

Ephemeral who? Evidence from the reconversion process implemented by Italian fashion companies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The paper provides insights over the response of the Italian fashion companies to the pandemic between their willingness to help the country to face the emergency and their necessity to keep the business afloat. In an exploratory ethos and by relying on qualitative inductive research, the study investigates 11 fashion companies by also engaging in extensive secondary data collection at the industry level. By reconciling several theoretical lenses (i.e., strategic management, grand challenges and organizational ecology) into a systemic conceptual framework, the paper uncovers the underlying dynamics of the reconversion process by also unpacking the relevant dimensions that were leveraged by the companies to respond to the pandemic. Through the concept of adaptive resilience, the findings highlight how the Italian fashion companies were able to cope with the pandemic, with the reconversion process being implemented at the crossroads between exploring opportunities of a new (albeit often temporary) business and the exploitation of existing key resources and capabilities.

KEYWORDS

adaptive resilience, COVID-19 pandemic, Italian fashion companies, reconversion process

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had severe repercussions from an economic and social point of view, having a detrimental effect for production, exports and supply chains for most industries. Within this context of unprecedented change, this paper analyses the process of adjustment adopted by a sample of Italian fashion companies in response to the pandemic. The process of adjustment is particularly significant because Italy has been the first country worldwide to experience a major outbreak after the COVID-19 spread from China in February 2020, and remarkably, there was no example that could be followed to face the economic and health crisis. Although the crisis has had undoubtedly a devastating impact on business and jobs, with the global industry's profits fallen by approximately 93%, it has also initiated or accelerated some organizational responses that might have ultimately led to some positive outcomes (Nathan, 2000).

In Italy, from the very outset of the pandemic, the fashion industry has found itself as the proud engine of a reconversion process. In particular, companies have started to mobilize their resources and capabilities to help the Italian government facing the emergency while at the same time by ensuring that their workers could earn a living by not shutting down their business. A wide range of actors spanning the entire fashion industry have been involved in the process: clothing and textile companies, companies specialized in the production of sportswear, online retailers, luxury players and a wide range of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) specialized in a vast variety of different fashion sectors—the response across the country has been remarkably cohesive. From the production of sportswear to the manufacturing of surgical masks and from the production of packaging to that of disposable gowns that these days, doctors from all over Italy are still wearing in hospitals, the Italian fashion industry has immediately reacted to the emergency by

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promptly converting its existing production lines to the production of protective equipment.

The COVID-19 crisis, indeed, has already resulted in a wide array of reconversion processes that involved shifting the production from ordinary products to those that were urgently needed to cope with the emergency and that entailed the production of testing kits, ventilators and personal protective equipment. Despite the widespread adoption of this strategy during wartimes to expand industrial capacities for making weapons (McLaughlin, 1943)¹ or even for making boots for the army (Belussi, 2009; Vecchi, 2008), the reconversion process based on such a horizontal diversification has been largely neglected from the range of organizational responses to grand challenges studied so far (Bapuji et al., 2020; George et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2021). This is rather surprising given that any reconversion process, which has led to the introduction of a new product, often implies some adaptation and requires substantial transformative capacity from the organization. A great deal of adaptation is required regardless that the process is spontaneous, market induced or, even more so, when it is externally driven by being forced by an exogenous shock as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic or a war. As such, the current pandemic underlines the importance of not only studying resilience (e.g., Magableh, 2021) to assess how organizations, industries and societies cope with shocks through anticipation (Fowler et al., 2007) and avoidance, but like in this case, it is also necessary to consider adjustment or adaptation (Williams et al., 2021). Yet existing research seems to be mostly focused on studying resilience more than adaptation (e.g., Choi et al., 2020; Magableh, 2021) by thus largely neglecting adaptation to investigate organizations' responses to the pandemic. This paper therefore seeks to address this unbalance by pursuing the question of how Italian fashion companies have managed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, how companies have adapted to this exogenous shock. The study seeks to frame and unbox the reconversion process based on horizontal product diversification that has been widely adopted by companies in order to provide granular insights over the distinctive dimensions that are relevant to this process.

In order to build a compelling exploratory analysis, firstly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were administered to 11 companies operating in the textile and fashion sectors. Secondly, extensive desk research was conducted on the overall response of the Italian fashion industry through secondary data to triangulate the main evidence from the interviews. Within this context, we found

patterns across cases that allowed us to draw important conclusions for the industry at large. From the coding analysis of our data, it emerges that four dimensions characterize the reconversion process implemented by the companies, namely, identifying the rationale of the reconversion process, seizing the opportunities out of the challenges faced, leveraging the key resources and capabilities and developing the resilience through adjustment. These dimensions were then discussed in the light of the theoretical lenses that informed our framework. In particular, we suggest a new category of organizational resilience termed *adaptive resilience*, which stemmed from the implementation of the reconversion process. *Adaptive resilience* has surfaced from the analysis as a capability in terms of adjustment of the fashion companies under investigation and that equally characterized the industry as a whole.

The study therefore makes a twofold contribution. First, by delivering a process model, the study provides a clear account of the reconversion process and its key dynamics. Despite being adopted in practice, no management research to date has considered both the rationale and the process underpinning the product reconversion. Second, by bridging different theoretical approaches, this study offers a systemic theoretical framework that has led to the notion of adaptive resilience. The findings highlight that this theoretical lens is apt to explain how organizations can cope with shocks through adjustment.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section briefly outlines the background and reviews the key theoretical approaches that have informed the conceptual framework, and then the methodology adopted by the research is presented, along with the discussion of the empirical findings. The paper finally outlines the theoretical contribution, the managerial implications stemming from the findings and their limitations and suggests directions for future research.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The COVID-19 pandemic and the reconversion process

There is substantial work seeking to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business. According to Nohria (2020), organizational preparedness is the key. Advantage in a crisis will go to those firms that can successfully leverage their capabilities and cooperate with other members of the community, including competitors, applying an open-source model to crisis response. However, it should be noted that according to Joly (2020), there is no obvious blueprint to follow in order to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the same principles of purposeful, human leadership that entails putting people and customers first and treating profit as an

¹As it is currently happening in the war in Ukraine when the Russian invasion began on 24 February, the Pravda brewery in Lviv decided to temporarily stop making beer. Instead of making beer, workers focused on making Molotov cocktails and metal road defences. The brewery later resumed the original production, with sales of its 'Victory Series' set to raise money for humanitarian efforts in the country (BBC News, 2022).

outcome rather than the goal should be applied. A very recent review conducted by Anker (2021) uncovers changes to underlying market circumstances that point towards radical shifts in the boundary conditions between business and society. Ritter and Pedersen (2020) and Seetharaman (2020) analyse the impact of the pandemic on business models. Mele et al. (2020) outline the process of servitization ensuing from it. Fairlie (2020) and Cowling et al. (2020) have documented the impact of COVID-19 on small businesses.

However, the majority of extant business research has mainly focused on supply chain disruptions. Choi et al. (2020) show, for example, that despite numerous supply chain upheavals inflicted by natural disasters in the last decade, most companies still found themselves unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Their response has been reactive and uncoordinated, and the impact of the crisis on them has been highly significant. In contrast, a small minority of companies that invested in mapping their supply networks before the pandemic emerged better prepared. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2020) find that firms are facing challenges in terms of demand–supply mismatch, technology and development of a resilient and sustainable supply chain. Furthermore, Singh et al. (2020) document the impact of COVID-19 on logistics systems and disruptions in food supply chain. By relying on a systematic analysis of the literature, Magableh (2021) examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on supply chains regarding its disruptions, challenges and trends. Within this stream of work, resilience has been studied across some themes, namely, business models, servitization, small businesses and supply chain disruptions. Conversely, this paper focuses on the product reconversion that has been recently widely adopted by companies² and documented in business history as adopted by several industries during wartimes. Although we acknowledge that the reconversion process can be assimilated to the process of horizontal diversification that has been identified by the pioneer work of Ansoff (1957), the reconversion process that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic has been surprisingly ignored by the management literature. In addition, less attention has been devoted to companies' process of adaptation to this exogenous shock. As a result of these lacunas, our understanding of the reconversion process—despite being adopted in practice—remains scant.

Grand challenges and the ensuing organizational responses

According to George et al. (2016), grand challenges require the coordinated and sustained effort from multiple and diverse stakeholders towards a clearly articulated

problem or goal. Solutions typically involve changes in individual and societal behaviours, changes to how actions are organized and implemented, and progress in technologies and tools to solve these problems. Thus, the tackling of grand challenges could be fundamentally characterized as an organizational problem. To this end, the authors separate the studies into two broad themes: (1) studies that provide management insights on how global problems can be tackled and (2) studies that identify mechanisms and contexts by which grand challenges affect organizations and institutions such as business environments. Within this taxonomy, given our focus on organizational adaptation or adjustment (Williams et al., 2021), our research falls into the latter category.

Within nowadays' business environment complexity and volatility and given the recursive nature of grand challenges (Clemente et al., 2017), it becomes of pivotal importance to fully understand the implications stemming from organizational responses. Organization scholars increasingly advocate for research that addresses grand challenges, highlighting that 'the fundamental principles underlying a grand challenge are the pursuit of bold ideas and the adoption of less conventional approaches to tackling large, unresolved problems' (Colquitt & George, 2011, p. 432). An environmental shock, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is an unanticipated and disruptive change in the firm's external environment (Meyer et al., 1990). It is severe and affects specific organizations (Brege & Brandes, 1993), industrial segments (Sheppard & Chowdhury, 2005) and entire economies (Singh & Yip, 2000).

How companies respond to such changes in their external environment has become an increasingly relevant matter (Grandori & Prencipe, 2008). Ecological theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1984) provides a helpful angle, arguing that organizations exhibit inertial tendencies, which can be attributed to four different internal constraints: political factions supportive of vested interests; organizational history that might prevent consideration of alternative strategies; investment in plant, equipment and specialized personnel; and limits on information received by decision-makers. Organizations that fail to respond to the changing environment, or respond in an inappropriate fashion, may be susceptible to failure (Klimas et al., 2021). A significant concept that has been proposed by this stream of literature is that of resilience (Santoro et al., 2020; Simosi et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Wan & Yiu, 2009) that, at a systemic level, has been defined as the 'capacity [...] to proactively adapt to and recover from disturbances that are perceived within the system to fall outside the range of normal and expected disturbance' (Boin et al., 2013, p. 9). According to Dentoni et al. (2021), resilience can be framed according to two dimensions: first, the amount of disturbance a system can absorb while remaining within the same balancing state and, second, the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, learning and adaptation.

²For a descriptive account of the reconversion process that took place in the packaging sector, see Remondino et al. (2020).

The field of ecology has focused mostly on the first dimension—the capacity to *absorb* disturbances of the system, measured in terms of the persistence of the relationships within a system (Holling, 1973). The second dimension of resilience within the so-called adaptive ecosystem management perspective (Berkes et al., 2003; Gunderson & Holling, 2002) has received considerably less attention. From this perspective, resilience can be observed as a capacity to *adapt* to disturbances (Norberg & Cumming, 2006; Smit & Wandel, 2006), as actors engage in a ‘recombination of evolved structures and processes’ in response to external changes (Folke, 2006, p. 259). This perspective suggests that organizations need to learn and change in anticipation of disturbances (Berkes et al., 2003; Kinzig et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the strategic management literature has emphasized that companies, when dealing with external shocks, must above all develop or activate dynamic capabilities with which they can adapt their resource base to the changes in the external environment (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Somsing & Belbaly, 2017; Teece et al., 1997). Accordingly, the dynamic capability approach allows to provide guidance on how managers can keep the business afloat when dealing with uncertainty and volatility, such as rapidly evolving market conditions (Lin & Wu, 2014). Within dynamic capabilities, ambidexterity plays a crucial role as highlighted in the literature on how companies adapt to discontinuous change (Birkinshaw et al., 2016) or embrace (incremental vs. radical) innovation (Mei, 2014; Russo & Vurro, 2010). Companies frequently attempt to gain a competitive advantage in their market through innovation that requires both exploration to tap new opportunities and exploitation to enhance existing capabilities. The ability to excel at these conflicting modes of innovation is termed organizational ambidexterity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the theoretical lens adopted by the study that seeks to reconcile several theoretical approaches (i.e., strategic management, grand challenges and organizational ecology) into a systemic conceptual framework. As depicted in Figure 1, for each of the theoretical approaches, we have summarized the main concepts; these are, namely—dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity; anticipation, avoidance and adjustment; and resilience and adaptation. Our framework stems from the intersection of these three theoretical approaches.

In the light of the theoretical lens just described, this paper endorses the view that the response of the Italian fashion industry to the COVID-19 pandemic is the ideal setting in which we can fruitfully gain valuable in-depth insights over the necessary dimensions that companies can leverage to turn a crisis into a viable opportunity as well as insights over the distinctive dynamics that have characterized the reconversion process as a form of adjustment for the Italian fashion industry. These rich

insights lend themselves to provide valuable lessons that, given the recursive nature of grand challenges, can be more broadly applied to other grand societal challenges that we might face again in the future.

DATA AND METHODS

Data collection

Given that the phenomenon was in progress while we were conducting this research, we performed an exploratory empirical investigation as ‘an exploratory study is a valuable means of finding out what is happening’ (Robson, 2002, p. 59), adopting a qualitative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This thick description allows an understanding of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic as a grand challenge and the idiosyncratic response of the Italian fashion companies at more than a superficial level (Ghauri, 2004). We therefore performed a study using different data sources.

In order to build a compelling exploratory case study, the data collection protocol was structured according to two main steps (Piekkari et al., 2009). The two-step process has been shown in Table 1. In the first step, we conducted extensive desk research on the overall response of the Italian fashion industry. Data collection involved the consultation of a vast array of secondary sources such as web articles (2), videos (4), newspaper clippings (17) and in-depth screening of the grey literature such as industry and consulting reports (5) as highlighted in Table A1. These secondary data collected were organized according

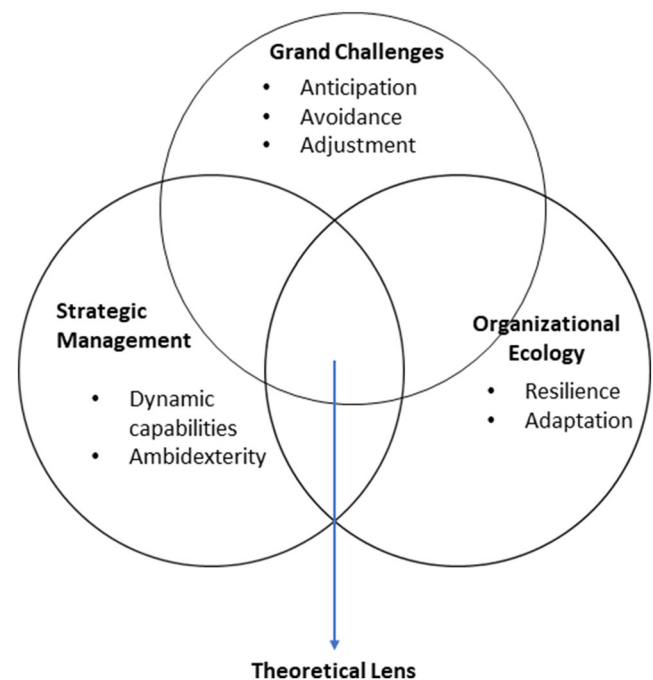


FIGURE 1 Systemic theoretical framework.

TABLE 1 Data sources and processing for each step.

Protocol steps	Collection	Processing
First step	Secondary data collection on 28 documents	Reconstruction of the ongoing evolution of the pandemic. Allowed us to gain contextual knowledge both about the key actors of the Italian fashion system and about the dynamics of the industry during the pandemic. Instrumental to identify a preliminary sample of potential companies (29 companies identified) Coding analysis of secondary data
Second step	Primary data collection on a sample of 11 companies	Coding analysis of primary data Process model development

to relevant topics. This step was necessary to gain contextual knowledge both about the key actors of the Italian fashion industry and about the dynamics of the industry during the pandemic and was instrumental to identify a preliminary sample of potential companies that were deemed as being interesting for a variety of reasons. To this end, secondary data about a wider set of companies (29) were collected, analysed and classified. The second step consisted in further narrowing down our preliminary sample of 29 companies down to 11. The companies were selected with a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1990), namely, a deliberate choice of companies that are information rich, as well as being available and willing to participate.

In particular, the companies selected are currently depicted in Table 2. The sample encompasses the textile and fashion sectors as well as various market segments.

The main data for the study came from in-depth interviews. To increase the comparability and the confidence of the findings, the research followed a semi-structured interview protocol where the interviewees (i.e., mainly CEOs, but also communication managers or production managers) were prompted to discuss specific themes related to how their companies have approached the pandemic, as well as the Italian fashion industry. The interviews took place online between early April and September 2020. Each interview approximately lasted for 40 min. In order to establish a good connection and allow participants to fully express themselves (Tsang, 1998), we conducted the interviews in their native language (Italian). The interviews were all digitally recorded and fully transcribed. These primary data were then triangulated and complemented by secondary data, (i.e., documental evidence) in the form of media reports and company documentation (as reported in Table 2). The interviewees were also prompted to provide additional material, such as financial reports, production books, brochures, other documents and occasionally directed us towards other interviews (in particular, five written and seven video interviews) that were publicly available on newspapers and the web.

Both secondary and primary data were then analysed in the same way (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) following a coding procedure, as outlined in the next section.

Data analysis

In analysing the data, a qualitative inductive approach was adopted where we allowed key findings to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A three-step coding process was implemented whereby first-order codes, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions were developed within a process of constant iteration between data and theory, until theoretical saturation was reached (Gioia et al., 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The materials were transcribed and analysed via *ATLAS.ti*, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The two authors, assisted by two knowledgeable researchers, independently coded the interview transcripts, and the secondary data were collected using in vivo codes to generate first-order codes. The relationships between first-order codes were scoured and grouped into smaller numbers of categories, that is, second-order themes. After further distilling the second-order themes into more abstract aggregate dimensions, we devised our data structure (Gioia et al., 2012). We met and discussed our codes at each stage of the coding (i.e., first-order, second-order and aggregate) and reconciled any disagreements through discussion. We found 15 second-order themes that clustered into the following four aggregate dimensions. These are, namely, identifying the rationale for the reconversion process, seizing the opportunities out of the challenges faced, leveraging the key resources and capabilities and developing resilience through adjustment. Table 3 depicts the data structure stemming from the coding process just described.

FINDINGS

The data structure in Table 3 shows a static representation stemming from the coding of both primary and secondary data. On the basis of the analysis, we outlined a model, depicted in Figure 2, in which we show the inter-relationship among these dimensions and the related concepts (i.e., the second-order themes). This model depicts the reconversion process implemented by the Italian fashion companies and also provides some insights over the overall process of adjustment implemented by the

TABLE 2 Sample of companies.

Company	Sector	Sources
CIFRA S.p.A.	Textile Sportswear Athleisure	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
DRoMe	Womenswear	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Miroglio Group (Miroglio Fashion and Miroglio Textile)	Womenswear Menswear Childrenswear Textile	2 interviews, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Klopman	Textile	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Les Copains	Womenswear	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Liu Jo	Womenswear Menswear Childrenswear	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Maison M s.r.l	Womenswear Menswear	Interview, company website, newspapers
Modaimpresa	Textile	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Monnalisa	Childrenswear	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website
Nastrificio Meridionale S.r.l.	Clothing accessories	Interview, company website, newspapers, documents
Zero & Co.	Childrenswear	Interview, company documents, websites, newspapers, company website

industry. Our analysis suggests that this process encompasses four main dimensions. These are explained in detail in the next sections. For each aggregate dimension, we then present the evidence by each second-order theme.

Identifying the rationale for the reconversion process

As depicted in Table 4, from the data, it emerges that the reconversion process stemmed from a trade-off between an economic necessity and the genuine desire to help the community. As stated by one of our informants, ‘... with

the lockdown we have ceased our normal production activity, like many others in the industry, especially the shortage of personal safety protection devices, in our community has prompted us to roll up our sleeves and help our way ... So, let’s say that the motivations that have guided us can be substantiated in the incentives allocated by the government, our attention and community spirit and wanting to help at the local level in a period of crisis, and above all to maintain a minimum level of production and sales. For business continuity, not to close, or at least not to send people home in this difficult period’.

Indeed, it started as being an economic necessity as during the national lockdown and because of the global economic setback, the reconversion process seemed a viable option to keep the company afloat. As stated by several informants, the companies started suffering from the financial point of view as their core business shrunk dramatically, as many of their supply chain partners had to shut down their activities. As a consequence, the staff within the companies lost motivation and were worried about their possible loss of income, the demand for future collections was at stake and the market scenario was highly uncertain. On the one hand, the reconversion process provided the opportunity to use the existing productive capacity in a different way by targeting the healthcare market and appeared as the best solution to prevent a possible financial upheaval; on the other hand, the production of surgical masks required basic skills and was highly accessible without implementing substantial changes in terms of raw materials, capabilities and assets. Furthermore, the production of surgical masks and other protective devices allowed a more efficient management of the cash flow due to the fast-paying nature of the new business (vis-à-vis the traditional fashion business). One informant clearly explained the financial advantage of entering this business—‘The most impactful aspect is the financial one, I’m honest. This is because in clothing we travel with a year and a half of the financial cycle. So from the day I invest to the day I collect, 12–13 months generally pass in a very long cycle in which the winter cycle then starts, in fact the companies in the fashion sector need a huge amount of cash. This of the masks is instead a fast-paying business because I deliver today and in the worst-case scenario you pay in 30 days, making us also impact financially in a much more positive way. Clearly the masks for us can represent at most 1/5 of the total turnover. The problem will be to recover what is missing from the rest’.

Noticeably, the national emergency took a crucial role in the motivation to undertake the reconversion process. During the pandemic, Italy suffered a shortage of protective devices, and fashion companies had the capacity to fulfil the pressing demand for surgical masks and hospital gowns. Furthermore, in many cases, the request for help came directly from the government or other institutions such as the local hospitals. To address this

TABLE 3 Data structure.

First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility to maintain a minimum level of production and sales • Business continuity: Forced to close the business in the absence of reconversion • Not to send people home in this difficult period • Carry out the few activities allowed • Try to generate a certain usefulness for us and the territory 	Trade-off between an economic necessity and the genuine desire to help	Identifying the rationale for the reconversion process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in keeping the core business open • Quickness in receiving revenues in the business of masks • Production resumed in the classic procedures with slight changes • Lack of serenity in the staff • Supplies temporarily stopped • Distribution channels and blocked customers 	Facing the economic necessity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolve national emergency • Response to market and institutional requests for masks and other protective devices • Help people to protect themselves 	Providing genuine help to the community	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of a strategy: Design a short-term path and implement and evaluate it progressively • Difficulty in understanding the national situation • Lack of regulation on the production of surgical masks • Changes in the new business dynamics (e.g., different schedule from the traditional fashion industry) • Involvement of the fashion designers for making a product that could turn out to be a fashionable accessory • Switching from textile/fashion product to sanitary product • Testing mental and organizational flexibility, to be brought into the core business 	Being proactive when coping with uncertainty	Seizing opportunities out of the challenges faced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the supply chain and new actors involved • Testing the relationships with partners along the supply chain • New relationships, to be retained in the future • Discover and create (new) dedicated sales channels • Shift from B2B to B2C 	From supply chain disruptions to partnering with new actors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Companies will do things differently: New skills, new routines • Review procedures to find new, hitherto unknown capabilities that can be used • Entering a new market: Different consumer needs and behaviours • Organizational changes: New way of working, smart working • Improving the familiarity with technology • A new approach to distribution • Enhanced individual and organizational flexibility 	Exploring new approaches when facing sudden market changes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to be recognized for small and medium-sized enterprises that have undergone a major conversion • Increased loyalty of employees to the company • Strong messages in communication with repercussions on brand reputation 	Improving brand image and loyalty	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a quality product based solely on internal resources and skills • Skills in the choice of materials • Ability of expert seamstresses • Design with your own technology • No additional investment, thanks to the presence of quality machinery • Simple conversion because of the absence of any other type of activity 	Exploiting synergies in the existing skill sets	Leveraging the key resources and capabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in machinery and specialized personnel 	Operations upgrading	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce the existing production chain • Skimming the business partners • Understanding the needs of the partners helps in times of difficulty • Create ways of communication with stakeholders 	Nurturing the potential of the supply chain through communication and sharing	

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue activities with new partners in the future Solid values such as honesty, integrity and dedication to customers that do not change after the crisis Company's credibility and reputation were crucial Value and culture of change present in the company: Importance of production and organizational flexibility in this circumstance Transferring values to partners: Being proactive and promoters of change Importance of adopting a smart approach 	Embracing values and a culture of change	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many companies will not be able to stay alive, whereas the strong ones will be even more Many stores will close, causing companies to lose a lot of credits The luxury sector will remain unaffected 	'The winner takes it all' ruling	Developing adaptive resilience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dogmas and rooted dynamics would change The pace of the industry (e.g., planning and release of seasonal collections) will change after this shock 	A possible change in the pace of the industry	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of virtual channels, innovative online systems and social channels Many consumers are moving to online shopping Development of proprietary software Coupling brick and mortar with online retail Website implementation and adoption of new software Digital leap 	Digital acceleration	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing demand for a quality product, return to Made in Italy Change in consumer tastes and habits, 'less is better' Problems for large mass clothing producers Small to medium players may have more opportunities Those who started buying online will continue to do so Focus on innovation in technology and sustainability 	The comeback of a more sustainable and strengthened fashion Made in Italy	

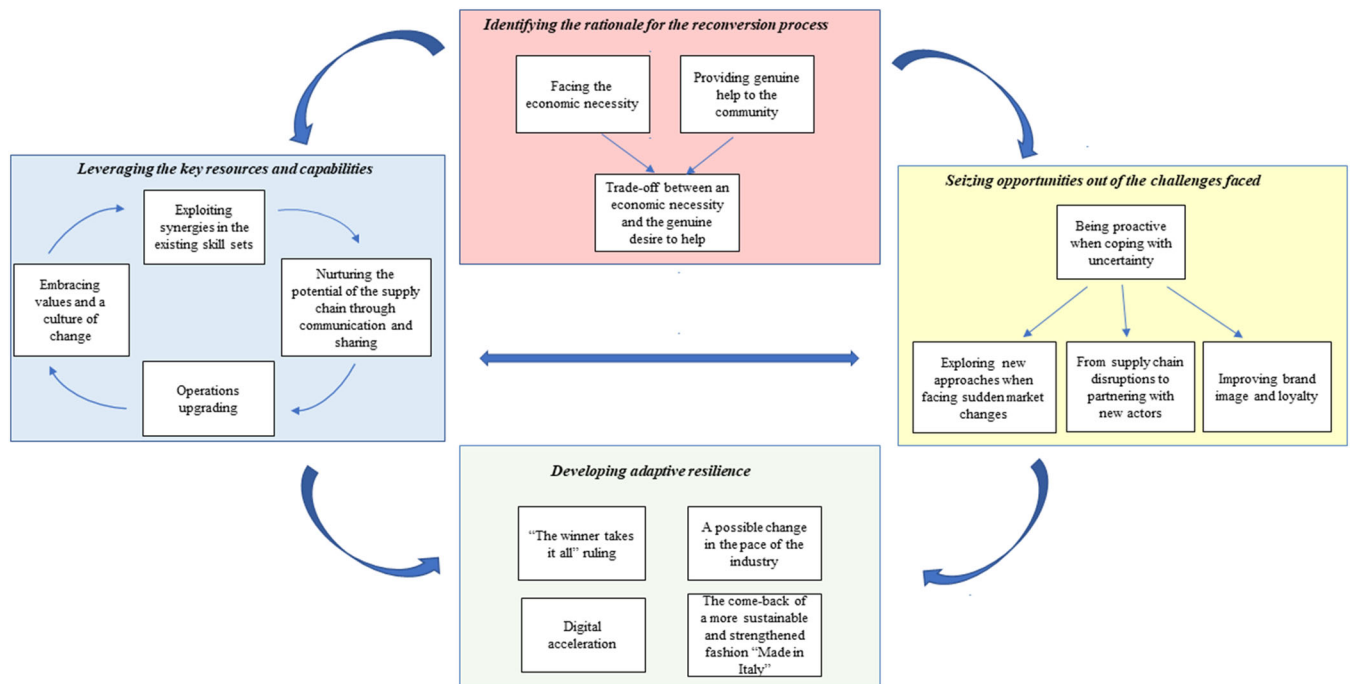


FIGURE 2 Process model of the reconversion process implemented by the Italian fashion system. Clear boxes represent second-order themes; shaded rectangles represent the aggregate dimensions of Table 3.

TABLE 4 Identifying the rationale for the reconversion process.

Second-order themes	Relevant quotes
Trade-off between an economic necessity and the genuine desire to help	<p>Our informant in Nastrificio Meridionale stated that ‘... with the lockdown we have ceased our normal production activity, like many others in the industry, especially the shortage of personal safety protection devices, in our community has prompted us to roll up our sleeves and help our way ... So, let’s say that the motivations that have guided us can be substantiated in the incentives allocated by the government, our attention and community spirit and wanting to help at the local level in a period of crisis, and above all to maintain a minimum level of production and sales. For business continuity, not to close, or at least not to send people home in this difficult period’.</p> <p>Our informant in Les Copains stated, ‘Our suppliers of raw materials, producers of fabric to be spun, of yarns and fabric already spun, or the external laboratories on the Italian territory that buy some processes, are like us at a standstill because we belong to unnecessary activities currently. We therefore tried to carry out the few activities allowed and speaking with the seamstresses who were in the department we wondered what we could and what we actually knew how to do in order to generate a certain usefulness for us and the territory’.</p> <p>Our informant in Miroglio stressed, ‘... the request for masks created by the COVID pandemic led us to a first production of reusable technical fabric masks, later we financed and set up a department for the production of printable disposable masks. In addition, another motivation was obviously the desire to help the country, and our sense of civil and social responsibility towards Italy and the community’.</p>
Facing the economic necessity	<p>Our informant in Modaimpresa stated that ‘For us it was a forced choice. For our business, that of fashion, the coronavirus hit us at the worst moment because we were in full order collection for the fall/winter 2020/2021 collection and in full delivery of the spring/summer 2020 blocking two cycles at the same time, while instead if it had been a month earlier or a month later he would have blocked only one period. This global crisis has blocked the company economically and legally’.</p> <p>Our informant in Modaimpresa clearly explained the financial advantage of entering this business: ‘The most impactful aspect is the financial one, I’m honest. This is because in clothing we travel with a year and a half of the financial cycle. So from the day I invest to the day I collect, 12–13 months generally pass in a very long cycle in which the winter cycle then starts, in fact the companies in the fashion sector need a huge amount of cash. This of the masks is instead a fast-paying business because I deliver today and in the worst-case scenario you pay in 30 days, making us also impact financially in a much more positive way. Clearly the masks for us can represent at most 1/5 of the total turnover. The problem will be to recover what is missing from the rest’.</p>
Providing genuine help to the community	<p>Our informant in DROME said, ‘our company was perhaps the first to equip itself with handcrafted self-made masks for its employees. From there, a series of requests were also quite pressing because many organizations did not have any protective devices and we asked our seamstresses if they felt like returning to work and we tried to fulfill these requests. We sent a clear message that ours was a contribution or charity to help people who needed it. A nurse who approaches a positive one if he does not have a protection system risks taking him out too. Precisely for this reason we wanted to put everyone in a position to defend themselves without distinguishing who could or could not pay’.</p>

Note: Data in bold are company names that are emphasized to show the plurality of sources in which the evidence relies on.

pressing need, companies decided to undertake the reconversion process. Our informant pointed out that ‘our company was perhaps the first to equip itself with handcrafted self-made masks for its employees. From there, a series of requests were also quite pressing because many organizations did not have any protective devices and we asked our seamstresses if they felt like returning to work and we tried to fulfill these requests. We sent a clear message that ours was a contribution or charity to help people who needed it. A nurse who approaches a positive one if he does not have a protection system risks taking him out too. Precisely for this reason we wanted to put everyone in a position to defend themselves without distinguishing who could or could not pay’.

Furthermore, the genuine desire to help the community was rather widespread and saw the active involvement of a wide range of actors ranging from some social enterprises as in the case of the social tailoring initiative of the Textile Museum of Chieri and of some penitentiary institutions (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16/03/2020; *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 23/03/2021b). Additionally, the reconversion process not only involved those companies whose core product was related to textile, but it was embraced also by the so-called ‘adjacent industries’ (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 24/03/2020). BC Boncar specialized in luxury packaging for luxury houses immediately began the production of masks for hospitals and public administrations (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 24/03/2020a).

TABLE 5 Seizing opportunities out of the challenges faced.

Second-order themes	Relevant quotes
Being proactive when coping with uncertainty	<p>Our informant in Miroglio stated, ‘As for the strategy, it was simply urgent to be able to start production, so we just started moving to succeed’.</p> <p>Our informant in Nastrificio Meridionale said, ‘The corporate vision and culture must be proactive and promoters of this mentality [allow rapid changes, relaunch]and transmit it to all operators to face the future which will be increasingly full of uncertainties. Especially if this Covid situation were to continue or in any case become a “normality”, which is not normal, we must adapt, and we must be prepared to do it better, this is how I think and what we have learned here at Nastrificio Meridionale’.</p> <p>Our informant in Les Copains said that ‘The difficulty of this situation, beyond the objective one, lies in the fact that the information and changes in the scenario have had and will be updated weekly. [...] Every week there was an informative gradualness that leads to update the business plan accordingly. Plus, we have the misfortune of being the COVID pilot country in the Western world ... So Italy is improvising. This doesn’t make planning easy. There was not actually a moment of meeting, because every time we gave each other an input the scenario changed, moving forward the quarantine leading to update all the possible strategic plans’.</p> <p>Our informant in Zero & Co. stated, ‘In this phase in which we are not sure of the future of production, both from the point of view of certifications and from the point of view of the market that will be created, we have not foreseen investments in industrial machinery’.</p>
From supply chain disruptions to partnering with new actors	<p>Our informant in Zero & Co. stated, ‘We have all been driven by the need to want to start again, to want to make ourselves useful and not lose the supply chain we have built over many years. So a sort of inner thrust was born, giving us to do together with our partners as we Italians have always been used to doing. From there then, considering the bureaucratic difficulties we encountered, there was a sort of selection between those who wanted to carry out this business in a very demanding way and perhaps take advantage of the need of the moment by creating speculation and those who, like us and other companies, instead wanted to trace a clear goal is to create a lasting business and above all made with solid foundations from all points of view’.</p> <p>Our informant in Modaimpresa claimed, ‘if I have well-rooted and defined logic for clothing, in this case I am taking the company to a completely different sector, starting to have relationships with distributors specialized in this sector and simply building what is the commercial network that I was missing ... So, slowly, past the moment of hysteria, now we are at the moment of rationality’.</p> <p>Our informant in Les Copains said, ‘In these moments you can really see who is a partner and who instead melts like snow in the sun also from a character point of view. It was an opportunity to make contact with customers and be more closely in touch with our suppliers’.</p>
Exploring new approaches when facing sudden market changes	<p>Our informant in Modaimpresa stated, ‘The purchasing dynamics were much more dictated by need and much more schizophrenic due to the madness and fear of not finding the product. The final consumer’s approach to purchasing was very insistent and very strong, the opposite of what happens normally in our world where we go around asking to propose and exhibit our products has happened’.</p> <p>Our informant in Maison M stated, ‘The “MAISON M DPI” project arises from the market needs to promptly deal with the production of protective medical devices, the demand for which has increased exponentially following the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19. The low production of these devices on the national territory, delocalized beyond national borders in recent years, is the origin of the problem ... The project therefore has as its objective the creation of a business unit capable of producing personal protective equipment. The introduction of new machinery, with a high content of innovation and automation, will quickly allow us to meet the huge demand generated in recent months’.</p> <p>Our informant in Zero & Co. said that ‘The third step will be to try to create a new business unit with the corporate network that has been created, considering that this emergency seems to be quite long and therefore our production capacity will probably be affected by a downsizing, because we expect clothing consumption to decrease for the near future and therefore we would like to keep our facilities alive with our staff by producing these products which are absolutely indispensable’.</p> <p>Our informant in Zero & Co. said, ‘In a tragic moment, in which the prospects are all black and nothing positive can be glimpsed, the company has questioned itself by reconverting parts of the activities and finding new sales channels. So, the whole group got involved in a new big project. Even at the level of corporate flexibility, we have always had this intrinsic quality, great flexibility and dynamism, otherwise we cannot survive in today’s competitive context. These innate abilities of ours have been enhanced’.</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Second-order themes	Relevant quotes
Improving brand image and loyalty	Our informant in DROME said, ‘without even thinking about it and looking for this news, he went around the press offices in Milan and New York where we also have a public relations office, ending up on very important sites and newspapers that have included us in a group of fashion brands that they have reconverted to help fight the coronavirus. This if we go to see it in communicative terms it was a very positive message because at the brand and company level we have been taken as an example and compared with what Gucci or Prada did’.

Note: Data in bold are company names that are emphasized to show the plurality of sources in which the evidence relies on.

For these companies, the motivations were strictly inherent to the national emergency, to help people to protect themselves and were moved by the genuine desire to help their community.

Seizing opportunities out of the challenges faced

As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic spread to Italy, due to the entry into force of the ‘Cura Italia’ decree on 17 March 2020, all nonessential businesses were forced to close down. However, the trade association for the fashion industry asked the government for an exemption for those textile and fashion companies that were already working on prototypes or had already started production of masks and other devices to deal with the emergency (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 18/03/2021). Within this context, the reconversion process took place through a day-by-day implementation—the lack of time to devise a dedicated strategy for the new products was a common denominator to all companies. Starting from the initial production of surgical masks, companies simply introduced this activity into their current strategy by adapting their business plan with the provision of protective devices. As highlighted in Table 5, companies did not engage in any long-term strategic planning; rather, they pursued a break-even logic according to the demand. This day-by-day implementation was mostly driven by a very proactive approach given the lack of a clear scenario in terms of both evolution of the pandemic and the evolving regulatory regime for producing such devices. Our informant stated that ‘The difficulty of this situation, beyond the objective one, lies in the fact that the information and changes in the scenario have had and will be updated weekly. [...] Every week there was an informative gradualness that leads to update the business plan accordingly. Plus, we have the misfortune of being the COVID pilot country in the Western world ... So Italy is improvising. This doesn’t make planning easy. There was not actually a moment of meeting, because every time we gave each other an input the scenario changed, moving forward the quarantine leading to update all the possible strategic plans’.

The reconversion process brought significant challenges that companies had to face by improvising. After China, Italy was one of the main countries affected by

the pandemic, and as a result, managers felt that they did not have any reference point or any example that they could follow. One challenge concerned the different underpinning logics of producing surgical masks and protective devices compared to fashion products, from the need to follow strict and rather uncertain regulations down to the new and specialized distribution activity. Companies switched to a product with different logics and schedules, which implied, in the first place, changes in the product design—where safety took the priority—disregarding other features that are usually considered during the design of a fashion product. Companies relied on their capabilities to design an entirely new product that albeit simpler vis-à-vis fashion garments, they had to cater for entirely new customer needs and product features that they were unfamiliar with. One informant pointed out that ‘if I have well-rooted and defined logic for clothing, in this case I am taking the company to a completely different sector, starting to have relationships with distributors specialized in this sector and simply building what is the commercial network that I was missing ... So, slowly, past the moment of hysteria, now we are at the moment of rationality’.

The pandemic has also significantly altered the dynamics of the existing supply chains. As the emergency tested the internal flexibility of the companies, it has also put under strain the capabilities and the flexibility of their existing supply chain; further, it also prevented collaboration with some of the existing international partners. This has forced companies to develop new relationships with local suppliers to engage with interesting partners that might be beneficial in the future also for the core business. Some relationships with established partners were interrupted because of their unavailability or inefficiency to follow the new decisions and needs of the company. Therefore, there was the necessity to establish partnerships with new actors. This point was emphasized by a key informant who stressed that ‘in these moments you can really see who is a partner and who instead melts like snow in the sun also from a character point of view. It was an opportunity to make contact with customers and be more closely in touch with our suppliers’.

Some companies started new partnerships with suppliers belonging to different sectors in order to be able to produce protective devices. Similarly, the distribution activity changed significantly. The distribution channels

for selling protective devices mostly required a B2C approach, while the companies used to be familiar with a B2B approach used for clothes or fabrics. Most of the companies changed their orientation, from a B2B market to a B2C market, whereas others needed to approach new business clients in order to distribute their products. E-commerce was adopted by almost every company and provided the opportunity to make a technological leap by also establishing a firmer grip on the final consumer.

Given the significant organizational challenges faced by the companies, the reconversion process provided valuable opportunities to explore new managerial approaches as the informants identified several positive spillovers to facing sudden market changes. These opportunities ranged from the possibility to gain experience in a new market that, for some companies, is more than a plan B because it may become an additional business unit in the healthcare market. They learnt new dynamics—from the product design down to its distribution—and internalized many new competences within the company's know-how and routines. These new capabilities were regarded as useful as they could further improve the quality of the core business, providing skills even if the reconversion process was just a temporary option. For the more traditional companies, the reconversion process provided the opportunity to innovate their internal processes and to familiarize with the technology by thus simplifying many of the existing procedures, starting from implementing more efficient remote work practices. As for the distribution activity, the shift from B2B market to B2C market provided the companies with valuable learning opportunities by acquiring new competences and relationships in the consumer market. The establishment of e-commerce, then, allowed companies to sustain both primary and temporary products by ultimately strengthening the brand image and generating useful capabilities for the future. This process provided the opportunity to find new capabilities to be employed more effectively within the company business. In this context, companies were prompted to show individual and organizational dynamism and flexibility. The informants wished proactivity and dynamism to be internalized within the organization and to be further exploited in the future. As highlighted by one of our informants, 'In a tragic moment, in which the prospects are all black and nothing positive can be glimpsed, the company has questioned itself by reconverting parts of the activities and finding new sales channels. So, the whole group got involved in a new big project. Even at the level of corporate flexibility, we have always had this intrinsic quality, great flexibility and dynamism, otherwise we cannot survive in today's competitive context. These innate abilities of ours have been enhanced'.

The reconversion process has benefited from a wide communication on the national and international press generating positive returns in terms of brand reputation, especially for SMEs. This has enhanced both the brand

image and brand awareness, which have been proved relevant to facilitate the rapid entrance into the new market and to reach new consumers. This process also improved the employees' loyalty to the company and strengthened the organizational identity. This was nicely put forward by one of our informants who said that 'without even thinking about it and looking for this news, he went around the press offices in Milan and New York where we also have a public relations office, ending up on very important sites and newspapers that have included us in a group of fashion brands that they have reconverted to help fight the coronavirus. This if we go to see it in communicative terms it was a very positive message because at the brand and company level we have been taken as an example and compared with what Gucci or Prada did'.

Leveraging the key resources and capabilities

In parallel with the analysis of challenges and opportunities related to the reconversion process, companies started leveraging critical resources and capabilities that were already deployed in their core business. Surgical masks were regarded as relatively simpler products from a technical point of view vis-a-vis fashion or textile products. Therefore, the new protective devices—both surgical masks and hospital gowns—mostly capitalized on the synergies with existing skill sets in selecting fabrics and on the competences and capabilities that manufacturing high-quality fashion products entails. These transferable skills were crucial in enabling the reconversion process. Our informant emphasized that 'the conversion itself was not difficult and did not require an investment, being a temporary business. We made masks as if they were trousers or shirts, making it at home and having all the tools to do it. [...] Being [the seamstresses] experts in making complicated workings, this process was not difficult. [...] We started making them with the fabric we had at home, intended for high fashion garments. If, on the other hand, I had decided to make it a side business then yes, I would have probably invested in buying machinery that would automate at least a part of the processing such as the part of the cut that is done by hand at this time. At the moment I consider the masks a temporary business, in the sense that when I am given the opportunity to restart with my business I will give priority to that'.

As highlighted in Table 6, informants emphasized the higher quality of their surgical masks compared to the disposable ones. High-cost machinery and the relevant know-how were essential to modify the operations promptly; further, the termination or temporary suspension of the core business activity was instrumental in focusing on the machinery conversion. Although some companies relied on or adapted the existing machinery, others decided to invest in new dedicated equipment by upgrading their operations. This difference reflects

TABLE 6 Leveraging the key resources and capabilities.

Second-order themes	Relevant quotes
Exploiting synergies in the existing skill sets	<p>Our informant in Zero & Co. said that ‘we found a lot of affinity between the production of masks and the original production. We have decided to make a temporary conversion of a part of the company, for the production of devices to be eventually resold to all those who need them for civil use’.</p> <p>Our informant in Les Copains emphasized that ‘the conversion itself was not difficult and did not require an investment, being a temporary business. We made masks as if they were trousers or shirts, making it at home and having all the tools to do it. [...] Being [the seamstresses] experts in making complicated workings, this process was not difficult. [...] We started making them with the fabric we had at home, intended for high fashion garments. If, on the other hand, I had decided to make it a side business then yes, I would have probably invested in buying machinery that would automate at least a part of the processing such as the part of the cut that is done by hand at this time. At the moment I consider the masks a temporary business, in the sense that when I am given the opportunity to restart with my business I will give priority to that’.</p>
Operations upgrading	<p>Our informant in Maison M stated that ‘Both the hiring of personnel assigned to the new Business Unit and the support, for some activities, of resources belonging to the Group, have been envisaged. It was also necessary for the more technical part of the organic implementation with specialized resources, for example mechanical skills, and the creation of new partnerships for specialized supplies. [...] A new production chain was created ad hoc, consisting of medical material suppliers and through the inclusion of highly technological and automated machinery’.</p>
Nurturing the potential of the supply chain through communication and sharing	<p>Our informant in Klopman said, ‘the supply chain has strengthened considering the relationships with our Italian and foreign customers. We understood what their needs were and they understood our problems. Italy was the first country to leave in this emergency, we are the largest European producers so we also have customers from all over Europe and all over the world who ask us where we are and if we have any problems. We opened a way of communication between us and our customers because they really wanted to understand what was happening in Italy. We started making weekly newsletters in which we explained the situation in Italy and the situation of Klopman towards the market also with our suppliers abroad, creating a very strong communication relationship that already existed, but which this time has strengthened because we had to talk to each other to help us work well together’.</p> <p>Our informant in DROME claimed, ‘I must say that as far as the credibility of the way of working is concerned, which has been consolidated for more than forty years, it meant a lot, therefore suppliers and all those with whom we spoke in the overwhelming majority have come to support us’.</p>
Embracing values and a culture of change	<p>Our informant in Nastrificio Meridionale stated in the interview that ‘... our core values, as you should have understood by now, are based on originality, territoriality and artisan quality, and now with this crisis and these changes that we have made by expanding our production and partially reconverting ourselves, I am also proud to say that organizational flexibility and attitude to change have become our core values’.</p> <p>Our informant in Liu Jo added, ‘We are already thinking about a policy that looks at two fundamental aspects which are product quality and eco-sustainability. These will be two issues on which we will aim to try to give a different cut to the image of the company, in terms of values, trying to be closer to the consumer and showing what the brand has been doing for some time. In fact [...] the possibility of thinking about these issues has been amplified’.</p>

Note: Data in bold are company names that are emphasized to show the plurality of sources in which the evidence relies on.

different companies’ approaches the new business, namely, whether the company was planning to retain the healthcare industry as a future market. One of our informants stated that ‘Both the hiring of personnel assigned to the new Business Unit and the support, for some activities, of resources belonging to the Group, have been envisaged. It was also necessary for the more technical part of the organic implementation with specialized resources, for example mechanical skills, and the creation of new partnerships for specialized supplies. [...] A new

production chain was created ad hoc, consisting of medical material suppliers and through the inclusion of highly technological and automated machinery’.

An important key factor that emerged consistently throughout the fieldwork was the potential of possessing a strong supply chain. As the pandemic brought a selective approach to partnerships, it was also crucial to strengthen the existing relationships. Companies stressed the importance of having found partners able to understand their new and specific needs and to build long-term

relationships with them. The crisis also helped to shorten and skim supply chain partners as it became strategically important to rely on new and local partners. More generally, keeping in touch and communicating regularly with stakeholders was essential in a moment in which it was impossible to perform the regular activities. Collaboration was also important for a wide range of stakeholders within the fashion industry. One of our informants claimed, 'I must say that as far as the credibility of the way of working is concerned, which has been consolidated for more than forty years, it meant a lot, therefore

suppliers and all those with whom we spoke in the overwhelming majority have come to support us'.

The initiative undertaken by the Rector of the University of Bari is emblematic of this trend. The University promptly started coordinating a working group of local companies interested in converting their production into the production of protective equipment (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 17/03/2020). These companies would normally produce clothing, diapers, sanitary napkins or footwear in the Puglia region. The creation of a 'Puglia model' was driven by the ambition that such a model of

TABLE 7 Developing adaptive resilience.

Second-order themes	Relevant quotes
'The winner takes it all' ruling	Our informant in DROME claimed, 'this is a year in which the effect the virus has had on people will also have on companies. Many companies will die and there will be a selection, those who were not well before the pandemic are unlikely to do better after. Assessment must be made sector by sector, many come out of this disaster. As for us, who are part of sportswear, considering the restart of production I expect a drop in turnover of 20/25% as well as my competitors'.
A possible change in the pace of the industry	Our informant in Les Copains said, 'The world of fashion is made up of dogmas and pillars that are difficult to unhinge. One of these pillars is the delivery time of the Autumn/Winter collection, that is delivered in July while the Spring/Summer collection in December. [...] Until a week ago I had Japanese customers who wanted their collection by July, but of course I cannot deliver it in time. This is to say that the situation will lead to an upheaval in the world of fashion and timing'. Our informant in DROME said, 'In my opinion we had reached an impossible situation in the world of fashion. The part of the big names always affects globally, so until recently, collections had been released in absurd times because they came out a year and a half earlier and delivered the Winter in May/June. To try to sell one thing before the others, when you know that the cold arrives in December; just as summer was put in the shop windows in December! There were three collections in advance, creating a huge amount of unsold products in stores. These are unrealistic situations and difficult to sustain for many companies. I hope this forced stop will lead to an "anarchy" and a revision of this system anyway'.
Digital acceleration	Our informant in DROME said, 'There will be immediate changes, in fact as early as July, 99% will organize themselves with more or less organized virtual sales. There will certainly be meetings via skype or other platforms to show the products, we tested this in early March. Innovative online systems will be created that make the negotiation of the order even more realistic and immediate. We are in fact making a system that will come into operation from the end of July with the release of the collection that will allow operators (agents, offices, customers) to connect to our platform where with a timed password and they will be able to make an appointment and will see on this platform exactly the whole collection, interacting with one of our operators who explains what they see, there will be articulated videos that will allow the potential customer to decide on the purchase. [...] starting from winter I hope that physical contact will return while maintaining this possibility, because today the clothing sector is so global that a customer in Shanghai has to do several laps in the fashion weeks and this wastes time and costs, while with this coronavirus-forced development on everything virtual selling will be good'. Our informant in Liu Jo said, 'Our sector, despite being quite obsolete, has undergone a major evolution in this period. Several of our customers are starting to appreciate the online store rather than just a physical one, keeping both possibilities so online can have an excellent response [...] in the sector awareness of the online world could grow which, as it is happening, could take the windward'.
The comeback of a more sustainable and strengthened fashion Made in Italy	Our informant in DROME said, 'The fact that corona virus originated in China has also somewhat discouraged the consumer towards certain products that come from there, so in my opinion part of production that represents true quality such as Made in Italy will be strengthened in the short and medium term. Then there will also be a slice of nationalism that will lead to buying a product Made in Italy rather than in other countries. The consumer will always turn to established and reliable Italian products'.

Note: Data in bold are company names that are emphasized to show the plurality of sources in which the evidence relies on.

collaboration—where the University and some affiliated technical labs would aid the reconversion transition—could soon become an example of good practice to create dedicated local supply chains to reduce supply distances and, consequently, people mobility to further prevent the spread of the pandemic.

Additionally, having strong core values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, passion, leadership and commitment towards customers was considered to be essential to maintain unaltered the company credibility. Credibility and reputation were deemed key factors in such an uncertain time as they helped keep the (new) business going and hold the supply chain together. Relatedly, a culture of change that permeated the organizations and that was infused to all stakeholders was a core value that drove the reconversion process. Flexibility, agility, proactivity and a collaborative ethos were all highly regarded. Having a flexible organization and a smart approach to production, and to work in general, was pivotal for implementing an effective and efficient reconversion process in a short time. This was nicely summarized by the following interviewee's statement: '... our core values, as you should have understood by now, are based on originality, territoriality and artisan quality, and now with this crisis and these changes that we have made by expanding our production and partially reconverting ourselves, I am also proud to say that organizational flexibility and attitude to change have become our core values'.

Developing adaptive resilience

The stages described so far pointed in the direction of pushing companies to adapt to new constraints to stay afloat by embracing change at all levels. This consistently emerged throughout our fieldwork, as outlined in Table 7. More precisely, according to the evidence, the direction of this change is threefold.

Firstly, the crisis seemed to amplify 'the winner takes it all' trend within the industry, according to which, after the crisis, the business would be even more polarized. According to the sources, the change in consumer behaviour—contracted demand and lower confidence—and the closing down of brick-and-mortar shops will inevitably accelerate the decline of struggling companies while reinforcing the dominant positions of others, such as the luxury conglomerates. Differently, many consolidated logics and dynamics in the industry, as well as the established dogmas that govern the business concerning the ever-fasting pace of the industry, especially related to the scheduling of the collections, would hopefully change due to this exogenous shock. As one of the interviewees said, 'In my opinion we had reached an impossible situation in the world of fashion. The part of the big names always affects globally, so until recently, collections had been released in absurd times because they came out a year and a half earlier and delivered the Winter in

May/June. To try to sell one thing before the others, when you know that the cold arrives in December; just as summer was put in the shop windows in December! There were three collections in advance, creating a huge amount of unsold products in stores. These are unrealistic situations and difficult to sustain for many companies. I hope this forced stop will lead to an "anarchy" and a revision of this system anyway'.

Secondly, innovation has become a strategic imperative for companies to survive and mostly concerns the possibility to offer alternatives to consumers and bringing them new value. Market-driven business models would be established by increasingly relying upon new technologies, ranging from 3D design to virtual sampling, virtual fashion shows and virtual fitting rooms. The pandemic has brought a technological leap for most of the companies by also introducing 'digital acceleration'. Particularly emblematic is the statement from one of the informants who said, 'Our sector, despite being quite obsolete, has undergone a major evolution in this period. Several of our customers are starting to appreciate the online store rather than just a physical one, keeping both possibilities so online can have an excellent response [...] in the sector awareness of the online world could grow which, as it is happening, could take the windward'. According to the informants, this change would hopefully create a level playing field, allowing small and local players to compete with the big players. However, informants believe that these changes will modify the industry only temporarily as the desire to 'touch' clothes and the fabrics is still there and will bring most consumers back to the physical stores at the end of the pandemic.

Finally, companies believe that engaging in a sustainable approach would regain consumers' trust via business models that embody resale, reuse, recycle and upcycle, despite consumers are expected to decrease their spending on apparel. Relatedly, the demand for high-quality products is expected to increase across all market segments. Due to the economic crisis brought by the pandemic, people have understood the importance of authentic 'Made in Italy' products, leading consumers to prefer slow fashion (i.e., high-quality handcrafted clothes) against the disposable consumption of fast-fashion products. Consumers will buy fewer garments with higher quality and invest in pieces that will last longer. Accordingly, informants wished that the big global fast-fashion retailers would lose some market shares in favour of SMEs as they are approximately the 90% of the companies in the Italian industry. In a similar vein, informants described a different scenario for the luxury segment, which they felt it would be left substantially unaffected by the pandemic. One interviewee said that 'The fact that corona virus originated in China has also somewhat discouraged the consumer towards certain products that come from there, so in my opinion part of production that represents true quality such as Made in Italy will be strengthened in the short and medium term. Then there

will also be a slice of nationalism that will lead to buying a product Made in Italy rather than in other countries. The consumer will always turn to established and reliable Italian products’.

DISCUSSION

From early March 2020, the Italian fashion industry was the first industry, not only in Italy but also globally, that undertook a sudden and unplanned extensive reconversion process to produce surgical masks and protective devices such as hospital gowns, as it was largely documented by the evidence presented. A specific form of adaptation emerges from the study—the reconversion process that implied entering a new market with new products and that was aided by a plurality of heterogeneous actors that comprise the whole industry. We unveil the reconversion process to provide granular insights over the dimensions that are relevant to the process and explain this phenomenon from an organizational and a managerial perspective. These dimensions outline the dynamics behind the response of fashion companies to the exogenous shock, as shown in the model in Figure 2. The reconversion process stemmed from a trade-off between an economic necessity and a genuine desire to help the community. Indeed, it started as being an economic necessity; however, companies were mostly driven by the sincere desire to help their community. Within this context, mustering ambidexterity has been pivotal for the successful accomplishments of both organizational goals.

After identifying the rationale of the reconversion process, the companies started seizing the opportunities, and as the evidence supports, having adequate dynamic capabilities was crucial to fully reap their benefits. These capabilities entail having a proactive approach by also improvising given the uncertain scenario and the lack of regulation, exploring new solutions and being open to establish partnerships with new actors. This approach was beneficial when facing the sudden market changes imposed by the pandemic and unlocked a wide set of valuable opportunities. These ranged from gaining experience in a new market, learning new dynamics and internalizing new capabilities within the company’s know-how and routines. This opportunity was particularly beneficial to the more traditional companies, as they thus had the occasion to innovate their internal processes and to embrace a process of digital acceleration. Conversely, the shift from B2B market to B2C market provided the companies with valuable learning opportunities by ultimately strengthening their brand image. The evidence supports the view that companies need to learn and change when facing disturbances (Berkes et al., 2003; Kinzig et al., 2006; Nohria, 2020).

While seizing opportunities and balancing the challenges involved, companies leveraged critical resources and capabilities that were already deployed in their core

business. Some transferable skills were key in enabling the reconversion process that, for some companies, provided the opportunity to upgrade their operations. Keeping in touch and communicating regularly with the stakeholders was deemed crucial in a moment in which it was impossible to perform the regular activities. Additionally, having strong core values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, passion, leadership and commitment towards customers was considered essential to maintain unaltered the company’s credibility. Flexibility and culture of change were values that permeated the most reactive companies.

Within the strategic capabilities that were deemed to be crucial to face the increased polarization (‘the winner takes it all’) and to counteract the ever-fasting pace of the industry, innovation and being authentic—reflected in the importance of ‘Made in Italy’—were identified as strategic imperatives. The fashion industry is characterized by deep-rooted logics and strategies such as the traditional fashion production schedule, with four to six collections a year according to which only a few companies can afford to take a leading role. The pandemic might have laid the foundation for changes that could modify the future competitive scenario, allowing the smaller players to grow in the market. The model depicted in Figure 2 depicts the process through which companies have managed to respond and adapt to the current situation, trying to avoid a potential ‘Darwinian shakeout’.

The analysis implemented, given the richness of the data—also coming from documental evidence—has led us to find patterns across cases and draw conclusions about the response to the COVID-19 pandemic of the Italian fashion industry as a whole. More precisely, several features emerge. Firstly, the fashion industry that is traditionally associated with a very negative public image—for its detrimental impact on the environment or its appalling corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices—has found a rather meaningful way to raise its profile, by showing that is time to lead with ethics (Christensen & Kohls, 2003) and with purpose and humanity (Joly, 2020). Within this context, our evidence supports Sheth (2020) according to whom business and society are two peas in a pod—their destiny is inevitably intertwined, and they are mutually interdependent. As such, to successfully overcome a grand challenge such as the COVID-19 pandemic, they need to mutually support each other.

Secondly, the Italian fashion industry has adopted an open-source model to crisis response (Nohria, 2020). Everyone has been united on the field—from the small family business specialized in the production of sportswear, to the online fashion retailers, the big luxury players, fashion social enterprises to a wide range of firms specialized in a vast variety of adjacent industries, such as the universities, the penitentiary institutions and the technical labs.

Thirdly, the response of the Italian fashion industry has been shaped by some of its distinctive resources and capabilities that make its companies adaptive survivors. These are the widespread creativity, the contagious enthusiasm that swiipe through the industry and the emotional attachment to the businesses because the great majority of its companies are all family businesses that often own heritage brands that have been in the family for many generations. They are firms where the entrepreneur still possesses that peculiar Schumpeterian connotation, making them apt to seize and fully exploit any business opportunity that might arise (Maalaoui et al., 2021). They were all able to turn a crisis into a viable opportunity by leveraging their core capabilities and know-how (Brusoni et al., 2009). The evidence supports the argument that in the complex and evolving uncertainty, where the potential for upheaval is gigantic, the most resilient organizations will not be those that simply own the suitable resources but those with adequate sensing and response capabilities. In particular, the companies have all shown remarkable dynamic capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece et al., 1997) and ambidexterity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Mei, 2014) as they were not only able to successfully adapt to abrupt change but they did so proactively—by even anticipating any relevant change in the legislation (Nohria, 2020) and by capitalizing on their core capabilities and know-how to develop some new ones (Lin & Wu, 2014).

Within this context, the Italian fashion industry has displayed a remarkable level of resilience in terms of both the amount of disturbance a system can absorb while remaining within the same balancing state and, second, the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, learning and adaptation (Dentoni et al., 2021).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides rich insights over the emerging dynamics of the response implemented by the Italian fashion companies to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the paper unboxes the reconversion process that relies on horizontal diversification—the launch of new products in the personal protection equipment market—which the companies have adopted by ultimately embracing *adaptive resilience*.

Through the concept of *adaptive resilience*, our findings highlight how the Italian fashion industry and its companies were able to turn a crisis into an opportunity, with the reconversion process being implemented at the crossroads between opportunities of a new (albeit often temporary) business and the exploitation of existing key resources and capabilities. In particular, the companies have leveraged their core capabilities and know-how to develop new organizational capabilities by also unleashing creativity and innovation in doing so. This approach

can indeed yield to the establishment of new business models that might drive sustainable competitive advantage in the future and further supports the notion of the paradoxical nature of a crisis (Nathan, 2000). The experience of the Italian fashion system further reinforces the strategic importance of having an effective leadership driven by purpose and humanity coupled by dynamic ambidexterity. Accordingly, our process model can be more broadly adopted to investigate when unsettling events—such as a pandemic, political turbulence or sweeping social unrest—overtake the headlines and organizations must be poised to respond, even when they are looking for answers themselves.

The opportunity was twofold. On the one hand, Italy was the second country worldwide to be affected by the pandemic after China; therefore, this paper provides a critical assessment of a spontaneous process of adjustment where both the severity and the urgency of the situation called for a prompt response. Improvisation played a pivotal role as there was no established route that could be easily followed. On the other hand, gathering rich primary evidence while the pandemic was in progress provided fresh evidence, such as the uncertain climate and the unplanned organizational and relational dynamics. Within this dramatic context of sudden change, the first steps undertaken by the companies' and the ensuing process of adjustment were captured. The Italian fashion industry was deemed as the ideal and a rather unique setting in which to unveil the distinctive dynamics of this process.

Our contribution could be framed around three areas. First, by contextualizing the organizational responses of the individual companies as a form of adaptation within the wider Italian fashion industry, the research provides valuable lessons that can be taken forward to handle any grand challenge—disruption, crisis or radical change—that given their recursive nature (Clemente et al., 2017), companies are likely to face in the future. The findings support the relevance of studying resilience, by ascertaining how organizations cope with shocks through adjustment (Williams et al., 2021).

Relatedly, the findings provide compelling evidence that studying resilience and adaptation requires an analytical lens that combines both microperspective (i.e., at company level) and macroperspective (i.e., at industry level). In particular, when facing any grand challenge, the reconversion opportunities that might be available to companies at microlevel do not take place in a vacuum. On the contrary, they are shaped and might be hindered by the industrial settings in which companies operate. Conversely, the reconversion opportunities available to the industry as a whole at macrolevel are highly dependent on the joint orchestration of resources and capabilities of its wide array of stakeholders, including companies. As such, both microlevel and macrolevel are mutually interdependent—only within their idiosyncratic nature we can gain a meaningful appreciation of what

resilience and adaptation entail. The evidence thus supports Folke (2006) according to whom adaptive capacity takes place as actors engage in a recombination of evolved structures and processes in response to external changes.

Second, the findings provide a clear account of the reconversion process. Despite being adopted in practice, no management research to date has considered both the rationale and the process underpinning the practice of product reconversion. This study suggests that companies were able to quickly reconvert their production processes leveraging significant operational synergies throughout the value chain, starting from the familiarity in the fabric procurement down to the production and to retail activities. Relevant intangible synergies were those related to the entrepreneurial vision, the culture of change and dynamism that guided and permeated the core business of many companies. The production of new products relied on existing technology, while meeting different customers' needs. Such a diversification strategy also relied on the use of the existing brands and distribution capabilities while targeting a completely new market. Accordingly, the study suggests that the rationale behind the reconversion process was to capitalize as much as possible on the existing synergies between the core and new businesses by thus exploiting those transferable resources, capabilities and assets. This is not surprising given that the timing during which the reconversion process took place was driven by the urgent necessity of providing reliable and suitable products to the market.

Thirdly, by bridging different theoretical approaches to investigate the response at both company and industry levels to a grand challenge, this study offers a systemic theoretical framework that was used to inform our qualitative investigation. The literature on grand challenges with its dynamics of anticipation, avoidance and adjustment coupled by the organizational ecology perspective highlighted the importance of resilience by adapting promptly to an exogenous shock to successfully cope with the new environment. Conversely, the related literature on strategic management emphasizing the pivotal importance of dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity that showed as innovating the production and the approach to work were keys to survive for the companies. Jointly, these three theoretical approaches allowed us to introduce a novel theoretical lens—*adaptive resilience*—that stems from the overlooked perspective of adaptive ecosystem management. Resilience, as the capacity to adapt to disturbances, was observed as companies engaged in a recombination of existing and established structures and processes in response to an external change. However, unlike existing research (Berkes et al., 2003; Kinzig et al., 2006), fashion companies could not possibly learn and change in anticipation of the COVID-19 pandemic because the challenge was rather sudden and unprecedented. They nevertheless showed remarkable

ambidexterity by proactively embracing risk while dealing with conflicting goals such as the economic necessity to keep the business afloat and the genuine desire to help the community. Seizing this challenge has resulted in the adaptively resilient attitude where companies began to offer products imbued with values, by engaging with new partners, by facing sudden market changes by exploring new approaches and by implementing operations upgrading and undertaking digital acceleration.

Our research suffers from several limitations, including the size of our sample, the focus on the national industry and the collection of the empirical material within a limited time frame concerning a phenomenon that is still ongoing and rapidly changing. More precisely, despite the study's explorative nature, the highly significant heterogeneity of the sectors within the fashion industry would have benefited from a larger company sample to ensure a broader representation of the industry as a whole. Additionally, in order to capture with more accuracy the dynamics at macrolevel, it would have been valuable to undertake additional data collection with a broader plurality of actors—universities, laboratories, policymakers, penitentiary institutions, museums and hospitals—because they were all instrumental in enabling and supporting the reconversion process implemented by the fashion system.

Further research could focus on a different set of companies in relation to either specific market segments or different geographical settings to further assess the broader applicability of the process model and further ascertain its robustness. Conversely, concerning the Italian fashion industry, future research could entail primary data collection in the form of interviews among the abovementioned plurality of actors. This in turn would add a further layer of complexity to our existing levels of analysis, whereby the analysis could be articulated not only at company and industry levels but also at fashion system level by assessing the reconversion process implemented by the fashion system as a whole and enabled by a wider plurality of actors. Lastly, the process model captures only the dynamics within the fashion industry; further research would be required to test the validity and the robustness of the model with other industrial settings. Research propositions can be drawn from our results to be tested in future research. Accordingly, our limitations can be used as a research agenda to inform future research in the direction of a more comprehensive study of other types of responses to grand challenges in a wider range of different industries. Finally, future research could assess how many of the reconversion processes that the grey literature has documented since the beginning of the pandemic are still in place and how companies are facing established competitors within these (new) industry environments. The demand for personal protection equipment, for instance, is expected to decrease, and the competitive dynamics are likely to change significantly. This ultimately calls for understanding the extent to

which such initiatives are economically sustainable. Yet their social value has proved to be evident.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors equally contributed to the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are made available in accordance with Wiley's data sharing policies. Wiley is committed to a more open research landscape, facilitating faster and more effective research discovery by enabling reproducibility and verification of data, methodology and reporting standards.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Secondary data sources.

How	Where and when
Newspaper article	Il Sole 24 Ore, 14/03/2020a. Covid-19, l'azienda che produce mascherine e vende a prezzo di costo. Available at: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/covid-19-l-azienda-che-produce-mascherine-e-vende-prezzo-costo-ADXOG6C [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	La Repubblica, 14/03/2020b. Coronavirus, mascherine prodotte con le stampanti 3D: "Il nostro modello è a disposizione di tutti". Available at: https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/14/news/coronavirus_mascherine_prodotte_con_le_stampanti_3d_il_nostro_modello_e_a_disposizione_di_tutti_-251260492/ [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	Il Sole 24 Ore, 16/03/2020. Dalle mascherine ai camici: il tessile-moda pronto alla «conversione». Available at: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dalle-mascherine-camici-tessile-moda-pronto-conversione-ADJ4BJD?refresh_ce=1 [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	Il Sole 24 Ore, 17/03/2020. Coronavirus: creare una filiera italiana delle mascherine sull'onda del modello Puglia. Available at: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/coronavirus-creare-filiera-italiana-mascherine-sull-onda-modello-puglia-ADh5tnD [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	Il Sole 24 Ore, 18/03/2021. Dal mese in più per rinnovare l'Rc auto ai congedi familiari, allo stop di tasse e mutui casa: ecco il decreto «cura Italia». Available at: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dallo-stop-mutui-all-estensione-cassa-integrazione-ecco-aiuti-famiglie-e-imprese-ADDIX2C [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	La Repubblica, 18/03/2020. Coronavirus, l'azienda di abbigliamento sportivo che si converte alla produzione di mascherine: "Così aiutiamo gli ospedali". Available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/18/news/coronavirus_azienda_varese_mascherine_abbigliamento_sportivo-251623017/ [Accessed 4th July 2021].
Newspaper article	Il Corriere della Sera, 20/03/2020a. Riconversione industriale. Available at: https://living.corriere.it/tendenze/extra/coronavirus-aziende-convertono-produzione-mascherine/ [Accessed 4th July 2021].
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(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

How	Where and when
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