

Table 11.2 (continued)

N. Company	UNI EN ISO 9001 : 2008		UNI EN ISO 14001		BS OHSAS 18001	
	Certification body	Certificate number	Certification body	Certificate number	Certification body	Certificate number
10 Giessegi	Rina	31360/14/S	-	-	-	-
11 Luxury Living Group	-	-	-	-	-	-
12 Calligaris	Csi	SQ174272-ICILA	-	-	-	-
13 Minotti	-	-	-	-	-	-
14 Stosa	Csi	SQ153919-ICILA	-	-	-	-
15 Estel	Csi	SQ184350-ICILA	Csi	SGA17266-ICILA	Csi	SHS150042-ICILA

Source: (our elaboration from Accredia.it)

11.7 Recommendations and Future Research Directions

All that is described in this chapter is based on a new awareness in production and consumption that should always be more respectful toward the environment and the real needs of people. This awareness, however, contrasts with the dominant greed, materialism, and prevailing consumerism. There are, therefore, antithetical forces facing each other: the described situation in the sector, however, also highlights some moral principles that can protect the conservation of natural resources and support transparent relations between the protagonists of the renewed globalized economic scenarios.

A renewed economic culture can contribute to the affirmation of ethical values which, in safeguarding the legitimate profit, trains new generations by constantly soliciting the reflection on the principles of fairness and justice. The education sector and scientific research should play a fundamental role in the development of sensible consciences, encouraging the ways inspired by such logics. Also, the countries and therefore public policies and related legislative functions must direct their action toward sustainable objectives, perhaps by encouraging correct behaviors with fiscal facilitations or other benefits. Even trade associations should affect the actions of their members, encouraging right behaviors.

The arguments expressed were based on the prevalent Italian experience, as a symptom of a more complex global reality. However, it would be desirable to compare Italian trends with those of other countries that are similar in terms of company size and production tradition and ethical values. So, it would be interesting to compare the supply chain characterized by SMEs, with supply chains made up mainly of large companies. International competition must also be monitored with special attention, especially that deriving from emerging countries in which economic logic prevails over ethical principles. Today, the affirmation of ecological processes and of clear commercial relations seems the main achievement of economically developed nations with widespread wealth.

It would be also useful to add empirical analyses to verify, in detail, the productive and commercial behaviors of the main multinational

companies that can influence the choices of small entrepreneurs. This occurs both in the production phase and in the marketing phase. The relations with end consumers are, in fact, strongly oriented towards e-commerce channels that could hide the dangers of transparency principles. The regulation of the web is still lagging, often regulated by local laws, while it should be managed by global agreements.

11.8 Conclusion

The arguments proposed provide some answers to the research questions originally formulated, obviously referring to further studies that are certainly appropriate for a sector in constant evolution.

Research Question One What are the relationships between culture, society, and furniture?

The furniture meets a primary need and, possibly, also a secondary one. Certainly, it has a functional role in the life of every person allowing to carry out the ordinary tasks of everyday life. Standardized production, typical of large enterprises, has reduced costs and therefore consumer prices. Even the poorest social classes can thus buy essential but useful furnishing. At the same time, however, especially the upper classes can combine the exigence to satisfy aesthetic needs with the answer to the basic needs. The design responds to this secondary need with innovative and aesthetically pleasing products. The most widespread “styles” in furnishing today are: minimal, shabby chic, classic, underground, pop and young (Castrignano 2014). There are still high-quality craft products reserved for the wealthiest consumers.

Therefore, the best production should be an almost exclusive feature of SMEs that can take care of the smallest details, also responding to specific requests from wealthy customers. The selling of design furniture should also include the responsibility of SMEs for the care they demonstrate in customer relations.

Research Question Two What is the new role of furniture? Is furniture still a durable product for the consumer?

The globalization of economies and societies has given a new economic, social, and cultural role to furnishing. It has improved the living conditions of families. Economic furniture derived from the standardization of processes have supported social equality. Unfortunately, products of this kind are also of poor quality and, therefore, must be frequently replaced by setting environmental issues. On the other hand, valuable furniture, often produced in specialized SMEs, can be considered durable products.

Research Question Three What ethical problems does furniture production pose? In particular, is the production of furniture coherent with the ecological requirements of conservation of natural resources?

The furniture supply chain poses significant sustainability problems. First of all, the consumption of raw material that must be oriented towards ecologically sustainable supplies, avoiding the use of polluting substances that deplete the forests. The need to reduce consumer prices could lead to the use of waste materials, affecting environments negatively. On the other hand, public authorities must favor the supply of ecological materials by tracing the different stages of the supply chain and punishing incorrect behaviors. Recycling of materials derived from decomposed furniture could be a valid solution to the problem. SMEs, devoted to quality production, should not be the cause of ecological problems, esteeming the best quality of raw and auxiliary used materials. However, they must deal with the problem of the disposal of processing residues, which is rather expensive, especially considering SMEs' small size.

Research Question Four Do furniture and its packaging comply with the ethical standards of ecology, considering the disposal needs?

Packaging of furniture raises the same issues, considering the risks deriving from its disposal. The significant size of the product and its fragility requires the use of resistant packaging that is not always recyclable. It would be necessary to use packaging of natural origin that can dissolve or be reused without damage. SMEs devoted to quality productions are

probably facilitated in the use of natural packaging, with low environmental impact: basically, higher prices should cover higher costs, because generally the wealthier clientele could be more sensitive to ethical problems.

Research Question Five Is it possible to design furniture in compliance with the ethical principles that combine efficacy, efficiency, and profitability of industrial and commercial companies and also environmental sustainability?

The recent evolution of the sector, which highlights the importance of sustainable production, makes it possible to apply ethical principles in this sector. Ethics also imposes transparent relationships in the furniture chain. Clear communications and accurate information must characterize the promotional messages and also the labels of each product. Obtaining appropriate certifications by impartial third bodies as a result of strict checks could be a promotional element of sales, esteeming the greater sensitivity of the population to environmental issues. The advent of large-scale retail distribution that concentrates sale proposals in a smaller number of operators can be a useful vehicle for increasing customer sensibility and applying moral principles in commercial behaviors. Small traditional retailers should specialize in consultancy services, devoting more time and energy to wealthy customers, being attentive to quality rather than price.

Research Question Six What role did Italy play in the production and trade of furniture, and what role does it play today?

Italy has always played a prominent role in the sector that has suffered significant consequences from globalization. In recent years there has been a growth in turnover resulting from a restructuring of the sector, which also affected the sales network in which daily large operators are in contact with traditional smaller-sized sellers. However, the scarce presence of certifications is worrying. Future surveys could provide more analytical answers by extending the field of observation. In any case, Italy remains, at least for now, an exemplary model regarding the production and commercial chain for furniture trade in which SMEs have a fundamental role.

11.9 Implications

Some practical implications for SMEs can also arise from this study. The analysis drives the authorities to re-evaluate the role of these companies that, better than others, have guaranteed employment even in times of recession. Subsidized financing, therefore, finds a further justification in the modest size of these companies, which often cannot have sufficient equity. This credit can also reduce the differences between geographical macro areas: in Italy, as in other countries, the distribution of companies is not homogeneous. In fact, there are richer areas where productive activity is facilitated by system economies, and poorer areas in which the activity of SMEs is more difficult. Only state financial incentives can promote a more equitable distribution of wealth in different areas of a country.

The analysis also provides useful arguments to promoters and managers that can better play their role as trainers of new generations of managers and entrepreneurs. Even university courses, focused on SMEs management, can benefit from this type of investigation that integrates traditional manuals used for the transfer of knowledge to new generations. Finally, this study stimulates quantitative research on the economic and financial balance of SMEs in the furniture supply chain, with particular attention to the contribution margin (Rossetti and Migliaccio 2015). Considerations focused only on managerial dynamics characterized by ethical principles are not enough. In fact, these principles must necessarily apply to companies that also respect the rules of the optimal balance between balance sheet assets and liabilities, in addition to having a high and constant profitability.

The management, according to ethical principles, must not represent a specific trait of an individual company, but must always be a shared practice with the general production system, the society, and the environment; in this way, all these components can benefit from the ethical management principles.

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Notes

1. In Europe, for example, the following provisions apply:
 - UNI EN 13427: 2005 Imballaggi—Requisiti per l'utilizzo di norme europee nel campo degli imballaggi e dei rifiuti di imballaggio;
 - UNI EN 13428: 2005 Imballaggi—Requisiti specifici per la fabbricazione e la composizione;
 - UNI EN 13429: 2005 Imballaggi—Riutilizzo;
 - UNI EN 13430: 2005 Imballaggi—Requisiti per imballaggi recuperabili;
 - UNI EN 13431: 2005 Imballaggi—Requisiti per imballaggi recuperabili sotto forma di recupero energetico;
 - UNI EN 13432: 2002 Requisiti per imballaggi recuperabili attraverso compostaggio e biodegradazione.
2. In Italy: CONAI—National Consortium Packaging.

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