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Eco-labeled Products: Trend or Tools for Sustainability Strategies?

Alessandra De Chiara

Abstract The paper offers a point of view on credibility of eco-labeled products, analyzing the relationships among company's sustainable strategy, eco-label and no-financial reports. Based on a cross-sector study of 109 companies with the EU-Eco-label licenses in Italy, the paper points out different behaviors among the companies investigated and explains the leadership of Italy in the number of these licenses. However, the paper underlines that the use of sustainability tools is not always matched to the explanation of companies' sustainable strategies. The study identifies the significant drivers for the management of eco-label within a sustainability strategy, drawing attention to the weight, and the hierarchical level of different decisions about sustainability. This study contributes to strengthening the understanding, promoting a discussion on the use of eco-label and on its value, and describing a desirable behavior that any company should tend in order to nourish the credibility that is an essential aspect for building strong associations with the brand.

Keywords CSR · CSR communication · Eco-label · EU-Eco-label · Green advertising · Sustainability strategies

Introduction

Consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental and social implications of their consumptions and they are beginning to make purchasing decisions related to environmental and ethical concerns (Eisingerich et al. 2011). Worldwide consumer appetite for green products has increased in the past years, despite global economic conditions, even if there are significant differences in different countries (Birkner 2011) and even though most of consumers believe that green products cost more than non-green equivalents (WPP 2011).

Increasing attention toward green products has stimulated several researches to study the impacts of firm's societal initiatives (whether environmental or social) on consumers, underling a positive impact on consumers' purchase intent (Ellen et al. 2000; Mohr et al. 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Swaen and Vanhamme 2005; Mohr and Webb 2005).

Growing environmental responsibility expectations have led companies to develop green advertising messages and green brands. But different stakeholders denounce that companies make very often green-washing operations (Sigliocco and Siano 2013; Greenwashing.net), also supported by advertising agencies (Bradford 2007). These situations lead to some key research questions: have companies gone beyond slogans? And, do they use eco-label and other marketing tools to support sustainability strategies?

Several researches have pointed out that environmental communication efficiency depends on the perceived credibility of the environmental claim (Erdem and Swait 1998), underling, for example, that corporate social responsibility (CSR) information coming from a commercial source should be perceived as less credible than the same information coming from an independent organization (Mohr et al. 2001), or from consumers' organizations (Swaen and Vanhamme 2005). The perceived credibility of the environmental claim can, therefore, influence consumers' decision, while on the other hand the non-credible information

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may prevent the construction of strong associations with companies and their brands. Then, the perceived credibility of the environmental claim appears as a necessary condition to build strong environmental associations.

This paper emphasizes that the relationship between eco-labels and firms' CSR strategy, especially in the environmental domain, represents a sign of credibility. Therefore, this work investigates, in its first part, the elements of credibility and efficacy of CSR communication focusing on green advertising and eco-labels, while in its second part, it shows the results of an empirical research about the use of EU-Eco-label in Italy, draws the managerial implications and presents its conclusions.

On the Credibility of CSR Communication

CSR communication "is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts" (Morsing 2006, p. 171). It can reflect three potential approaches (Van de Ven 2008): (1) focusing on the basic requirements of conducting a responsible business to obtain and maintain a license to operate by the society, (2) making an explicit promise to the stakeholders and the general public that the corporation excels with respect to their CSR endeavors, (3) communicating the differentiation of product or service on the basis of an environmental or social quality.

The use of CSR communication is growing because it is an important element of competition, it provides a corporate marketing tool that can build a strong corporate image and reputation (Hoeffler and Keller 2002) and achieve social legitimacy (Morsing 2006), and, moreover, it can be addressed to influence consumer's behavior. Its diffusion has stimulated researchers to bring to light the elements that give it credibility, regarding especially green advertising. This concept defines any advertising "(…) that 1-explicitly or implicitly addresses the relationship between a product or the biophysical environment, 2-promotes a green lifestyle (…) or 3-presents a corporate image of environmental responsibility" (Banerjee et al. 1995, p. 22).

Among the elements that have a positive impact on efficacy of advertising have been indicated specific and detailed claims, which are more persuasive than vague and ambiguous ones (Davis 1994). Another important aspect is the timing of the environmental attribute, in fact some scholars declare that if it is presented as a second attribute behind a more central one, consumers perceive it as less manipulative (Davis 1994). Besides, when the environmental problem is high, some scholars believe that a message, which emphasizes the severity of the problem (a "sick baby" appeal) is considered more efficient than a message which stresses the significance of individual action ("well baby" appeal; Obermiller 1995). Another important aspect to consider is

people's involvement degree in environmental problems, so a green appeal should have more efficacy for people weakly involved, probably because the people highly involved with the environment are more skeptic toward green claims (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995).

Among conditions which influence green claims' efficacy on consumers, there are also the cultural differences of countries, which explain, for example, the way European and American envisage CSR initiatives, showing a really different responding to the influence of their national business systems (Matten and Moon 2004), or the differences between transitional economies and mature ones (Grbac and Loncaric 2009).

But the environmental communication efficacy depends on the perceived credibility of the environmental claim (Erdem and Swait 1998; Chan 2000) too, so efficacy and credibility are linked and the latter is likewise important too. Credibility has been associated to the type of source: CSR information should be perceived as more credible if the information is coming from an independent organization (Mohr et al. 2001), or from consumers' organizations (Swaen and Vanhamme 2005).

The credibility of an environmentally aware communication is of great importance because it produces a strong impact on the two main dimensions of brand associations, strength, and favorability (Benoit-Moreau and Parguel 2011) and these factors have been considered by Keller (2003) as important determinants of brand equity. Therefore, societal initiatives and their communication appear as a key strategic lever to build brand equity.

Actually several academic studies have proposed that societal initiatives and related communication can actively build brand equity (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Bhattacharya and Sen 2004), in fact the perceived credibility of the environmental claim could influence consumers' decision to interpret, encode and stock the message related to societal involvement, and then this approach appears as a necessary condition to build strong environmental associations. If the perceived credibility of the environmental claim has a great impact on brand equity, this question is even more crucial, because, in the actual context, the profusion of CSR claims has been denounced by several public movements which suspected companies' "green-washing" operations (Bradford 2007; Greenwashing.net). The research by Sigliocco and Siano (2013) shows that perceptions of "green-washing" or deliberately misleading strategies can damage consumers' attitude toward a brand, and therefore brand equity.

Linking Sustainability and Brand: The Eco-labels

The term eco-label means a voluntary labeling system because a single economic actor can decide to certificate its

products, certifying the respect of environmental standards in a more cogent way then law requires (Gen Global Ecolabelling Network 2011). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) identifies three types of environmental labelling: labels of "type I" comply to the UNI EN ISO 14024 normative, they are classified as B2C (Business to Consumer) and contain all the "eco-labels" submitted to certification by an external institute, promoter of the label and agency assigned to control the respect of the selection criteria; the labels of "type II" comply to the UNI EN ISO 14021 normative, they are classified as B2C and B2B (Business to Business) and include all the declarations on product ecological characteristics; the labels of "type III" comply to UNI EN ISO 14025 normative and include the ecological labels that report environmental declaration about the product (environmental product declaration, EPD).

Nowadays there is an intense discussion on the benefits that firms and brands acquire by being socially responsible, such as the connection with consumers (Porter and Kramer 2002), the improvement of financial performance (Johnson 2003), the increase in employee commitment and the decrease in employee turnover (Dawkins and Lewis 2003), a significantly account on a company's brand image (Business and Sustainable Development 2001). That explains the great interest shown by firms in eco-labels and the decisions of several of them to integrate CSR as a core value in brand positioning (Werther and Chandler 2005). Above all, in the advent of the environmental era, because of some phenomena, like climate change, have achieved a tremendous media coverage, the environmental preoccupations have spread (WPP 2011) and companies have found an opportunity to enhance their environmental performance.

By linking a socially responsible behavior with its brand, a firm can develop its brand's value and personality (Kitchin 2003), as well as its value in terms of differentiation within the market (Johnson 2003). In fact, by affixing an eco-label to a product, a company reaches a strategic placement of this product in the category of ecological ones. So the eco-labels contribute to support differentiation strategies by way of an ecological value awarded to the product. This result can be also achieved using a variety of brand elements (Keller 2009), like linguistic (brand name), iconic (lettering, pictogram, diagram), and the figurative elements (drawings). Also, the colors may generate specific emotional reactions (Valdez and Mehrabian 1994).

If carefully chosen and designed, these elements are crucial to give meaning to a brand, whose management has a strategic value, because it is the main element of the visual identity of an organization and one of the most important intangible corporate assets (Vicari 1995), which can give a competitive advantage and build a corporate reputation, as well as make an organization less vulnerable to competitors. But building the value of a brand means also giving it credibility, and in this perspective the certificated eco-labels, such as those of "type I", are surely more credible and give a major visibility to a firm and to its products. Moreover, these labels can generate in consumers an experiential benefit, as consumers have the impression to contribute to the general well-being (Hoeffler and Keller 2002). This aspect reinforces the favorability of brand environmental associations.

Building a Credible Eco-labeled Project

Even the presence of a "type I" eco-label could be insufficient to express a positive opinion about the existence of a real approach to environmental sustainability pursued by the company. This paper frames the ruling of credibility of an eco-label respect to two fact-funding elements.

The first one concerns the research of coherence with the strategy pursued by the company. It is believed to be necessary to assess the content and the purpose of company's strategy, rather than limiting the analysis to a finding of the presence of this and other tools.

The choice of using an eco-label concerns an operative decision of marketing which must find its motivation in a company's strategy oriented to sustainability. Building a credible eco-labeled project a company should pay attention to the weight and the hierarchical level of different decisions, choosing to place the decision about the formulation of objectives and corporate behavior related to the path of sustainability, as a strategic choice, while the definition of choices related to the brand, label, communication, and other tools should be considered marketing operational choices and therefore secondary.

Clearly the eco-labeled products are not addressed to the whole market, rather they are addressed to specific market target and should be the result of sustainable differentiation strategies. The first should be the target to which company wants to reach, the latter should be the starting point for the planning of appropriate actions.

In other words, the recognition of an ecological value to the product, assigned by a green label, must be supported by a concrete sustainable differentiation strategy, based on the reduction of environmental impact of the processes and products, which makes clear the reference to the principle of sustainability.

The second fact-funding element, for evaluating the credibility of an eco-label project, is the presence of a voluntary disclosure, a no-financial report, which makes clear and visible to all stakeholders the sustainability path pursued by a company, reporting objectives, investments, resources and obtained and forecasted results.

Voluntary disclosure, providing formally report about sustainability strategy in exceeds to more general information, represents a key complement of CSR communication strategy. It is suggested by European Commission in "A renewed EU strategy 2011-14 for Corporate Social Responsibility", which declares: "Disclosure of social and environmental information, including climate-related information, can facilitate engagement with stakeholders. It is also an important element of accountability and can contribute to building public trust in enterprises" (EC 2011, p. 12).

Companies must not underestimate the importance of such documents and, at the same time, these documents represent for scholars, consumers, and all stakeholders an useful tools for building an opinion on the credibility of eco-labeled products.

Then the definition of sustainability objectives that a company wants to pursue and the formulation of sustainable strategy must precede the planning of marketing tools, including the decision to introduce an eco-label, and must be reported adequately. It should not register the presence of eco-label without the formulation of a sustainability strategy. This would undermine the credibility of the company's offer to consumers and the opportunity to build a strong association with the brand (Benoit-Moreau and Parguel 2011).

The more clarity and communication between the firm and the stakeholders there is (see Fig. 1) the more credibility the project acquires.

Therefore, credibility of an eco-label and its efficacy, among that green target extremely alert toward companies' proposals, must be built and investigated in a chained process which includes the formulation of company's sustainability objectives, of marketing tools and of disclosure statement in order to valorize and to communicate company's sustainability project.

The Empirical Research: Studying EU-Eco-labeled Firms in Italy

The empirical research is based on a cross-sector study of 109 companies with the EU-Eco-label licenses in Italy. This label was established in 1992 by the European Commission to encourage businesses to market products and services that meet high standards of environmental performance and quality. EU-Eco-label criteria consider the whole life cycle of a product, from the extraction of raw materials, through manufacture, packaging, distribution, use and its disposal.

The EU-Eco-label helps consumers and public procurer's easily identify environmentally-friendly products. It is a voluntary scheme and represents the only European "Type I" official eco-label, providing a convenient tool for EU-Eco-label license holders to channel their marketing efforts through a single label represented by a flower.

The choice of studying this label has some motivations: (1) it is a recognized label whose process of assignation, revised in the June 2013, is rather complex and articulated in different phases, from the pre-registration to the verification of the requisites of the applicant and to technical-administrative preliminary activities, which in Italy are performed by ISPRA, Superior Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, (2) it has a international

Fig. 1 The "credibility chain": efficacy relationships among CSR objectives and policies, marketing actions, and reporting tools

CSR objectives

Establishing environmental policies and actions

Establishing marketing tools: green advertising, eco-label, etc.

Establishing reporting tools: report (CSR Report, Sustainability Report, Environmental Report; etc.); green index; etc.

dimension which ensures consumers of different nationalities on the seriousness of the label and at the same time it allows companies to give visibility to their eco-labeled products in the foreign markets, (3) it has a data base, managed in Italy by ISPRA, with all information about EU-Eco-labeled companies in Italy.

According to the "credibility chain" proposed above, the use of the eco-label must be linked to the formulation and communication of company's environmental objectives, actions, and results to its stakeholders. This certainly helps the understanding of a company's sustainability project and augments its credibility. Hence the second element for the empirical research are the no-financial documents, available on corporate websites, which mainly describe the sustainable behavior of a firm, such as CSR reports, sustainability reports, environmental budget, as well as all the documents associated with the achievement of the EU-Eco-label.

The empirical research has been performed consulting: (a) the European statistics on EU-Eco-label and ISPRA data, (b) the internet portal "Global Ecolabelling Network", a global non-profit association, whose members are institutions that have created and managed eco-labels of type I, (c) companies' documents which have obtained the EU-Eco-label related to industrial products in Italy, available on the ISPRA website, which allows one to be linked by category to each firm's website. The selected documents have been analyzed through the content analysis and with the statistical program "Concordance," used in two ways: (1) to carry out a textual analysis, creating a list of meaningful words for the research and calculating the frequency of their recurrence (Full Concordance), (2) to contextualize these specific words with others (Selective Concordance).

The research objective is to analyze the relationships among this label, firm's sustainability strategy and its disclosure statement in order to individuate a real path of sustainability.

The Diffusion of EU-Eco-label: The Italian Leadership

The statistics describe a great diffusion of EU-Eco-label in the whole Europe and between production firms which operate in the old continent. Among European countries, Italy has more certified products than the others, followed by France and the UK (EC 2013), while it may be considered unexpected the position of Germany and of the other Northern European countries, generally sensible to the environmental themes (see Fig. 2).

To find an explanation to the high diffusion of this label in Italy, it has been analyzed the online portal of the "Global Ecolabelling Network". The objectives of this organization are numerous and they are directed toward a general policy on the dissemination and creation of eco-labels. Analyzing

this portal it has been found that almost all the main European countries have a national environmental labeling system. Countries such as Germany, France, Spain, and Sweden have established their eco-labels between the end of 1970s and the beginning of the '1990 (see Fig. 3). "Der Blaue Engel", the German label, is the more ancient label in the world, having been created in 1978, it is assigned by Federal Agency for Environment and by German Institute for Guarantee of Quality. "Nordic (Swan) Eco-label" is assigned by an independent Scandinavian Institution and it is used only in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. "Aenor - Medio Ambiente" is the Spanish eco-label, created in 1986, it is 1 of the 10 environmental certificates with more diffusion in the world (www.aenor.es). "NF Environment" is the French label, but it has a great diffusion also in Europe. The framework of the eco-labels established by European national government does not finish here: Austria has created "Unmweltzeichen", The Netherlands has the "Milieukeur", the Czech Republic has the "Ekologicky Sterny Vyrobek", in Sweden there are the "Bra Miljoval" and the "TCO Devolopment", and also Ukraine, Croatia and the autonomy province of the Catalonia have created their eco-labels.

It is possible to suppose that the reasons of the Italian leadership must be found in the fact that Italy is one of the fewer European countries that has never created its environmental labeling system. In Italy, small steps forward have been made in 2010, with the Act No. 3565, which sought the establishment of an Italian brand in order to recognize the social responsible companies. This proposal has among its aims not only the intention to encourage "the promotion and protection of human rights, economic, trade union of workers", but also "the principle of environmental integrity". The Act has intended to encourage the growth of CSR, assuming a tax credit for small and medium-sized enterprises. This proposal, however, has broken its legislative process without ever having been discussed in Parliament.

It is, therefore, possible to affirm that the Italian record in the number of licenses for EU-Eco-label is based on a legal loophole which sees the Italian manufacturers "forced" to apply the EU-Eco-label if they wish to position themselves strategically in the category of products with low environmental impact, unlike companies in other European countries that have national systems of eco-labeling. It could be argued then that the Italian legal vacuum has been filled by the EC Regulation No. 66/2010 that just gives rise to the European eco-label.

How do EU-Eco-labeled Companies Behave in Italy?

The findings coming from ISPRA, which were updated in July 2013, show the distribution of licenses for groups of products (see Fig. 4) and allow to view the companies' data (ISPRA 2014).

Fig. 2 Geographical distribution in Europe of products with EU-Eco-label
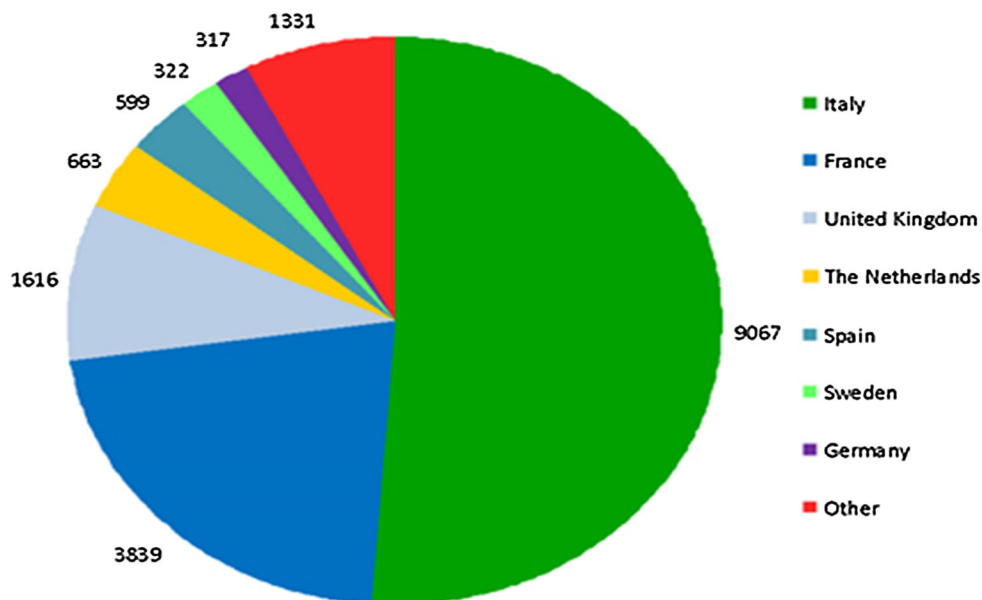
From these data, eliminating duplication, it is found a number of 109 companies that have the EU-Eco-label in the categories of industrial products, in Italy.

The cross-sector study of 109 companies shows the number of companies that present documents, as well as specific parts of it, that pertain to environmental policy in detail. Only 17 companies (16 %) are completely committed to environmental protection and consequently to the sustainability of their processes and products and provide detailed documents (available on line) on objectives, means, and results of their environmental policy. This number is really low in almost all sectors (see Fig. 5), with few exceptions in the Copying and Graphic Paper sector, where there is only a company with the EU-Eco-label however, in the Hard Covering and Textile Products sectors (respectively 25 % of companies). Not occur, however, significant elements in relation to the structural characteristics of enterprises, in particular firm size and legal form.

The number of companies which present a wealth of information on the online sites, in relation to sustainability initiatives, is slightly higher (17 %). But they do not make complete reports, not inform stakeholders in a complete manner about the objectives and the strategy pursued, nor report concrete information concerning resources, investments, and achievements: specifically, in the sectors of Detergents, Indoor Paints and Varnishes, Growing Media and Soil.

The majority of companies (67 %) does not make any CSR communication on its website.

Together with the EU-Eco-label almost all companies possess other forms of certification of environmental type, but also in general on CSR: an higher number of cases are in Hard Covering (66 %) and Textile Products sectors (50 %).

Still, for methodological accuracy, note that for some businesses, it was not possible to access the company website at the time of the analysis (November–December 2013).

The textual analysis of the selected documents has focused on the words that have a higher number of frequencies and which are representative of the environmental policy pursued by companies. As it shows from the Table 1, also recording some differences in the groups, "sustainability" and similar words, "environment" and similar words, are the most common ones as well as "emissions" and "quality". It is especially important to emphasize the number of frequencies with which the term "brand" appears in all its translations and meanings, while the term "eco-label" appears to be less frequent.

With the Selective Concordance, the words that have obtained a greater number of frequencies, namely "sustainability" and the "environment", have contextualized in order to understand the strategic importance of sustainability policy pursued by enterprises, as well as the words "brand" and "eco-label, since they are the object of this research.

The analysis shows that there are relations/associations relevant for the terms "sustainability" and the "environment", in fact, all the 17 companies claim that the

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	"Blaue Engel": German eco-label, applied on 11,700 products and services, divided into 120 categories.		"Ekologicky Setrny Vyrobek" is the eco-label of Czech republic.
	"Nordic (Swan) Ecolabel", Scandinavian eco-label that provides for the certification of disposable products technically complex (e.g. diapers).		"Kornyezetbarat Termek" is the Hungarian eco-label.
	"Umweltzeichen", Austrian eco-label.		"Environmentally friendly" is the Croatian eco-label.
	"Milieukeur", eco-label in the Netherlands. It is used by 737 companies for a total of 43 product categories.		"Bra Miljoval" is the Swedish eco-label.
	"Aenor-Medio Ambiente" is the Spanish eco-label, it is applied over 98,329 products and it is used by 5,274 companies.		"TCO" is a Swedish independent brand.
	"Distintiu de Garantia de Qualitat Ambiental" is the eco-label of the autonomous province of Catalonia.		It is the Ukrainian eco-label, established by the organization "Living Planet" and adhering to" The program for Development of Ecological Marking in Ukraine".
	"NF Environment" is the French eco-label widespread in Europe, with 5,400 companies trademark holders.		Set up by the EC Regulation N 66/2010 and formulated for 26 non-food and non-medical product groups. Every 3–5 years the criteria are revised and new product groups can be considered.

Fig. 3 The main European eco-labels
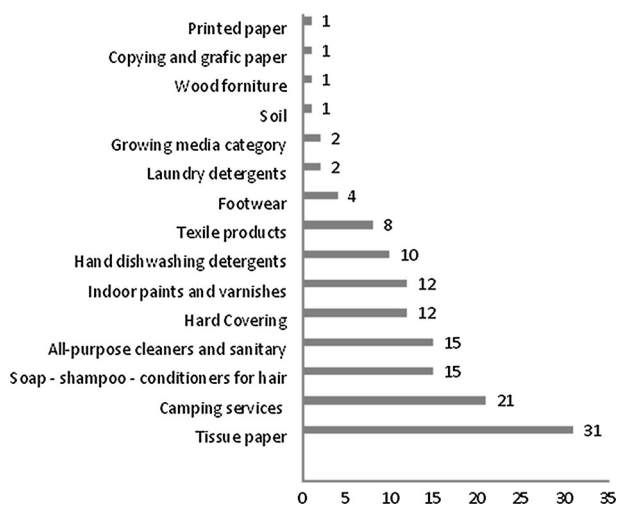
**Fig. 4** EU-Eco-label, licences in Italy, for products groups (July 2013)

environment and sustainability are their primary strategic objectives, they are part of their mission and strategies or they are central in the business policy (see Table 2).

In reference to the words "brand" and "eco-label", the analysis does not record significant associations for all the businesses. The associations discovered permit first to say that the reasons for the introduction of the EU-Eco-label can be found in the attention of companies toward the growing interest of consumers in the environmental impact of products. Besides, the analysis showed that, only in three cases, the choice of this label has been motivated by virtue of its greater credibility and recognition on the international markets, allowing companies to give greater visibility to their products. In particular, it was found that the introduction of the label is justified by the need to respond to the request made by the operators of international distribution.

Discussions and Managerial Implications: Models of Behavior

The point of view of the paper frames the credibility of eco-labeled products in a broader perspective respect to

Fig. 5 On line CSR
communication of companies
with EU-Eco-label licenses in
Italy, for groups of products
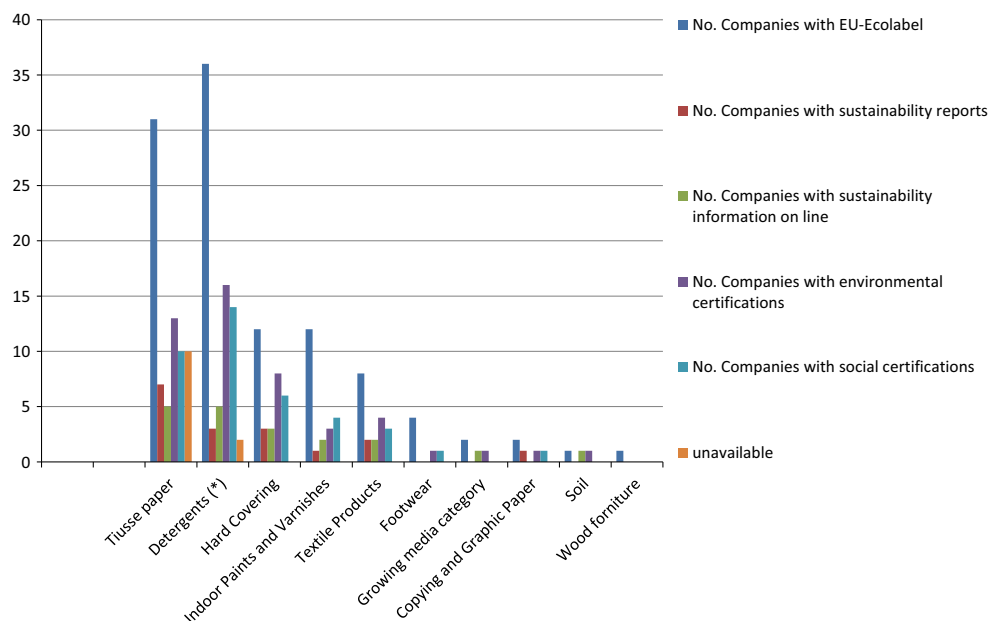
literature referred, which appears to focus on specific aspects related to sustainability communication. The perspective of this work includes an overall evaluation of the relationships among company's sustainable strategy, eco-label and no-financial reports and on this perspective the empirical research generates two main considerations. The first one concerns the discovery of a very large number of firms that are in possession of the EU-Eco-label, but which do not describe the policy of sustainability that are pushing ahead, do not invest in documents and reports about goals and motivations related to their sustainability paths.

This attitude could be explained by an approach to sustainability that still is in an immature or initial stage, which, consequently, has not yet led companies to plan the sustainability strategy they intend to enact. There is the use of a marketing tool that informs the consumer on the ecological value of the products, with the label EU-Eco-label, but lacks the formulation of a business plan in which objectives and actions are established.

Another possible explanation could be attributed to the companies' choice of a deliberate omission of detailed information on CSR policy, articulated in a specific document, available on the companies' websites, and therefore usable by the different categories of stakeholders.

Both cases make one think that the lack of policy of sustainability equals a lack of conviction in those companies about their will to build a strategy of differentiation of certain products which complies with the principle of environmental sustainability, a strategy that instead requires specific investments, which include reporting.

However, the research points out different behaviors among the companies investigated in relation to the

communication of their sustainability initiatives and the use of related "certifications". And therefore in the light of these differences, is possible to describe, through a scheme (see Fig. 6), not only the different models pursued by companies, but also a desirable behavior in order to propose credible managerial paths.

A first model identifies those companies which made an effort to adopt the EU-Eco-label as well as other certifications, always within the framework of social responsibility, but do not perform any document to communicate the strategy and policies pursued, especially in the environmental field. In this model (defined Beginners) fall, as seen, the majority of companies surveyed.

A second model identifies those companies, with the eco-label, which have also reports that describe the social responsibility initiatives pursued, but which did not deepen the dimension of environmental sustainability and, consequently, these companies do not provide information about motivations, objectives, and the results achieved or to be achieved (defined Developers).

The third model (defined Fully-Developed) identifies those firms that pursue a line of conduct designed to give maximum visibility to the environment policy and the strategic importance of the principle of sustainability for the company, giving notice in the reports published online and deepening the aspects of motivation, performance indicators, and improvement targets achieved and future. It is toward this behavior, considered virtuous and credible, that any company should tend in order to nourish and strengthen the credibility that is an essential aspect for building strong associations with the brand (Benoit-Moreau and Parguel 2011).

Table 1 Selected sustainability reports, for each group of product, and frequencies of the most representative words of companies' environmental policy (Full Concordance)

Group of products	Tissue Paper	Detergents	Hard Covering	Indoor Paints and Varnishes	Textile Products	Copying and Graphic Paper
Reports	Environmental Report (2012), Environmental Policy, Environmental Declaration (2011), Environmental Information (2011), Sustainability Paper (2012), Integrated Budget (2012), Sustainable Report (2012), Protection of Environment, Sustainability Report (2012), Environmental and Social Report (2012)	Environmental Report (2011), Environmental Declaration (2011), Environmental Declaration (2008)	Company Profile, Sustainability Report (2012), Environmental Declaration (2011)	Annual Report (2010–2011)	Environmental Budget (2012), Climatic Declaration Sustainability Report (2008)	Environmental Report (2011)
Words	Frequencies					
Sustainability*	528	5	42	1	15	88
Environment*	434	249	87	15	43	128
Emissions	320	19	24	1	6	52
Brand (label, trademark, etc.)	262	21	15	40	9	1
Garbage	227	88	37	1	6	8
Pollution	204	4	19	6	1	5
Responsibility	184	0	12	2	3	19
Care	157	11	2	8	0	10
Health	142	2	6	5	0	33
Certifications	138	10	27	5	11	47
Social	118	0	35	1	1	9
Quality	113	34	35	5	3	35
Ecological*	64	10	0	1	1	4
Safety	53	11	20	9	8	74
Recycling	38	19	9	0	2	16
Eco-label	25	25	10	0	7	1

Asterisked words (*) include all those terms which derive from it (example: environment* includes environmental, etc.)

Table 2 Proximity search for the terms "sustainability", "environment", "brand" and "Eco-label" (Selective Concordance)

Group of products/words	Tissue Paper	Detergents	Hard Covering	Indoor Paints and Varnishes	Textile Products	Copying and Graphic Paper
	Meaningful words present "within 10 words of"					
Environment*	"main objectives" "cornerstone of corporate policy" "our future" "putting at the first places the promotion of a correct behavior" "company agenda"	"Company philosophy" "pivotal element of its company policy" "endorsing the e. question in all its forms"	"produce quality" "to be a business priority" "management objectives" "our policy"	"essential to its development strategy" "fundamental values"	"is the basis of our activity" "our aim" "is the path to be followed" "A Better Way to the Future" "vision"	"our mission and our business strategy" "commitment is primary and crucial"
Sustainability*	"strategic factor" "mission" "Value" "component of our Global Business Plan" "business mindset" "vision" "global opportunities" "part of our business model" "value creation"	"business"	"is indispensable to our future" "trying to fulfil our customers' desires and create value" "the path of development"		"is the path to be followed" "the pivot of our vision"	
Brand	"to strengthen our customers fidelity" "secures us a customer advantage"					
Eco-label	"making aware the customers of the issue of environmental care" "officially guaranteed by the EU" "to work with the large scale distribution" "offers itself to European distribution operators as partner"	"making customers aware of human and environment friendly products"	"following the market directives"	"to meet market demand"	"to be able to count on a value recognized at European level"	"to acquire transparency and to allow traceability of our products"

Asterisked words (*) include all those terms which derive from it (example: environment* includes environmental, etc.)

The issue of credibility is an aspect very important in our times considered the increasing knowledge of consumers and their awareness of the choices they perform. This is particularly true for those who recognize themselves in the "green" segment, and which are extremely disenchanted and attentive to compliance of business offerings to the declared focus of the company toward environmental protection.

The second point that arises from the research concerns the motivations that have driven businesses to adopt the
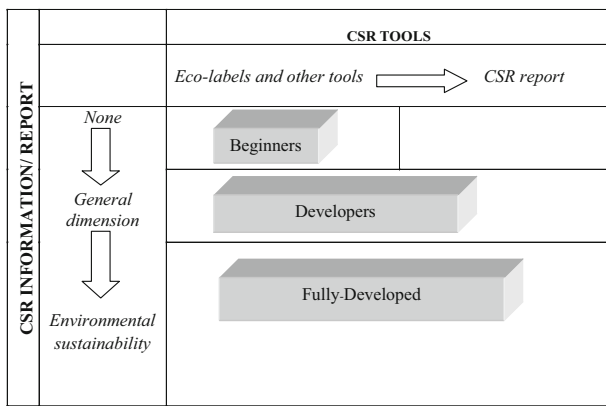
Fig. 6 Prevalent models of behavior for the sustainability communication

European eco-label. The information brought us toward a possible explanation, namely that the EU-Eco-label is not required for its international dimension. It is, therefore, not used for its recognition abroad, which could open businesses the opportunity to enter new markets abroad. Rather, it seems plausible to hypothesize that this label is chosen because the Italian companies do not currently have other alternatives. This also explains the primacy of Italian enterprises in the application of this license with respect to the other European companies. So it is in the Italian legal vacuum which is the main motivation, whereas companies that want to demonstrate the low environmental impact of their processes and products, in Italian territory, must necessarily have recourse to EU-Eco-label.

Conclusions

To the question at the basis of this work, that is to say if firms use eco-label and other marketing tools to support sustainability strategies, the research provides the answer to a limited number of companies that adopt a strategy of sustainability; it shows, compared to the analytical model proposed, a convincing behavior only for these actors which have a eco-label project motivated by sustainability goals, investments and the results obtained, properly communicated to their stakeholders.

The majority of companies surveyed (67 %) does not communicate on business websites the commitment to the environment and an additional percentage (17 %) has a "disorganized" communication.

This situation raises at least two questions that could represent an additional stimulus to research. The first, of methodological nature, concerns the adequacy of the instrument to study the behavior of firms. In the paper, we have used the sustainability report (no financial document) presented by companies on their websites. The analysis

could be deepen on other forms of communication, but at the same time the research discloses a lack of on line communication, by companies investigated, while it is believed to be reasonable that these operators follow the suggestions of Europe to give maximum visibility to the paths of sustainability that they are pursuing.

Another question is about the relevance of sustainability principles in the companies surveyed. Italian companies are leaders in Europe for the EU-Eco-label, but the research has found that the explanation for this record can be attributed to the lack of a national eco-label system, unlike other European countries. Anyway, the majority of Italian companies with the European eco-label do not believe to have to communicate, online, the meaning for the companies of the principle of environmental sustainability. In other research (De Chiara and Delli Carpini 2009) was established the primacy in the world of Italian firms in acquiring some operational tools of social responsibility too, such as SA8000, but the reasons recorded are not always attributed to an higher ethical sensitivity of Italian businesses. For dispelling any doubt about the fact that companies are following a trend in acquiring eco-labels, it is hoped that businesses do more to be credible in terms of environmental sustainability.

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