

# Beyond Appearances: The Hidden Meanings of Sustainable Luxury

Silvia Ranfagni and Simone Guercini

**Abstract** The notion of sustainability has become increasingly pervasive. It is affecting even luxury sectors where companies attracted by the economic advantages of the green economy develop business models based on sustainable supply chains. Thus, sustainability and luxury, although apparently distant concepts, seem destined to coexist. Their combination appeals to those fashion consumers who, inspired by conscientious consumption, materialize even in luxury goods their sense of environmental and social responsibility. Hence, the importance of investigating what makes a luxury brand sustainable. The aim of this chapter is to identify the dimensions that characterize sustainable luxury and, thus, the sources of the dialogue between luxury and sustainability. The analysis is focalized on four Italian cases (Loro Piana, Gucci, Zegna, and Brunello Cucinelli). Based on the collection of secondary data, it compares company-dominated data (Websites, interviews, etc.) with consumer-dominated data (fashion blogs) by using the text-mining technique. The emerging information produced for each brand has driven us in the interpretation of the individual cases. The main findings show that a sustainable luxury brand is marked by a quality-based ideology, measures itself against a community setting, creates by integrating manual skill with technology, and is part of institutional and political relations. Thus, ideological, community, political, and creative dimensions compose a sustainable luxury. These dimensions suggest that the dialogue between sustainability and luxury unfolds around the features of rigour, perfection, sharing, flexibility, and independence. All these features can be seen as values that a luxury brand should embrace if it decides to turn to sustainability.

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Silvia Ranfagni and Simone Guercini share the final responsibility for this chapter. The authors wrote together introduction and methodology, only Silvia Ranfagni wrote the remainder.

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S. Ranfagni (✉) · S. Guercini  
Department of Economics and Management, University of Florence,  
Via della Pandette 9, 50127 Florence, Italy  
e-mail: [silvia.ranfagni@unifi.it](mailto:silvia.ranfagni@unifi.it)

S. Guercini  
e-mail: [simone.guercini@unifi.it](mailto:simone.guercini@unifi.it)

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## 1 Luxury and Sustainability: An Emerging Path in Fashion Companies

Luxury and sustainability seem to bear divergent, almost irreconcilable meanings. Luxury denotes products and services that generate intensive human involvement, exist in a limited number, and are recognized for their value (Kapferer 1997). Luxury is a hallmark of beauty and an object of desire and, although devoid of utility, produces pleasure, thus becoming also a source of social differentiation: its possession brings esteem, thereby enhancing notoriety, prestige, and status (Pantzalis 1995; Vigneron and Johnson 2004). In short, luxury is inessential, superfluous, exclusive, and ostentatious. In this sense, it is the exact opposite of sustainability (Guercini and Ranfagni 2013). Sustainability is associated with environmental conservation (Berns et al. 2009; Pullman et al. 2009), improvements of social living conditions (Montiel 2008; Closs et al. 2011), and ethical business philosophies (Colbert and Kurucz 2007; Lubin and Esty 2010). Thus, it is an indispensable, collective, and ideological phenomenon. The divergence between sustainability and luxury is not merely terminological. It has also been borne out by specific studies that investigate the perception consumers have of sustainable luxury. Davies et al. (2012), for example, show that consumers consider sustainability and ethics less important in their luxury consumption decision-making process than in their commodity consumption decisions, although luxury products were perceived as more sustainable in comparison with the commodity products. Achabou and Dekhili (2013) go so far as to claim that sustainability embedded in luxury goods can make them less desirable than non-sustainable luxury products. Yet despite this divergence, a growing share of consumers is giving up “conspicuous consumption”, which foregrounds individual appearance, and converting to “conscientious consumption”, which expresses an evolving environmental sense and social responsibility (Hennigs et al. 2013). As a consequence, international luxury brand companies increasingly invest in sustainability as a means to exploit the consolidated heritage embedded in the manufacturing excellences extending their intrinsic values (Jones et al. 2008; Sharma et al. 2010; Gardetti and Girón 2014). They do this by associating their brands with actions they implement to preserve environmental resources and peculiarities of their original territories and to protect special skills of which their employees are holders. Thus, they express what, according to Kapferer (1997), joins luxury and sustainability, that is durability and uniqueness. Just as luxury goods do not pass in the wake of fashion and animate enduring businesses, so do sustainable behaviours lead to ensuring the continuity of

a natural and social environment. Besides, luxury goods derive their value from rare raw materials, also territorially rooted, and craftsmanship competences, just as sustainable actions contribute to not wasting what on the planet is scarce and irreplaceable. Luxury companies seem to make a pact with the environment: they safeguard it and make it the protagonist of their collections. It is a sort of tacit exchange as expression of the alliance existing between luxury and sustainability. What is more, luxury brands that derive from sustainability reciprocal and integrative values of their personality attract consumers whose attitudes are consciously ethical (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau 2015). These consumers search for luxury brands, which are an expressive synthesis of an individual identity that reflects an empathetic tension and aspiration for a better human environment (Bendell and Kleantous 2007). They are motivated by a variety of contingent situations. Among them are a rapid and unbalanced economic growth, especially in the emerging countries, and its negative impacts on pollution and on conditions of workforce exploitation, cases of entrepreneurial corruption that damages consumers, and, more in general, a corporate social responsibility, which often appears more declared than real. Those who share a deep and authentic approach to the concept of luxury are critical of companies that ignore the conservation of social and environmental excellences or that consider it only as a façade of a non-existent brand ethic (Hult 2011). It follows that for sustainable luxury managers, it is essential to understand how to make the relation between sustainability and actual brand values dialectically and as far as possible interpenetrating by creating an aspirational world of brand that is evocative and expressive of concrete and tangible socio-environmental actions. In this chapter, we will analyse the cases of Loro Piana, Zegna, Gucci, and Brunello Cucinelli, which, albeit from different points of departure, have developed sustainable management approaches. On the whole, our aim is to gain an understanding of what constitutes sustainable luxury. Sustainability can be broken down into environmental, organizational, social, and economic dimensions (Guercini and Ranfagni 2013). We seek to understand whether luxury as well consists of the same dimensions or involves still others, and what, aside from rareness and durability, might be other associations that could foster the dialogue between sustainability and luxury. Before proceeding with the analysis of the cases, however, we need to explain how we went about their reconstruction. What follows, then, is a brief methodological note.

## 2 Methodological Notes

The methodology involves the analysis of business cases constructed from the collection and interpretation of secondary data (Yin 1984; Stewart and Kamins 1993; Guercini 1996). The sources explored are varied and include brand-related press releases found on Websites, non-financial narratives from annual reports, and interviews with house designers published in mainstream media sources. All these company-dominated sources were compared with consumer-dominated sources

and, in particular, with brand perceptions emerging from fashion blogs that contain posts written by experts (Guercini 2014; Crawford et al. 2014). The fashion blogs investigated are variegated and selected as the most suitable for the subject of our research. They have been chosen for a variety of reasons. They rank highly according to well-established criteria used to identify successful blogs, including membership, Alexa traffic data, number of indexed pages, and incoming links. Moreover, their posts/comments are also available for approximately three years, which made possible the collection of a sufficient amount of data.<sup>1</sup> For each brand, the keywords used in gathering data are “sustainable”, “luxury”, and the brand name. All the keywords were searched in combination. We collected data and created overall eight files: (a) four containing for each brand, data that are company dominated and (b) four containing for each brand, data that are consumer dominated. We processed them using the text-mining software T-LAB. This program is widely used by researchers and professionals nationally and internationally (<http://tlab.it/it/partners.php>). More specifically, we produced a semantic cluster analysis of data (Rastier et al. 2002) to identify themes related to sustainability marked by the combination of common semantic features. We compare for each brand the information resulting from data contained in the files related to company and consumer-dominated data. The combined emersion of information guided us in the interpretation of the individual cases. Finally, these data were also integrated with information on the four companies the authors possess and codified in case studies, as product of five years of research (Ranfagni and Runfola 2012; Ranfagni 2012). The analysis delineated the dimensions of sustainable luxury and their contents, which we will present in the discussion section on the sustainable luxury dimensions.

### 3 Cases of Italian Luxury Brands

In this section, we will analyse the four cases of Italian companies. Brunello Cucinelli is the youngest of the cases investigated. It has developed a sustainable approach, which is filtered by a humanistic vision of business. This makes it an interesting case when compared with the other three. All the cases even if they do not necessarily belong to international sustainability classifications are recognized by consumers participating in fashion blogs as sustainable brands because of their actions in defence of the environment and social resources.

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<sup>1</sup>Here, we list some of the main fashion blogs investigated. For Zegna: [cashmereworldfair.com](http://cashmereworldfair.com), [fashionwelike.com](http://fashionwelike.com), [bluandberry.com](http://bluandberry.com), [evermanifesto.com](http://evermanifesto.com), [vegasmagazine.com](http://vegasmagazine.com), and [fashioninvest.com](http://fashioninvest.com); for Gucci: [earthtimes.org](http://earthtimes.org), [eco-age.com](http://eco-age.com), [ecoblog.it](http://ecoblog.it), [fashion.telegraph.co.uk](http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk), [greenbiz.it](http://greenbiz.it), [greennew.it](http://greennew.it), [ideegreen.it](http://ideegreen.it), [luxurysociety.com](http://luxurysociety.com), and [urbantimes.co/](http://urbantimes.co/); for Loro Piana: [ammando.com](http://ammando.com), [ecouterre.com](http://ecouterre.com), [harryrosen.com](http://harryrosen.com), [knittingindustry.com](http://knittingindustry.com), and [mcaadsustainabledesign.com](http://mcaadsustainabledesign.com); and for Brunello Cucinelli: [campdenfb.com](http://campdenfb.com), [enablingideas.com](http://enablingideas.com), [fashionwelike.com](http://fashionwelike.com), [fismo.it](http://fismo.it), and [treedon.net](http://treedon.net).

### ***3.1 Loro Piana: Naturalness Generating Sustainable Luxury***

Loro Piana is a company that has achieved a leading position in the production of cashmere, vicuña, and extra-fine wools. Behind the company is a family business, which began its activity as wool merchants and founded in the second half of the nineteenth century a woollen mill at Quarone in Valsesia (region of Piedmont). There is situated the company's corporate headquarters, completed in 1924 by the engineer Pietro Loro Piana. In the period following the Second World War, Pietro's grandson took over the family business and turned it into a well-known fashion brand. Today, the company has 2533 employees and two divisions. The first is the wool factory, which manufactures high-quality textiles using noble fibres such as cashmere, vicuña, and extra-fine wools. The second is the luxury goods division, which produces a complete line of clothing products and accessories for men, women, and children using the company's own fabrics. Loro Piana is a vertically integrated company and, as such, has complete control over the whole supply chain; thus, the luxury it produces is built on a continuous and monitored quality. The search for quality has animated every generation of the Loro Piana family; each has managed the company inspired by the values of excellence and the respect for the business history, especially in terms of manufacturing traditions. The quality the company pursues involves a meticulous attention to fine raw materials. The main sourcing areas are Australia, New Zealand, Mongolia, and China. While in Australia and New Zealand, it seeks the highest quality fleeces from merino sheep, in Mongolia and China, it searches for rare fleeces from local goats. The natural environments where Loro Piana finds its finest raw material are unspoiled worlds that supply inimitable resources. The Loro Piana family, in fact, invests economic and human resources in order to identify and, then, to preserve them. This is because they are convinced that it is precisely thanks to them that it is possible to combine quality and timeless elegance and to produce fabrics and garments destined to last more than a lifetime. A quality-based philosophy seems to inform the search for yet unexplored natural resources. Their preservation at the base of Loro Piana's sustainable orientation is thus coherent with an existing company way of being. All this explains the recent environmental projects that the company has decided to undertake. One of these concerns the opening of a subsidiary in Ulan Bator (Mongolia) to work together with nomadic tribesmen in the breeding of goats whose fleece is used in the production of cashmere clothing collections. In particular, the aim of this green field investment is to transfer to the local community of breeders all the techniques of animal husbandry in order to preserve a local ecosystem and, at the same time, to pursue the high quality of the emerging raw material. The survival of this latter depends on the conservation of the underlying rare resources rooted in naturalistic environments. The products Loro Piana realizes by using Mongolia fleece are a source of pride; particularly cherished, and appreciated by consumers, are the products labelled as Loro Piana Baby Cashmere. Their fibre comes from Hyrcus goat kids that are between three and twelve months old.

Marked by an unmatched softness, its derivatives include limited editions of long overcoats (average price \$50,000 per item) along with baby clothes such as body suits, caps, and socks. Overall, Loro Piana cashmere is a real luxury; its value in terms of price to pay makes it accessible only to market niches. Since it is made of raw materials that are deeply natural, its products seem to appeal mainly to consumers who understand and recognize their untouched origin. They are in markets such as Europe, the USA, and Japan. However, also consumers who belong to emerging countries are revealing themselves an interesting segment. Some of them, in fact, are beginning to express a higher sensitivity to quality perceived as such on the basis of the manufacturer's country of origin (Loro Piana collection are 100 % made in Italy), independently of the underlying brand awareness. The perceived value of Loro Piana collections depends on raw materials, manufacturing place, and also on production processes. Loro Piana has, in fact, invested in the most up-to-date technologies, which carefully and thoroughly process fibres to make them to achieve the highest level of refinement and quality. The technologies do not alter raw materials but exploit to the greatest extent their innate potential. However, the high quality in the finished products is due to a combination of technology with human competences and, in particular, with superior craftsmanship, necessary to make handmade adjustments.

The search for new productive experiences involving natural communities has led Loro Piana to develop agreements with foreign governments. Thus, sustainable choices the company makes coherently to its ethics of quality pass through political relations. A case in point is the ongoing collaboration, since 1994, with the Peruvian government to save the vicuña, the animals that produce the most precious and finest natural fibre (12–13 microns against the 15 microns of cashmere). Since the vicuña was at risk of extinction, Loro Piana was granted permission to acquire 2000 ha of local land to be converted into a private reserve, where the animals could live protected from poachers. In exchange for this intervention, Loro Piana has enjoyed preferential access to the reserve and, in particular, has obtained exclusive rights to the purchase of 85 % of the fibre produced. Now, Loro Piana preserves unique resources including them in collections, which thus emanate from a process of company integration with foreign communities of producers. These communities, although faraway and culturally distant, share with Loro Piana an important objective: the safeguarding of their environment together with their local traditions. The extremely soft golden fur of the vicuña has, in fact, a centuries-old history. "The Princess of the Andes", as it is called, was once reserved exclusively for Incan Emperors; its loss would be considered the death of an ancient Peruvian symbol. Overall, the raw fibre obtained from vicuña amounts to less than 5000 kg, as compared with the 10 million kg of cashmere and 500 million kg of wool. The dedication of Loro Piana to natural resources is witnessed also by an experiment carried out on lotus flower fibres, a natural raw material produced on the lakes of Myanmar. These fibres, once extracted from the plant, have traditionally been spun by hand and woven to produce a fabric, akin to raw silk, which in the past marked local textile traditions. Loro Piana decided to use this fibre and the resulting fabric to produce a special jacket.

Driven by the mission to sell excellence made from the best sources of raw material, the company increased its sales from Euro 242 million in 2000 to Euro 630 million in 2012. It is globally distributed in 22 countries and operates 135 retail stores, most of which directly owned. A quality-oriented approach, integration of local communities, scouting activities, and experimentations, has favoured in Loro Piana the union between luxury and sustainability. The driver behind all of this is the passion of a family, which, at least until some years ago, has believed in its sustainable projects by exploiting them to enhance the manufacturing excellence underlying the company identity. In addition to passion, the success of sustainable luxury in Loro Piana is also due to sophisticated marketing skills, capable of transforming the exclusive raw material into a visible source of brand differentiation. Both Baby Cashmere and Vicuña are now premium Loro Piana labels that consumers associate with products of outstanding and unique quality. However, something has marked the recent history of Loro Piana. If on the one hand, it is characterized by continuity in sustainable investments, and on the other hand, it is tinged with changes in the company-ownership. In 2013, Loro Piana acquired for 1.6 million dollars the majority of a company that has the right to shear about 6000 vicuña in Argentina. In the same year, it also sold its 80 % to the French Group LVMH and remains affected by the death of Sergio Loro Piana, who, together with Pier Luigi Loro Piana, composed the company's top management. In light of these events, Loro Piana will be an interesting case to observe in the near future. We are dealing with a family business, which, after having fostered the cult of quality through sustainable experiences, finds itself, for contingent reasons, passing the baton to a multinational of luxury. It is a delicate and insidious choice that among consumers raises questions as to the possibility of preserving sustainable values embedded in a quality production without becoming mere subordinates of economic and financial interests. What is perceived to be at risk is the human integrity that has fuelled the true brand ethics, and with this, the passion of those who created it and made it tangible in the eyes of consumers. Thus, the question that arises is whether sustainable experiences such as those of Loro Piana, once they are incorporated in a multinational company, can really survive over time and not just become a memorable case destined simply to be narrated.

### ***3.2 Gucci: Formalism as the Basis of a Sustainable Corporate Approach***

Gucci is a luxury fashion company, which has recently made sustainability as an integrating value of its brand. The development of a sustainable business approach in a multinational company like Gucci, that is recognized in international markets, structurally consolidated and integrated in a predefined network of suppliers, was far from easy. It required formalized relational processes capable of activating in both internal and external company actors a managerial sustainable orientation. The

engine of these processes has been the profound sensitivity Gucci has always held for the manufacturing excellence together with an increasing awareness that luxury fashion consumers are reconsidering their relations with brands. Since they are inspired by more authentic and, thus, realistic consumption ideologies, they tend to judge luxury brands combining their intrinsic quality with their involvement in actions related to social and, more in general, environmental issues. In Gucci, sustainable actions were preceded by formal acts endorsing sustainable corporate ethics aimed at searching for the highest level synthesis of brand quality through natural and human resources protection and preservation. Gucci's conversion to sustainability can be traced back to 2004, when the company initiated a process of certification in the corporate social responsibility (SA 8000). This certification regards leather goods, jewellery, footwear and clothing supply chains, and stands for values such as business ethics, respect for human rights, and workers' health and safety. The process, certified in 2007, was only the first stage in Gucci's quest for sustainability. Another important step was the special formal agreement signed in 2013 with the Ministry of the Environment and Protection of Land and Sea to set off a process of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions along the manufacturing supply chain. This agreement concerns the assessment of the environmental impact in terms of "eco-costs" to verify whether production is certifiable as sustainable according to specific international standards. The quality-based brand value pursued through a sustainable attitude leads Gucci to make the underlying socio-environmental sentiment a unifying feature of the company: once shared, it can bestow a deeper meaning on the achievements of both employees and economic actors that have built consolidated business relations with the company. As bearers of distinctive technical skills, employees and manufacturing partners are seen by Gucci as a community of workers fostering a real heritage to be preserved over time. The need not to lose it motivated the company to sign, in 2009, an agreement with business associations (Association of Industries and Local Craftsmen Confederation) of Florence (Tuscany) to ensure a formalized exclusive relation with the company partners. Many of them are located near Florence where Gucci has also its headquarters. Thus, Gucci has created the conditions to count on the local partners' expertise, which lies not only in their craft skills, but also in the ability to convert them into sustainable production practices that are internationally recognized. By means of flexible and specialized human resources, it can expand its sustainable experiences to foster processes of product innovation based on the use of new manufacturing technologies. Environmental projects have served Gucci to be creatively more inspired and filter brand values making them more credible and, in certain sense, more pure. Instances attracting market attention are the new packages (100 % recyclable paper) designed in 2010 to limit the use of material and produced exclusively according to FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) guidelines, and more recently, the completely (100 %) traceable handbag collection realized in partnership with the well-known eco-fashion advocates Livia Firth. Sustainable innovations also involve the manufacture of glasses. In 2011, in fact, Gucci realized in partnership with Safino eyewear models using an innovative acetate, which, compared to the traditional ones used for optical frames, contains a much higher



percentage of material of natural origin. Consumers seem to appreciate especially the sunglasses Gucci has made from liquid wood, a biodegradable, eco-friendly material alternative to the plastic normally used in the production of eyewear. Liquid wood is composed of bio-based materials: wood fibre from sustainably managed forests and lining from the paper manufacturing process and natural wax. Innovation, driven by the quest for sustainability, also led the company, in 2012, to make a special edition of eco-friendly women's ballerina flats and men's sneakers. The former are made of bio-plastic, while the latter combine bio-rubber soles, biologically certified laces, and a top in genuine vegetable-tanned black calfskin. Gucci's sustainable orientation finds strategic coherence in the strategies implemented by its membership group that is the Kering Group. This latter in fact pursues corporate social responsibility in the luxury sector. In particular, it intends to eliminate hazardous chemicals from its production by 2020. Its action plan focuses on the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, waste and water, sourcing of raw materials, hazardous chemicals, and paper and packaging. The formalized and collective-based sustainability orientation Gucci has developed seems to have contributed to increasing its economic results. Gucci is now a multinational company with revenue of over 3.1 billion Euros, more than 8000 direct employees and over 370 directly operated stores around the world. One of its most widely recognized expression of social and environmental initiative concerns the creation of the world's first bag certification as zero deforestation from Amazon leather. It has involved natural communities of local workers as guardians of rare resources. Its production took two years. This is the time to bring the bag from concept to creation. The Gucci Environmental Responsibility Manager, Rossella Ravagli, and her specialized team lived on a ranch in Brazil to experiment with local communities how they could raise cattle without chopping down a single tree. This experimentation is seen as a way to reduce an environmental issue whose impact is both local and global. Brazil has the largest commercial herd of cattle in the world, and grazing land for cattle in the Amazon is now the driving factor behind 75 % of tropical deforestation. It is not just a question of the damage and decimation of plant life; deforestation is also one of the major causes of climate change, as it contributes to approximately 20 % of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. The leather Gucci uses to produce bags is sourced from Fazendas Sao Marcelo, Ltd, a group of four ranches located in the Mato Grosso state in Western Brazil. The ranches cover a total area of 79,000 acres (32,000 ha) including a reserve of 32,000 acres (13,000 ha) in the Amazon. All these ranches have earned the Rainforest Alliance Certified seal of approval. This means that they curb deforestation, protect wildlife habitats, provide ethical treatment to livestock, and promote the rights and well-being of ranch workers. This shows that environmental sustainability and social sustainability converge in the labour of a natural community: its inhabitants contribute to the protection of the environment where they live, at the same time improving their quality of life. What Gucci's former creative director, Frida Giannini, has to say in this regard is emblematic: "At Gucci we would like not just to be synonymous with made-in, but also made-with-integrity. In this way, we try to meet the green criteria without compromising Gucci's reputation for luxury"

(<http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/article/TMG9902615/Eco-fashion-Why-green-is-the-new-black-for-Gucci.html>—accessed, 12 February 2015). The Amazon community is an example. Here, Gucci tries to create community integrity through environmental and social conservation. Thus, Gucci brand could enrich its expression of exclusivity through sustainable experiences based on local integration. By doing this, the company contributes also to preserving all the traditions and cultures related to natural communities. In sum, Gucci stands as a company that has been able to formalize through the definition of common rules a sustainable orientation, contaminating both those who work in and those who work with the company. It succeeded in this company despite the fact that it is a multinational and, as such, subject to continual financial pressures, which, at times, inhibit effective, ethically responsible behaviours, and, as a result, the ability to listen to emerging market segments as pioneers of new needs. Experts recently ask, however, whether the increasingly aggressive competition and the company's recent organizational overhaul (with the exit of the creative director) will affect the sustainable path that Gucci has embarked upon. A formalized sustainability can perhaps be interpreted as a first step in a sustainable process that must be continually fuelled and renewed, while maintaining a balance between differentiating sustainable values and the continuum of brand values. This is the challenge that today characterizes many sustainable luxury multinationals. Sustainable luxury is increasingly becoming a source of competition between companies, so it may well take on new features in the near future. Regardless of the changes, it is desirable that it retains over time a core of authenticity without turning into mere trimmings of a brand appearance. Otherwise, it could lose its ethical purpose and, thus, its underlying *raison d'être*.

### ***3.3 Zegna Group: Sustainability as a Connecting Link Between Businesses***

The Zegna Group is a family company, established 1910 in Trivero, in the Biella Alps (region of Piedmont). Its founder's objective was to create the world's finest innovative fabric, sourcing the noblest and the rarest fibres directly from their markets of origin. He seems to have been successful in this plan. Zegna fabrics are, in fact, recognized as among Italy's most prestigious. The intent to employ these materials in independently designed collections has led the company, since the 1980s, to pursue a strategy of vertical integration. Managed by the fourth family generation, Zegna is today a global luxury brand, which includes fabric, clothing, and accessories production. The internationalization process it has triggered involves both production and distribution. Zegna has opened production subsidiaries in countries such as Spain and Mexico, and following the inauguration of the first flagship stores in Paris and Milan, it has invested in retailing and, well ahead of its competitors, has reached out to the emerging markets. In particular, it was the first international luxury brand to open a store in 1991 in Beijing and to make China

its principle market with over 70 directly owned stores. Overall, Zegna is present in over 80 countries with 555 stores, 311 of which managed directly. The need to acquire new skills in business areas, which it does not dominate, like leather goods, led the Group to purchase, in 2002, the brand Longhi, a clothing manufacturer of luxury leather, and to forge a joint venture with Salvatore Ferragamo (ZeFer), one of the international luxury brands best known for the production of footwear and bags. In its growth, the company has acquired new skills, but at the same time, it has undertaken social actions to retain and, thus, preserve the internally existing ones. A demonstration of this is the decision to invest in building collective complexes near the company headquarters where workers can decide to live by exploiting the workplace proximity. Besides, thanks to Zegna's economic efforts, since the early 1930s, employees, but also Trivero citizens, can make use of a library, a gym, a theatre, a public swimming pool, a medical centre, and a kindergarten. All these initiatives produce a sense of community, both within the company (among employees) and in the social fabric (among local citizens). Thus, Zegna strives to enter the collective imagination of the local communities it contributes to generate by building up with them relations that are trust-based. In particular, these relations once developed with employees can act as a kind of intangible barrier against the drain of internal competences, which are amalgamated and refined through continuous processes of productive experimentation. There follows a sense of social sustainability underpinned by taking positions on social issues involving citizens and workers. These latter are seen by Zegna Group as an irreplaceable source of differentiation; the more refined their skills, the rarer they become, and the greater the need to preserve them. The perceived value of the brand, in fact, seems to depend not only on the nobility of the raw material, but also on the expertise of the underlying human resources. In Zegna, social sustainability is combined with a marked environmental sustainability. In fact, as just described, the company acts to preserve the environment by making it a shared good that positively affects the collective quality of life. However, starting from the company's foundation, the environmental commitment has been profuse. In love with the beauty of nature and deeply attached to the land, its founder gave rise to an impressive project of environmental enhancement, creating a genuine natural park known as "Oasi Zegna". In this regard, Angelo Zegna, current Honorary Chairman of the Group, likes to point out that "my father was an environmentalist long before the term came into existence" ([http://www.zegnagroup.it/pdf/en/history\\_and\\_development.pdf](http://www.zegnagroup.it/pdf/en/history_and_development.pdf)—accessed 12 February 2015). The Oasi Zegna covers approximately 100 km<sup>2</sup> between Trivero and Valle Cervo, in the Biella Alps, and is the first Italian example of "environmental heritage". For every new born child of the Group employees, a new tree will be planted in the Oasi Zegna. This oasis is a natural site and a protected park that offers visitors an educational and emotional experience. It stands as a real, open-air "laboratory" for the new generations and is seen as an ideal place for families, children, and outdoor sports enthusiasts. Through the Oasi project, Zegna is trying to transform the protection of environmental uniqueness

into a source of economic aggregation. In fact, it has established a Tourism Consortium, which includes selected local actors, such as hoteliers and sports and cultural operators, in an effort to develop a structured tourism and recreation supply. Not merely a nature park to visit, but a genuine cultural tourist destination capable of accommodating a national and international audience who are sensitive to the values of environmental conservation and environment-friendly sporting activities. Thus, the distinctiveness Zegna seeks lies not only in human skills and in the raw material marking its fashion-based supply, but also in the combined tourist and environmental contents, which are specific to its leisure-based supply. Ultimately, it protects environmental singularities and turns them into a source of new business, that is sustainable tourism. All the activities Zegna has included in the Oasi's valorization plan, aimed at honing the skills involved and coordinating the different environmental attractions, are decided in partnership with local institutions and associations. Thus, as promoter of local territorial development, Zegna can manage the Oasi boasting also an institutional legitimation.

The sustainable behaviours involving Zegna's core business translate into products resulting from manufacturing processes that respect the European environmental standards as well as from resources that, as they are in risk of extinction, are socially protected. The production of knitwear yarn, for example, is assigned to a specialized staff that carries out environmental tests to optimize energy and water consumption. Further, specific collections are created using the noble vicuña fibre, to which Zegna has access as member of the International Vicuña Consortium. This role is due to collaborative relations Zegna has developed with the Peruvian government to implement a project designed to create a water system capable of supplying the local communities of vicuña breeders. To the extent to which these local breeders protect their livestock from poachers, they are entitled to the proceeds from the sale of the shearing going to the companies, like Zegna, that contribute to the safeguarding of their environment. In terms of sustainable behaviours, Zegna also realizes products made from materials, which, if scattered in the environment, can become a source of pollution. Their value lies not in a preserved uniqueness but in recycling. The company, under the Zegna Sport label, has recently realized a short city jacket composed entirely of reprocessed plastic materials. Water bottles and soft drink bottles not used after their normal life are exploited in manufacturing processes. Zegna Sport has also produced a solar-powered jacket whose outer fabric, breathable membrane, seam taping, lining, and padding are all derived from recycled plastic. Zegna is a case of a family company, which has developed sustainable behaviours making the protected environment also as a source of new business. We are dealing with a model of combined environmental business: sustainability brings diverse businesses together and constitutes a connecting link. The ensuing relationship involves both giving and receiving: you protect the environment so that you can exploit economically what it yields. This also expands the confines of brand. Its association with more than one sustainable business increases its notoriety and underpins its ethical status. This behaviour is strategically interesting, but can conceal a risk: making sustainable behaviour mere instruments

rather than goals of a management philosophy. It is precisely the relationship between means and ends that luxury companies should call into question.

### **3.4 Brunello Cucinelli: Human Dignity as Engine of Sustainable Behaviours**

Brunello Cucinelli is a luxury company located in the centre of the country (Umbria) and specialized entirely in cashmere production. It was founded recently, in 1979, on a precise business concept: to exploit local manufacturing traditions and skills to work the noble cashmere from India, Mongolia, and China and to produce colourful, oversized pullovers for women. This idea distinguished Brunello Cucinelli from the traditional producers of cashmere, who focused mainly on the creation of men's collections in conventional colours. In addition to this, what especially marks the company is the development of a humanistic managerial approach. It adopts a way of organizing the social fabric, within the company, based on mutual respect. Its roots can be found in a unique and, in some ways, autobiographical managerial style. The owner, in fact, declared "I have always cultivated a dream: to make man's labour more human" (<http://www.fashionwelike.com/conversations/brunello-cucinelli-sustainable-luxury>—accessed 11 February 2015). Conditioned by the experience of his father, who went from being a happy, cheerful farmer to becoming a depressed, anonymous worker in a cement factory, he decided to develop a luxury fashion business that endorses human ethics and moral values. Selling luxury in Brunello Cucinelli was to be like selling respect for human dignity. This makes the company a distinctive social sustainability case if compared with the other explored luxury brands. In fact, its sustainability, rather than social, can be more precisely defined as *human*; this is because it aims to improve and maintain over time the human self-respect of a local community which embraces not only employees, but also all those economic actors (first and foremost suppliers and consumers) that interact with the company. One of the consequences was the decision to grant employees a monthly salary 20 % higher than the rate set out in the national labour contracts. There is no doubt that this choice, when it was taken, was countercurrent: Brunello Cucinelli preferred to satisfy economically his employees, and extol their skills, rather than outsource production and take advantage of foreign labour, less expensive but not specialized. However, the motivation of this choice is also due to the increasing perceived value of the brand and thus to the related *premium price* recognized by consumers. In addition to compensation policies, the human-based sustainability of Brunello Cucinelli has oriented other collective decisions. First, the creation of a protected labour environment is far from industrialized society. The company is located, in fact, in the medieval village of Solomeo in the Umbrian countryside (near Perugia), which includes a fourteenth-century castle, medieval houses, and farmhouses rich in spiritualism and mystique, where employees can work and live. Then, the building

in the same village of recreational spaces such as a restaurant, open for employees every day, and of a Theatre and an Arts Forum, whose events and performances are available also for local residents. Finally, the definition of management rules, rigorous yet tolerant, that foster homogenous behaviours within the company. For example, the employees are not required to punch a card when they enter and are free from constraints of a hierarchical nature, since there is no clear distinction between management and non-management areas.

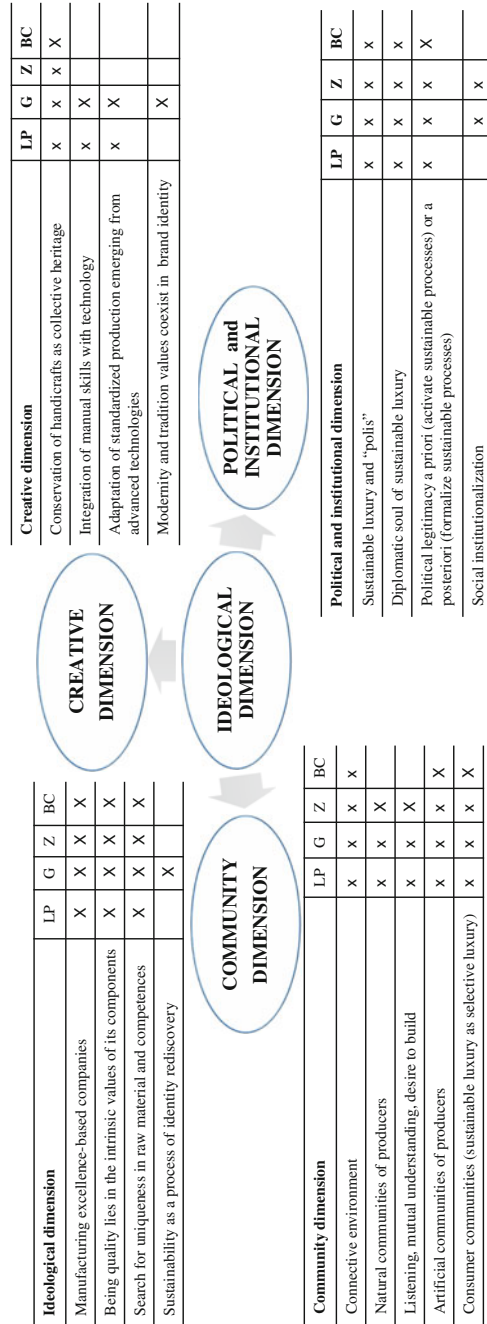
It follows that in Brunello Cucinelli, a human-based sustainability can pass through an environmental sustainability. In other words, it results in actions benefiting employees that are direct (e.g. higher salaries) and indirect. The indirect ones translate into a recovery and a conservation of natural environments. More specifically, a climate of mutual respect is realized preserving the natural environment and then making it a shared resource. The effects are positive. The company life that takes place in a collective natural space if managed through internal rules can contribute to generating a motivated and cohesive employee community. The feeling of unity is also increased by a convivial entrepreneurial behaviour. The owner, in fact, likes to state: “I often meet with the employees to talk about how the company is doing, the profits, my ideas, the stores we are opening. I share everything with them” (<http://www.enablingideas.com/how-did-they-do-it/2012/04/brunello-cucinelli-its-not-about-me-as-a-brand-its-about-humanity/>—accessed 11 February 2015). The sense of sharing and of listening Brunello Cucinelli develops, and finds its root in his life experience and in his passion for philosophy. His inspiring and favourite philosophers are Socrates, Plato, Seneca, Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, and Marcus Aurelius, the second-century Roman emperor. They help him to think in depth without being overwhelmed by instinctive actions that can turn out to be an end in themselves. They inspire him in developing a human-based sustainability that seems to find its complementation in environmental sustainability. Their combination allows the company to foster actions that positively affect a broader context that is society. Thus, the collective involvement it produces extends beyond an internal community and underlies a company search for a social legitimization of its actions. Proof of this is the so-called projects for beauty the company is involved in. It has supported and financed parks in Salomeo, the Laic Oratory Park, and the Agricultural Park. The first is equipped with a stadium without barriers where young people can train and play in natural surroundings. The second consists of 70 ha dedicated to vegetable gardens, orchards, olive groves, and corn, which will supply the company canteen and the local population. Thus, Brunello Cucinelli has gained an inimitable strategic advantage based on human management as driver of an environmentally and socially oriented business model. Similar to what has occurred for other fashion companies, its sustainable behaviours seek social, but also political legitimacy through the development of relations with government organs. Recently, for example, Brunello Cucinelli has expressed its willingness to assess carefully the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in its supply chain with the aim of bringing them down in line with international norms and standards. The company has formalized this commitment in an agreement signed with the Italian Ministry of Agriculture. The results of this behaviour are positive. From a single store in Porto

Cervo, a resort town in Sardinia (an autonomous region of Italy), the company has grown to 60 stores in five continents and 1000 points of sale, if non-company operated stores are included. The company achieved an outstanding revenue growth of sales, which in 2014 reached the level of 355.8 million Euro. Currently, Cucinelli sells 70 % of its coloured sweaters abroad, in 59 single-brand boutiques and 1000 multi-brand shops. The principle markets are North America and Europe. The company's products are made in Umbria; the workforce consists of 700 employees and a network of micro-companies employing about 2300 individuals. The case of Brunello Cucinelli stands out as a particular approach to sustainable luxury that consumers recognize although it has not yet led to the company's inclusion in the main relevant international sustainability rankings. Unlike the other brands explored in this chapter, Brunello Cucinelli sustainable approach is the result of a shorter company history, begun, however, with a specific aim: that of preserving a social community based on human dignity. Now, despite this differentiating approach, we question—together with some consumers—the possibility of its conservation over time. The question is meaningful for a variety of reasons. First, the humanistic approach once it has been filtered by an environmental sustainability has given rise to actions (“projects for beauty”, Ministry agreements) capable of generating a brand echo both in social and political contexts. But it has also recently favoured an effective approach of the owner to institutional circles as supporter of political actors. This choice could appear to reflect an opportunistic behaviour, which, if real, would undermine the credibility of the human approach as it has been conceptualized. Moreover, Brunello Cucinelli's is an owner-based approach. Thus, as such, it could not be simple to transfer and maintain it independently of its founder. Indeed, it would require exploiting the managerial heritage and carrying it over to new entrepreneurial generations through a process of *entrepreneurial sustainability*. This process is what is lacking today in many medium-sized Italian companies that are struggling to preserve and foster the core of a business philosophy generated by the visionary perspective of their founders.

#### 4 The Emerging Structure of Sustainable Luxury

Social sustainability and environmental sustainability are intertwined in the cases investigated thus far. It may occur that social sustainability passes through the environmental: social rights can be preserved making the environment a collective good. In Brunello Cucinelli, the human sustainability approach pursues the protection of personal dignity, giving rise to a more circumscribed interpretation of social sustainability, which also in this case is pursued in part through the sharing of reclaimed and subsequently protected natural environments.

At this point, we can attempt to abstract from the cases the dimensions of sustainable luxury. One of these is the ideological one (Fig. 1). First of all, an indispensable prerequisite for making luxury sustainable is a deep-rooted *ideology of manufacturing excellence*. Its promoter is usually the company founder. This



**Fig. 1** The dimensions of sustainable luxury from cases analysis (Source Our results from secondary data collection)



ideology underlies sustainable luxury and is common to Loro Piana, Gucci, Zegna, and Brunello Cucinelli. It fuels the quest for *uniqueness in using raw materials and competences* that are scarce and that become accessible to those who, ultimately, are able to preserve them. In particular, the competences assume a sacred value for the company; in Brunello Cucinelli, for example, their safeguarding may imply managerial approaches geared to protecting even the innate right they conceal, that is human dignity. In all the cases explored, the ontology of quality and, thus, being quality is fostered by the *intrinsic value* of what contributes to its composition: the searched for rarity incorporates distinctive qualitative contents that make it superlative and almost universal. The search for quality in rarity activates a natural process of preserving social and environmental resources. Thus, sustainability takes its place in a company ideology, becomes an expression of it, and promotes a tangible-adaptive metamorphosis: in sustainable products, excellence materializes in renewed products that are the result of a productive experimentation. In Gucci, being sustainable becomes a condition that triggers processes of *identity rediscovery* by intensifying or reviving the desire to innovate and to radicalize the sources of a pursued differentiation. The resulting renewal affects not only those who pursue it, but also those with whom they interact. This is because excellence sought through sustainability lays down requirements and productive rules company employees have to respect together with the actors of the supply chain involved. In this way, a *sustainable culture*, which starts out *individual*, becomes *collective*. We are witnessing an ongoing process of contamination whose engine is a shared respect for socio-environmental issues and an underlying sense of rigour and perfection. What is produced can gain value and thereby a sense that exists regardless of the brand awareness; however, to the extent that the “meaning-value” of the product combines with that of the brand, sustainable production and the relative brand develop an interpenetrating dialogue in which each strengthens the other. All this is plausible in the case of sustainable behaviours that are genuine. If they are genuine, they do not conceal a fictitious identity but are rather a true expression of a coherent and rigorous brand ethic rooted in an authentic business identity. Sustainability can thus be seen in this case as a stage in the pilgrimage the company undertakes towards the discovery and the emergence of its true self.

The ideological dimension precedes and is a prerequisite of the other dimensions. One of these is the *community dimension* (Fig. 1). Sustainable luxury appears as a *connective environment*, where needs, values, and cultures are collectively shared. In fact, Gucci, but especially Loro Piana and Zegna, interacts with communities, varied in nature but all custodians of unique resources. These communities need to be discovered, reassembled, and managed. Their members are *producers* of natural resources located in distant lands, pristine, detached from the hustle and bustle of the modern world. They are often breeders attached to their lands and proud of them. The role they assume is that of irreplaceable partners for the companies investigated. Loro Piana, Gucci, and Zegna transfer them the traditional sustainable breeding techniques or contribute to the preservation of local

ecosystems and the underlying traditions, obtaining in return prestigious primary resources. This interchange requires *listening*, *mutual understanding*, and the *desire to build something together*, despite geographic and cultural distances. The sought-for uniqueness is also a cultural discovery. In fact, it is created in unimaginable places, where feeling counts more than action and where history and traditional ritual customs animate collective realities by transforming them into nuclei that are stable and resistant to the forces of modernity. These nuclei, once internally organized, interface with *artificial communities*, created according to a voluntaristic logic based on predefined requisites. These communities join Loro Piana, Gucci, Zegna, and Brunello Cucinelli and consist of internal employees and of specialized suppliers—holders of special competences. Like the natural ones, they have something in common: they share the same sustainable project. The production of sustainable luxury takes shape, then, within community environments and not outside of them. The same is the characteristic of sustainable *consumption* as it emerges from the four cases explored. It, too, seems to manifest itself within predefined boundaries. Its actuators are not dispersed, but united by the same creed: contributing to the preservation of the earth and its peoples. In this sense, they form *communities*, which are visible and therefore identifiable in the heterogeneity of markets. Thus, the identity of a sustainable brand may strengthen its perception in the consumer's mind, if it is able to transfer that sense of collectivism underlying its ethical values. The sustainable brand thrives on deep, shared convictions that act as factors contributing to social aggregation. The luxury that characterizes it, precisely because it is authentic, seems to address those who recognize and understand it. It is, therefore, a selective luxury.

Sustainable luxury requires *manual skills* combined with *technology*. It is just this combination that fosters the creative dimension of sustainable luxury (Fig. 1). All the four cases explored show that sustainable luxury does not take shape without the appropriate craftsmanship. This latter is an inalienable resource on which the value added of the final product depends. The *ductility*, the plastic capacity, and the experience incorporated by craftsmen promote processes of experimentation and, with these, the *adaptation of raw materials* that are natural, never transformed, and processed, to the company's creative projects. Those who possess these skills contribute to giving shape to what the environment offers, breathing life into innovative products in which naturalness, expertise, and style interact in harmony and reinforce each other. However, *manual skills* alone cannot guarantee full meaning. As it derives from Loro Piana and Gucci cases, their achievements are in fact ensured by a continuous dialogue with what appears to be their opposite, that is technology. Yet in sustainable luxury, even opposites seem to find some form of integration. An advanced *technology* allows artisans to express the full potential of their manual flexibility. It materializes all the distinctive qualities of the processed raw materials, transforming them into standardized semi-finished products that are then easily malleable in different models of finished products. Sustainable productions are ultimately individual works of art, the result

of handicrafts that the company tries jealously to maintain over time. It preserves them not alone, but together with what composes and fuels them. Behind these productions, in fact, there is a history, and generations of craftsmen who have preserved, renewed, and transferred their knowledge, thereby creating an inimitable collective heritage. This heritage must not be lost. It should be exploited and developed with every available means. It follows that a competitive force of Loro Piana and Gucci lies in the integration of manual skills and technology. A brand that dialogues with sustainability should become an expression of this *integration* fusing in its identity the *values of tradition* with those of *modernity*. All this particularly marks Gucci brand. The sustainable brand, then, is the offspring of a modernity, which does not deny but rather is composed of a past, which strives to become eternally present.

Sustainable luxury includes, finally, a *political and institutional dimension* (Fig. 1). Thus, it embeds a propensity towards the “*polis*”, that is towards the acquisition of a space in the governmental decisions of a country. Especially in Loro Piana, Gucci, and Zegna in fact, we are witnessing a search for legitimacy on the part of local institutions. This legitimacy can act *a priori* or *a posteriori*. In other words, it can activate a company’s sustainable processes or it can formalize their actual existence. The form used consists of agreements signed with local and foreign institutions, such as governments, ministries, and business associations that pursue a socio-environmentally based country ethic. Sustainable luxury has, then, a *diplomatic soul* and even thrives on *formalism* and *acts* that enshrine its existence socially. The recognition of consumers, employees, and suppliers seems not to be enough. Sustainable luxury, in fact, assumes full semblance if integrated in social policies pursuing the collective well-being. Thus, it expands the communities with which it interacts and of which it is the guardian; it becomes visible in a wider, but heterogeneous community, in that of the citizens. Thus, the dialogue between brand values and sustainable luxury may become more symbiotic and interpenetrating to the extent to which it passes through a process of, one could say, *social institutionalization*: the ethical identity of a brand and its sustainability-based actions acquire an intrinsic coherence once they become formally a collective knowledge. This process particularly joins Gucci and Zegna. The social brand value is then reinforced by the political brand value. It is an emerging relation, but potentially also critical. The process of institutionalization, if instrumental to a recognition stabilizing the social brand value or to the activation of cooperative interpersonal exchanges, can create stagnation and disillusionment. If the market, and therefore consumers, became aware of an underlying false truth, they would consider the dialogue between brand values and ethics a mere illusion, and perhaps even a sort of deception. This would contribute to the destruction of the ethical path that a brand has blazed over time. Nonetheless, all the sustainable luxury dimensions investigated, once adequately combined, produce positive effects on brand performances.

## 5 Conclusions

The case analysis reveals the sources of an interpenetrating relation between luxury brands and sustainability. This relation implies a symbiotic alignment that the brand seeks between its values and the sustainable actions undertaken. The alignment requires a corporate ideology based on quality, excellence, and rigour. Moreover, it passes through a collective sharing within community contexts of the combination of brand values and sustainable projects. The resulting contamination increases mutual respect and collaboration. Then, the materialization of sustainable projects as synthesis of the brand ethics requires craftsmanship and, thus, the flexibility necessary to shape productions generated by progressive technologies. Finally, the dialogue a luxury brand develops with sustainable choices, while it may be legitimated by institutions through formal acts, must remain fluid, be free, and have an independent life; it has not to bureaucratize the underlying businesses processes that are largely inspired by rhythms, not only economic, but also natural. From the analysis of the dimensions of sustainable luxury, it emerges that not only scarcity and durability join luxury and sustainability, but also the distinguishing qualities of rigour, perfection, sharing, flexibility, and independence. Just as nature thrives on a nearly spontaneous rigour, luxury is the result of rules oriented towards the quest for excellence. The natural environment is an open and accessible environment; similarly, luxury is shared by those who want to recognize it and make it part of their existence. The natural world is flexible and manages to reorganize itself even in the wake of catastrophic events; in the same way, luxury comes to life if it is grounded in the manual flexibility of those who are capable of creating it. Finally, the environment is a free collective good; luxury can acquire independence as well, when it is transformed into a social myth, recognized by the broad community. However, despite this commonality, the balance between brand values, ideology, and actions behind a real sustainable luxury is rather difficult to maintain over time. Takeovers, company expansions, and new entrepreneurial generations can denature the pursued sustainable managerial approach. This risk marks all the different cases we have investigated. It follows that we may be suspicious of the genuineness of the sustainable behaviours companies adopt. While these behaviours are surely a priority for many luxury fashion companies, it is possible they hide a zero-sum game with the market. This means that what a company achieves by sustainable actions joined with its perceived brand value may appear much greater than what it has invested in carrying out those actions. Disproportionate gaps, especially in cases of high brand awareness, can reflect a mere economic exploitation of sustainable actions. There emerges, therefore, a twofold imbalance between environment and business: not only economic, but also ethical. Measuring this imbalance is important. This is because a revealed economic imbalance, if it is appropriately considered, could correct the underlying ethical imbalance. The company should reallocate the economic resources it dedicates to sustainable actions in relation to the impact these actions have produced on its brand performance. As a consequence, a declared sustainable responsibility can find its demonstration in an

incremental sustainable behaviour based on the achieved eco-performance. Evaluating the existing equality in the relation between luxury brand and the environment can constitute, in our view, a possible path for scientific research within the context of sustainable luxury brands. In the next phases of our research, we intend to follow this path. Fully aware of the limits of an exploratory study concentrated on emblematic cases, and exclusively Italian, we propose to refine our qualitative research to explore even more in detail the facets of the luxury brand dimensions identifying them in all their contents; then, we intend to carry out quantitative research to investigate the impact of each dimension on brand performance. The ultimate objective is to develop specific ratios capable of evaluating the compatibility between the brand performance and the sustainable actions undertaken. We think that if on the one hand, it is difficult to assess thoroughly how sustainable a company is; on the other hand, we can at least estimate to what extent its relationship with the environment is not inspired by temporary, opportunistic, and speculative aims. Understanding the “how” of a luxury company’s sustainability is, in our view, ultimately more important than bowing only to its declared and perceived “how much”.

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