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Responsible Consumption and Ethical Brands for Sustainable and Fair Development: The Case of Libera Terra

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Abstract

The paper aims at analysing responsible consumption and ethical production phenomena, particularly focusing on the pioneer role of social enterprises in the change process of production patterns towards sustainable production. The Libera Terra case study will lead to an identification of best practices to outline strategic and operational guidelines for effective and sustainable ethical brand strategy design.

A theoretical analysis of responsible consumption and ethical production models, to reason on the nature of the phenomena and the reasons that led to their global spread. Major root causes, core values driving consumption and production patterns will be presented, focusing on the potential of social business models to foster sustainable development, thus offering a valid response to ethical consumers. The Italian project Libera Terra will be examined as a model actor that was able to restructure local economies by promoting social farming on confiscated assets previously owned by mafias. Libera Terra has proved capable of developing a brand strategy that allows for long-term sustainability and competitiveness on the market.

The case study lends support to the claim that for Libera Terra to be sustainable and competitive key success factors were: brand positioning strategy able to convey social mission by means of high-quality products; balance between perceived social values and perceived quality; consortia business model to acquire competitiveness and bargaining power and reinforce a unique and recognizable brand identity; promotion of emulation processes by other actors to generate broader impact.

Keywords: Ethical brand, Responsible consumption, Libera Terra, Social enterprise, Sustainable production, Confiscated assets

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Introduction

Responsible consumption, as a practice of purchasing products and services realized by means of production patterns attentive to the social-environmental variables of the process, is gaining more and more attention from citizens, institutions, and businesses – both of for-profit and non-profit nature. Among the best practices in the domain of ethical brands, a particularly relevant role is played by third-sector organisations – e.g. social enterprises - which avoid the logic of merely obtaining a profit in order to pursue social and/or environmental objectives and which seem to have triggered a change of direction also in the world of for-profit production chains.

In an attempt to identify specific guidelines for the structuring of effective ethical brand strategies, this paper will first portray main factors that have contributed to the spread of critical consumption, with a focus on the globalization of markets as a phenomenon triggering an increase in income and social inequalities, as well as an increase in environmental risks related to production processes. Indeed, ethical consumption trends and - accordingly - ethical production models may be understood as a reaction to increasingly aggressive competition on markets that led to economic polarisation, inequalities, and rising poverty in certain areas of the world. In this process, we may observe a diminishing ability to act of welfare states, and a concurrent increasingly important role of non-governmental organizations in responding to unmet needs.

After an exploration of the phenomenon of responsible consumption, the paper will illustrate an in-depth analysis of the Libera Terra case, which proved a virtuous example in the field of ethical production, able to generate social and economic capital thanks to the social reuse of goods confiscated from mafias, thus enhancing local development and social innovation in Southern Italy territories that are particularly characterized by democracy deficits.

Starting from the strategic brand choices implemented by Libera Terra, the concluding chapter will introduce a reflection on development prospects of the world of ethical brands and on the strategic and operational guidelines to structure effective and sustainable brand strategies.

1. Responsible consumption: a global phenomenon

Economic models like fair trade, fair tourism or the purchase of products realized by reusing seized assets that were previously owned by mafias are spreading as responsible consumption tools within an economic paradigm that focuses on social responsibility, which is not only attributed to public institutions and businesses, but also to individuals that concretely contribute to shaping the economic system. In this way citizens turn into active subjects in an attempt to model a virtuous economic circuit that can cope with two leading issues, which are both strictly connected to globalization: on the one side the increase in income inequalities, on the other side environmental issues (Becchetti and Paganetto, 2003, p. 173 ff.).

For better understanding the underlying logic of responsible consumption choices, one of the major topics to be investigated is the nature of the phenomenon and the reasons that led to a collective awareness by all actors involved in the production, trade and consumption chain of goods and services.

The first issue under scrutiny is the economic and social context in which responsible consumption tools have been spreading. Thus, in section 1 major root causes, core values driving consumption and possibilities for action will be presented. The second question under discussion is whether changes in production patterns have been developing as natural consequence of the increasing demand for ethical economic models. In section 2 an analysis of sustainable production patterns and ethical brands will be provided.

1.1 Globalization

Since the 1990s “globalization” has been a commonly used term to refer to “increasing economic, political and socio-cultural integration, mostly determined by recent technological innovations” (Becchetti and Paganetto, 2003, p. 26). The phenomenon at issue is characterized by market financialization and subsequent dematerialization of the economy, increased impact of technologies, transnationalization of markets, hypercompetition and resulting social dumping[1], growing accessibility to information and data. Contextually, a global civil society has been arising, aimed at spreading a new approach for critically investigating the implications of the globalization process (Paltrinieri, 2012, p. 13-14). If on the one hand globalization is producing enormous opportunities for economic development, on the other hand there are increasing concerns about the environmental and social sustainability of the phenomenon at stake (Becchetti, 2005, p. 78-79).

From an environmental point of view, a problem arises concerning impoverishing of raw materials, climate change and pollutant emissions, waste accumulation, deforestation and

reduced biological diversity. All this is sharpened by the fast and not sustainable growth of developing Countries.

From a social point of view, the foremost problems to cope with are the enormous inequalities - both among Countries and within Countries - and the poverty that arose from uncontrolled development. Those criticalities do not only impact on underdeveloped Countries, but on many developed ones, as well. As a matter of fact, technological progress determined decreased demand for unskilled labour and contextually an increase in high-skilled labour. This results in a general rise in wage gaps among the above-mentioned work categories, thus sharpening social differences even in the most industrialized economies[2].

As underlined in many studies, contemporary globalized and capitalistic society is characterized by the central role of consumption, intensified by economic policies that outlined material well-being and economic growth as primary goals (Paltrinieri, 2012, p. 111). In such society, consumerism exacerbates social and economic disparities (Baudrillard, 1976, cited in Paltrinieri, 2012).

Given the central role of consumption in modern societies and the growing need for intervention to contain the adverse consequences of uncontrolled economic growth, our research aims at investigating consumption models as tools for market politicization.

1.2 Social responsibility and the “vote with the wallet” theory

If on the one side increased interdependence among Countries turned problems from local to global and given that the market alone cannot ensure a fair and sustainable development, it is equally true that citizens' awareness and their ability to impact on companies and institutions is getting stronger (Becchetti and Paganetto, 2003, p. 174). According to Di Nallo, the increasing individualization and personal alienation that globalization brought about, lead individuals to perceive a strong sense of responsibility and anxiety, that are directly connected with the fact that individuals feel they are the only responsible for their destiny (Paltrinieri, 2012, p. 25 ff.). Citizens perceive a magnified freedom of choice with respect to the past, and a greater quantity of alternatives and information at their disposal; at the same time, they also perceive they are alone in their decision-making process. This explains various present consumption trends, by which consumers intend to demonstrate ethical requests and self-regulating life projects, in terms of a request for better life quality (Di Nallo, 1977, p. 151-152). Such ethical request embraces not only individual interests, but also public-social interests (Paltrinieri, 2004, p. 152). Since citizens feel that their governments do not take care of them anymore, they personally deal with themselves and they express their beliefs - even the

political ones - by means of non-traditional vote channels: their consumption choices (Hertz, 2003, p. 153).

There takes shape what economist L. Becchetti theorizes as “vote with the wallet”: citizens can be advocates for economic democracy, enabled by not only the classical voting method, but also by daily consumption and saving choices that can impact on businesses and institutions. The latter - confronted with a greater demand for ethics and social responsibility - need to adjust their production and trade patterns unless they want to lose significant market shares (Becchetti and Paganetto, 2003, p. 16-17). The standpoints of a pioneering group - that directs its consumption choices based on the product social content, and not only on its price - represent the driving force of the whole mechanism. Consumers become protagonists of an empowerment process, enabled by increased possibilities to access massive amounts of information, particularly thanks to smartphones and social media (Schlaile *et al.*, 2018, pp. 561-588). Available information results in greater critical ability and - consequently - in greater ability to act and to produce an impact. Political consumerism makes consumers-citizens the protagonists of a political choice that can influence the productive side of the economy (Paltrinieri, 2012, p. 127). In this sense, ethical consumption is understood as a political choice rather than just a change in market demand (Barnett *et al.*, 2010, p. 1).

1.3 Responsible consumption: definition and analysis of the phenomenon

Definition

The term “responsible consumption”, which is also commonly labelled “ethical consumption” or “critical consumption”, refers to:

«The practice of purchasing products and services produced in a way that minimizes social and/or environmental damage, while avoiding products and services deemed to have a negative impact on society or the environment. It can also include a boycott of a company or product, a type of personal consumer activism» (Chakravartty, 2016, pp. 24-25).

According to this definition, political consumerism results in the promotion or penalization of given commodity-related categories or businesses. In its positive interpretation – or “buycott” - consumers purchase products or services for rewarding virtuous entities on the market, such as companies that adopted production models that pay attention to the social and environmental impact of their decisions. Some examples are fair-trade organizations, Solidal Purchasing Groups, companies - both for profit and non-profit - that adopt organic procedures, specific best practices in managing their human resources or other Corporate Social Responsibility strategies. For the purposes of this analysis, best practices that turn out to be

of particular importance are third-sector organizations - e.g. social enterprises - that avoid the mere logic of achieving profit in order to contextually pursue social and/or environmental objectives. These include social businesses operating for the reuse of seized assets previously owned by mafias by implementing farming activity and re-integration of disadvantaged people into the labour market. Our research aims at in-depth analysing Libera Terra, an organization falling into this category, in order to identify possible successful ethical brand strategies to achieve a competitive advantage.

In its negative declension, responsible consumption translates into boycotting brands, services, and products of “irresponsible” companies, mainly by a non-purchase choice (Paltrinieri, 2012, p. 127-128).

Trend analysis

Responsible consumption practices are gaining increasing attention from citizens, companies, and institutions at local and international level. This is also demonstrated by the Sustainable Development Goal #12 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promoted by the United Nations, which aims at “ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns” (United Nations, 2015). According to the UN program:

«Since sustainable consumption and production aims at “doing more and better with less,” net welfare gains from economic activities can increase by reducing resource use, degradation, and pollution along the whole life cycle, while increasing quality of life. There also needs to be significant focus on operating on supply chain, involving everyone from producer to final consumer. This includes educating consumers on sustainable consumption and lifestyles, providing them with adequate information through standards and labels and engaging in sustainable public procurement, among others» (ibidem).

The growth in ethical consumption practices appears to be a worldwide trend.

A 2008 survey by the National Geographic Society and GlobScan on consumer choice reported on current consumer behaviour in 14 countries worldwide. The report general findings highlight how «consumers feel empowered as individuals and are willing to make changes in their consumption habits» (National Geographic Society and GlobeScan, 2008, pp. 10-14). Moreover, there is evidence for stronger demand for organic and local foods (ibidem). Similar findings are reported in a global opinion survey carried out across 22 markets on six continents by BBC World News and Synovate in 2008: in particular, «there has been a significant shift in concern over climate change, translating through to many facets of consumer behaviour» (Synovate and BBC World, 2008). According to the survey in question, 72% of respondents

are concerned about climate change, 68% of them have reduced the use of packaging and bags, while 61% have bought green products (ibidem).

Despite increased awareness and concern about environmental and social issues, many consumers have not changed their lifestyles and purchasing decisions yet. Some major barriers to behavioural changes are a general lack of understanding of the issue and associated costs (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008, p. 18). Especially, a large number of consumers feel confused about the ethics of a product, given the increasing variety of on-pack claims and third-party labels - both from internationally recognized bodies and from non-certifying third parties. In addition, we may observe how several brands - including large-scale retailers - have developed their own certifications for fair and sustainable products. Nonetheless, certification and labels can play a key role in fostering responsible consumption if they are part of a broader brand strategy (ivi, p. 19). In the coming sections we will in-depth analyse how an Italian social enterprise has been able to merge socio-environmental values and profit goals into its brand strategy.

For the sake of our analysis and for better understanding the dynamics behind Libera Terra's successful brand strategies, the most recent responsible consumption trends in the Italian context will be introduced.

Italian consumers confirm the prevailing trend at international level: according to a survey promoted by the Observatory for Cohesion and Social Inclusion (OCIS) and conducted by SWG in 2018, 63,4% of respondents adopted responsible consumption practices in the period February 2017 - March 2018[3]. We can therefore observe a consistent increase compared to the data observed in 2002, according to which only 28,5% of the sample declared to adopt ethical consumption practices. Those who declare the opposite justify their choice asserting they are not interested in the phenomenon or not aware of responsible consumption tools (OCIS, 2018). Thus, we should stress the extreme need for strengthening communication and information on available tools for citizens. This assertion finds confirmation in a further market survey conducted by Nielsen for Fairtrade (The Nielsen Company, 2018). According to this investigation, the weakest link in ethical product circuits is the fear of potential consumers that product and process controls may not be effective. Thus, brand mistrust stands as main barrier to purchase.

With regard to the reasons behind the gesture, between 2002 and 2018 we observed an increase in the percentage of those who opted for responsible consumption practices not only for ethical reasons, but for a true interest in product quality (11,5% compared to 3,8% in 2002). Moreover, responsible consumers prove to have on average greater trust in institutions and a more vivid political participation compared to non-ethical consumers. We may underline that

the most indicated answer by interviewees is “purchase sobriety”, i.e. purchase choices that pay specific attention to energy consumption and waste generation, which may be understood as a natural response to recent economic downturns (OCIS, 2018). According to Pirani and Zandonai, growing attention to responsible consumption developed in strict relation to purchasing power reduction - resulting from the “great contraction” - and to a downshifting of lifestyles that encourages individuals to repair, reuse and share (Pirani and Zandonai, 2017, p. 5).

Growing interest in ethical consumption also emerges from the Ancc-Coop 2018 report, conducted by the Italian National Association of Consumer Cooperatives (Ancc – Coop, 2018). For the sake of our analysis, we report the following relevant information excerpted from the survey (increase percentage observed in the first semester 2018 compared to 2017):

- mass consumption is increasingly fragmented: small niches brands (+4,3%) and private labels (+3,7%) gain in importance;
- interest in 100% Italian products is growing (+8,6%);
- health product sales are growing (+2,3%);
- e-commerce is increasing (+11%) (ivi, pp. 252-253; pp. 300-301).

The staggering growth of the organic sector deserves particular attention: according to market research company Nomisma, in 2018 81% of Italian families consciously purchased organic products (MarcabyBolognaFiere, 2019).

The data that have been presented provide an opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon at issue and on related potential developments. Section 2 of this paper will first address the issue of the increasing response of businesses to the demand for ethics; we will then look at the central role of social enterprises in fostering local development and in offering a valid response to ethical consumers.

2. Responsible production for fair and sustainable development

2.1 The spread of responsible production strategies

The growing demand for ethics has brought about a substantial change in the supply side of the economy. As a matter of fact, companies are challenged to change their behaviour in response to ethical consumers seeking for guaranteed compliance with social and environmental regulation. Thus, ethical brands, labels and related marketing strategies are entering the mainstream. For enhancing social perception of products or services, many companies «are developing codes of conduct and monitoring systems to improve the social conditions in their supply chains» (Zadek *et al.*, 1998, p. 15). In the last years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)[4] has increasingly become part of business strategies for both ethical-environmental reasons and for potential profits, given the role of consumers in pressuring private companies to modify their supply (Nave and Ferreira, 2019). Focusing on the Italian context, private labels are growing particularly in the premium segment (+13% in 2018 compared to 2017) and in the organic/green segment (+7,5%), while an increasing number of large-scale retailers are launching their own organic and fair product lines (MarcabyBolognaFiere, 2019).

The impact of consumers' awareness and activism on the market is plainly visible, though, some important questions may arise regarding the nature and the future progression of ethical brands and CSR strategies. In analysing the Libera Terra case study, we will question whether and how the pioneering role of social economy in production patterns could induce a change of direction even in the for-profit sector, and how third sector could be able to compete with for-profit organizations.

2.2 The role of the third sector in promoting fair and sustainable development

From a theoretical point of view, there is ample support for the claim that third sector organizations like social enterprises play a major role in the process of developing new economic models of fair and sustainable growth. In particular, research on social enterprises seems to validate the claim that the willingness to respond to growing social needs that are left unmet by State and market is intrinsic in these social business models' mission (Mazzanti *et al.*, 2016, p. 22). Given the spread of new societal challenges and needs, social enterprises seek to provide to local communities those goods and/or services that would otherwise not be offered by for-profit enterprises - because of limited profitability - or by the public sector - due to limited financial resources (Birkhölzer, 2009, p. 16). This translates into business projects that aim at: «fighting poverty and social exclusion; offering socially useful and/or ecologically

sound workplaces; integrating long-term unemployed or otherwise socially disadvantaged; developing a sustainable local or regional economy» (ibidem) and that may be considered pioneers in the attempt to tackle social exclusion and to promote work integration of disadvantaged people (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010) in response to the consequences of uncontrolled economic growth. As stated in chapter 1.1, ethical consumption trends and - accordingly - ethical production models may be understood as a reaction to increasingly aggressive competition on markets that led to economic polarisation, inequalities, and rising poverty in certain areas of the world. In this process, we may observe a diminishing ability to act of welfare states in their effort to provide social protection to the most fragile populations, and a concurrent increasingly important role of non-governmental organizations in responding to the above-mentioned unmet needs (Birkhölzer, 2009, p. 13).

In this paper, the discussion centres on the case study of the social enterprise Libera Terra as a model actor able to enhance local development and social innovation[5] in Southern Italy territories that are particularly characterized by democracy deficits. In those contexts, Libera Terra reflects how third-sector projects act as forerunners in the change process of production patterns towards sustainable production. In the coming sections, we will inspect the major success factors that allowed ethical brand Libera Terra to be an agent of change in restructuring local economies by promoting social farming in the belief that “mafias can be defeated by excellence”.

3. A case study: Libera Terra social enterprise

3.1 The Libera Terra project

Libera Terra was established in 2000 through the initiative of the association *Libera. Associations, Names and Numbers Against Mafia Organizations*[6]. Nowadays, it is a network of 9 social cooperatives type B[7] - according to the Italian legislation - dealers of the brand Libera Terra[8] and coordinated by the Consortium Libera Terra Mediterraneo Cooperativa Sociale ONLUS. The Consortium was established in 2008 for managing processing and trade of products conferred by the cooperatives, to jointly and effectively approach the market. Peculiar features of Libera Terra social cooperatives are their establishment by means of public tender notices, and the implementation of farming activities on seized assets that were previously owned by organized crime. Those assets are granted on a free loan for use by public local administrators, in accordance with the Italian Law nr. 109/96[9].

The project's stated mission is:

«to give dignity to territories with a strong mafia presence through the creation of autonomous and cooperative farms that are self-sufficient, stable, and that are able to create workplaces, thereby establishing a moral economic system based on legality, social justice and market» (Libera Terra, 2020)[10].

According to the Brand Procedural Guidelines, cooperatives and other associative forms of enterprise are entitled to apply for the use of Libera Terra brand to pursue the following objectives:

- *«valorise existing resources on the territory;*
- *create work opportunities for the territory, also by means of inclusion processes of the unemployed and disadvantaged people;*
- *favour the professional growth and the active engagement of all involved actors;*
- *monitor and communicate the social value of seized assets and their impact on the local context;*
- *implement sustainable production processes, respecting the environment and its resources, preferably applying the organic farming method;*
- *disseminate Libera's objectives and the related activities promoted by the Dealer of the brand;*
- *pursue global sustainability (social, environmental, economic) and the continuous improvement of management processes» (Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, 2017, p. 2).*

3.2 *The actors*

For a comprehensive understanding of the project, an overview of involved actors will be introduced, aimed at illustrating the protagonists of a cooperative project for the social reuse of seized assets.

- Libera Terra Cooperatives

They represent the entrepreneurial instrument designed for the reuse of seized assets - either plots of land or real estate - in accordance with the Law nr. 109/96. 8 out of the 9 cooperatives currently participating in the project are members and/or confer their production to the Libera Terra Mediterraneo Consortium.

- Libera Terra Mediterraneo Consortium

As underlined in section 3.1, the Consortium consists of almost all of the Libera Terra cooperatives and is mainly responsible for coordinating the productive activities of its members, as well as for managing processing of conferred raw materials into finished products and their subsequent commercialization (Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo Cooperativa Sociale ONLUS, 2019, p. 4). The Consortium represents an effective operational tool aimed at fostering integration and organization of conferring cooperatives. Implemented activities include: raw materials production planning (cultivation plan), commercial management of branded products, engagement of local stakeholders by means of production or transformation agreements, responsible tourism, administrative support of members and conferring cooperatives (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2017).

- Cooperare con Libera Terra Agency

The Agency for cooperative development and legality was established in 2006 on the initiative of relevant companies members of Legacoop Bologna[11] with the purpose of creating a network of competences and know-how at the service of Libera Terra actors (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2020)[12]. At present time, the Agency includes over 70 members from all over Italy[13]. It has been key actor in the elaboration of the Brand Procedural Guidelines and in the establishment and start-up of the Consortium and its cooperatives. Its fields of activity include:

- To provide advice in terms of Brand Strategy Plan, thus guiding Libera Terra cooperatives in implementing strategic choices regarding new or modified products/services, products' value chain, sales channels, communication and promotion, project design for obtaining public or private funding.
- To monitor the social and economic requirements stated in the Procedural Guidelines.

- To design feasibility studies and business plans for companies willing to participate in the project.
- To design public calls for establishing new cooperatives.
- To advice Libera Terra cooperatives in their start-up, stabilization, and development phases, by supporting them in structuring their budget and management control and by training their human resources[14].

In addition, the Agency encourages and supports the creation and strengthening of collaborative networks to promote business models cantered on legality and excellence. De facto, paramount goal of the Agency is to engage relevant stakeholders from the third sector - mostly in Northern Italy - to make them active part in promoting legality and the transfer of know-how and expertise to Libera Terra actors[15].

- Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie

The Association has played a role of primary importance not only in the promotion of the Libera Terra project, but also in the promotion of Law nr. 109/96 on the social reuse of seized assets. Libera does not directly manage the assets, but it carries out information and sensitization actions during judicial procedures - i.e. before permanent seizure of assets - and formation and participatory design actions during the administrative stage - i.e. after seizure (Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, 2017, p. 14).

- ANBSC

The Italian National Agency for the administration and allocation of sequestered and seized assets (ANBSC) was established in 2010 to administrate and allocate assets upon completion of the seizure procedure and to support judicial administrators from sequester to first-degree seizure. It supervises the collection and systematisation of information and data on sequestered and seized assets[16].

3.3 The Libera Terra brand strategy

In the present section the main brand strategies implemented by Libera Terra[17] will be illustrated with the aim of providing a comprehensive picture of the brand philosophy developed by the social enterprise at issue and to identify some best practices that could be applied by ethical brands to effectively pursue both social and economic objectives.

Libera Terra brand strategy is mainly regulated by the Brand Procedural Guidelines, which we can define as the reference document that outlines and regulates the conditions for becoming

brand dealers. The Guidelines document was adopted in 2007 and it stands out with respect to most procedural guidelines since it combines both value-driven standards and qualitative standards, related to both products and processes. Particularly, it envisages requisites and commitments with regards to:

- values and ethics
- legality
- work-conditions
- quality of production and management processes
- coordination in the external communication of the brand
- coordination in the participation in call for proposals/funding
- social, cultural, and training activities for the local communities
- training of involved professionals
- financial statements
- management control and budgeting (Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, 2017; Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2017, p. 8).

Libera Terra brand strategy will be analysed with reference to: product range, packaging, pricing and value transfer to conferring subjects, processing and commercialization, communication and positioning.

3.3.1 Product range and packaging

Libera Terra products are classifiable in 3 categories:

1. Food
2. Wine
3. Gift.

Note that some brands that are complementary to Libera Terra brand have been launched on the market, e.g. “Centopassi” to distinguish Sicilian wines, “Hisò Telaray” to distinguish Apulian wines, and “Il g(i)usto” to identify products like legumes, oil, honey, mozzarella, fruit juices, and others[18].

In addition, since 2009 Libera Terra has been providing fair and responsible tourism itineraries to valorise the territories where Libera Terra cooperatives are located[19].

The advent of Libera Terra Mediterraneo Consortium has determined a restyling of product packaging aimed at designing a common and recognizable line for the entire range of Libera Terra products:

- to draw the attention of consumers and stand out with respect to competitor products;
- to enhance product characteristics, in particular raw materials' origin, connection to the territory, organic method;
- to valorise the identity-making project features, avoiding the risk of misrepresenting the social dimension of the project's mission;
- to valorise the use of biodegradable and recyclable materials (Citarda *et al.*, 2019).

3.3.2 Pricing and value transfer

The Consortium claims to aim at the best possible value for money. The current brand positioning is a premium one, relative to both price and intrinsic product value, in line with the high production costs and the project identity strategy: "mafias can be defeated by excellence".

Focusing on the value transfer to conferring cooperatives, we should distinguish between provisions from members and from non-members:

- In case of raw materials conferred by members, the Consortium applies conferring regulations that define a reward-penalty system. Indeed, the guidelines establish a range of qualitative standards for conferred raw materials; once the organoleptic quality has been evaluated, the Consortium defines a price, which - in some cases - might be higher than the minimum guaranteed price. Note, however, that minimum prices defined by the Consortium are higher than those guaranteed on the market. The illustrated system should design a virtuous mechanism to encourage cooperatives to continuous improvements (Citarda *et al.*, 2019).
- In case of raw materials conferred by non-members, conferring agreements emulate fair-trade principles. Signed agreements are long-term and guarantee minimum prices regardless of market prices uncertainty. The involvement of local organic farmers, selected based on quality and ethics, is a key aspect of Libera Terra's mission, since it empowers a positive contamination of the territory (Fiore, 2017, p. 233).

3.3.3 Processing and commercialization

Similarly to the selection criteria applied to any project partner, companies in charge of processing raw materials are also chosen based on quality and ethics. Priority is given to cooperatives and local actors.

The subsequent commercialization of finite products is managed by the Consortium. Around 70% of total sales are attributable to large-scale distribution channels; a major role is played by Coop, the biggest Italian consumer cooperative[20][21]. Such balance could be read as a reciprocal exchange: on the one side, Libera Terra products have access to relevant sales channels, on the other side, Libera Terra project contributes to the positioning strategy of consumer cooperatives.

Indeed, we may observe how the relationship established by Libera Terra with the world of Italian cooperation - especially in Northern Italy - has proven essential for the project growth. A first collaboration with Coop has expanded to include Legacoop - Italian cooperative organization that has been a key actor for the establishment of Cooperare con Libera Terra Agency, as already mentioned in section 3.2.

Around 30% of total sales is attributable to minor channels, as the Libera Terra online shop, foreign clients, Libera Terra shops ("botteghe"), specialist shops and other large-scale distributors others than Coop. A closer look at the 2018 balance sheet of the Consortium indicates the following:

- revenues from large-scale distributors: 69%;
- revenues from Coop channels: 63%;
- revenues from foreign clients: +73%;
- e-commerce platform: +13% (Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo Cooperativa Sociale ONLUS, 2019, pp. 9-10).

The Consortium recently declared that its strategy envisages growing carefulness regarding the stagnation that Italian large-scale distribution is experiencing and aims at a greater diversification of sales channels, particularly focusing on e-commerce[22] and foreign markets, which experienced a relevant growth (Citarda *et al.*, 2019).

3.3.4 Communication and brand positioning

The communication and positioning strategy of the brand Libera Terra has been developing through 3 main stages:

1. At project launch, Libera Terra products were identified by a positioning strategy that was exclusively social and a commercialization strategy that was likewise based on that positioning, with a very influential role played by Coop. As a matter of fact, some of the first products did not reach qualitative levels in line with prices and market standards (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 52).
2. An analysis of the positioning map illustrated in the brand strategic plan outlines how - during a second intermediate stage - top priority has been given to a shift upwards along the vertical quality axis.

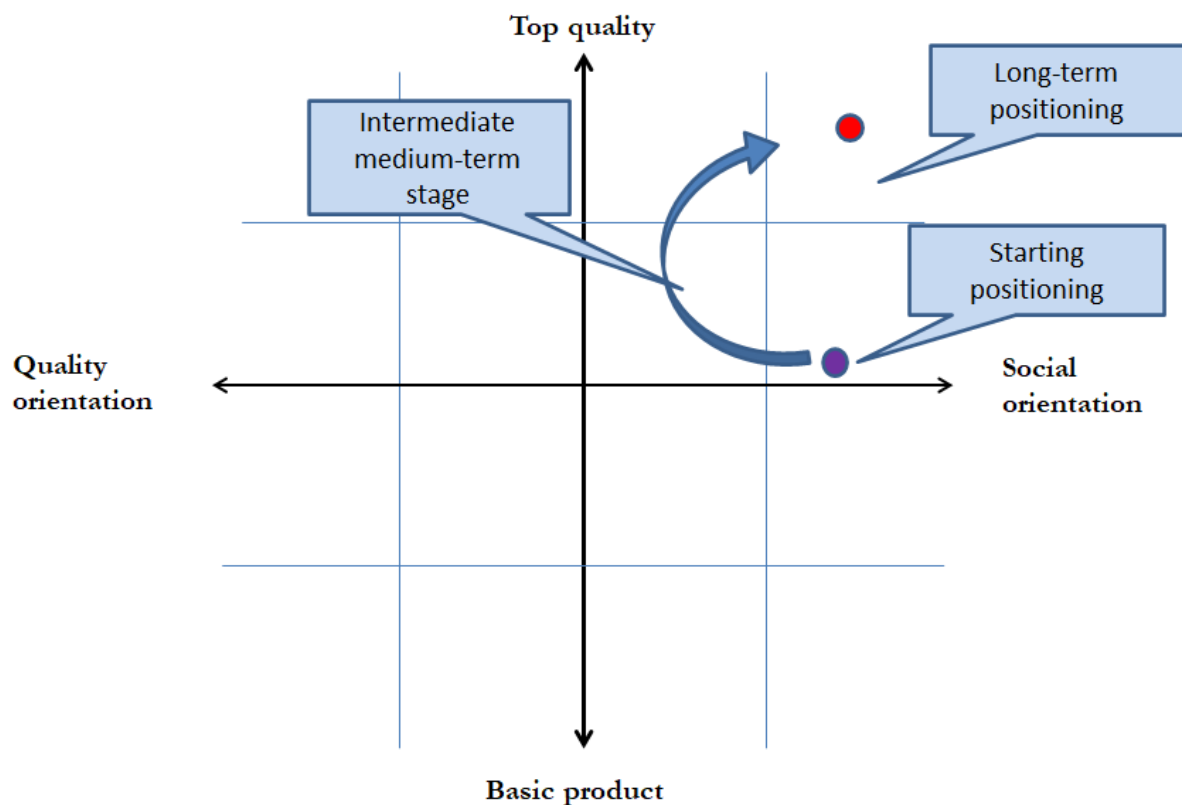


Figure 1: Brand positioning strategy (2011) (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 92).[23]

According to a survey[24] conducted in 2010 on the Libera Terra brand profile: 43% of interviewees stated they would like to «receive more information regarding the products, their organoleptic features and their history», 12% expressed their willingness to choose among a broader range of products, 8% were demanding for higher quality (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 45). As a matter of fact, the Consortium - aware of the widespread belief that third-sector actors are not able to be efficient or competitive on the market - has worked with foresight towards the strengthening and communication of qualitative features of products and implemented activities, rather than identity-related aspects (Citarda *et al.*, 2019).

Further aspects to be considered are the high production costs of Libera Terra products[25], that implicate high product prices and require - thus - high quality levels that can legitimize the price itself (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 128ff.).

3. After having observed an increase in perceived quality, the Consortium's current objective is to restore a balance between identity and activities, i.e. between communication of identity-related aspects and qualitative aspects (Citarda *et al.*, 2019).

The achievements reached by Libera Terra strategies encourage a reflection on the necessity for third-sector actors operating in the fair production and fair trade to rethink their brand positioning, thus aiming for a strengthening of intrinsic and perceived quality. Such strategy may build customer loyalty and expand the number of end consumers by attracting even those that at a first stage are not interested in the project social mission. Accordingly, the organoleptic quality of a branded product should turn into a reason to purchase and - finally - convey the project's mission.

4. Strategic proposals for ethical brands

This concluding chapter is an illustration of proposed operational guidelines, conceived in the light of a review of Libera Terra's key success factors and addressed to ethical brands and social businesses committed to offer a valid response to ethical consumers. The following table outlines observed success factors and related strategic suggestions.

Best practice	Strategic proposal
Social business model that aims at long-term sustainability.	Overcome the widespread "charity model" of third-sector bodies; develop a sustainable social business model that aims at long-run competitiveness and sustainability; stress the pioneering role of social economy in promoting environmental and social sustainability.
Brand positioning and communication: balance between social identity e conveyed quality.	Design a brand positioning strategy able to convey a project's social mission by means of high-quality products/services; seek a balance between perceived social values and perceived quality; develop consumers' trust by communicating key ethical and qualitative features: transparency, disintermediation, excellence, certification.
Replicable, sustainable, and competitive business model.	Promote emulation processes by other actors - both for-profit and non-profit - to generate a broader impact; encourage consortia business models to acquire greater competitiveness and bargaining power and to reinforce a unique and recognizable brand identity.
Valorisation of seized means of production; value generation for local communities.	Promote the social reuse of seized assets to turn them from illegal capital into social and

	economic legal capital for local development.
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4.1 Social business model

The first key success factor to be highlighted is the ability of Libera Terra project of combining market principles with a social mission revolving around redistribution and reciprocity, which - according to Defourny and Nyssens - we may consider a peculiar feature typifying social enterprises (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). As underlined in section 2.2, we might thus stress the relevance and potential of third-sector social businesses in promoting a change not only in existing production philosophies, but also in the general perception of third-sector bodies' ability to be self-sustaining and competitive on the market. In order to overcome widespread prejudices on their inefficiency and economic unsustainability, third-sector actors could precisely start from investing in properly communicating the pioneering role they assumed in promoting environmental and social sustainability, thus being the first who responded to the growing demand for ethical production patterns.

4.2 Brand positioning

A core strong point in Libera Terra's brand strategy is the visionary decision to work towards a strengthening of perceived product/service quality to reach competitiveness in the long run. Current research seems to validate the view that social innovations and social entrepreneurship show too little investment in infrastructural growth and brand image towards sustainable entrepreneurial models. This often results in products being purchased for the social message they convey, rather than for their quality and functionality (Komatsu Cipriani, 2017).

As Komatsu Cipriani observes: «Social innovations must therefore escalate their branding efforts if they are to convince consumers to buy their products not only to support the cause but also for the quality of the product or service itself». Accordingly, the brand challenge that many cooperative actors are nowadays facing is the design of a method for enhancing perceived quality over perceived social value, whereas such actors tend to underinvest in their brand image construction, given - among other factors - the complexity of their business models, which attempt to combine economic and social objectives (ibidem).

As a matter of fact, in recent years we could observe an increase in the percentage of consumers who opted for responsible consumption practices not so much for ethical reasons,

but for a true interest in product quality (OCIS, 2018), which amounts to a strategic factor for competitiveness and survival on the marketplace. There takes place a «progressive reshaping of the social value related to the original dimension of fair trade, [...] which by now engages a limited group of *aficionados*» (Pirani and Zandonai, 2017, p. 15). What consumers find increasingly attractive are features like:

«product “authenticity”, which is made up of a varying mix of environmental sustainability, certified ethics and a link to a specific “territory” [...]. Added to this is a growing attention towards intrinsic product features attributable to design aesthetics, packaging and functionality. These are aspects that characterize traditional consumption, but seem to be inextricably linked to the social component, which, alone, “is no longer sufficient”» (ibidem).

Accordingly, closer attention should be paid to product quality, i.e. the ability to meet the real needs of consumers, that is only achievable by means of accurate planning, supply and communication of delivered product/service that «should not be overloaded with excessive social quality, which could create a hard-to-overcome psychological barrier, rather than developing an added value» (Napolitano, 1999, p. 47).

Along these lines, Libera Terra case is a meaningful example, since it was able to gather the need for building up perceived quality and - after having reinforced a premium positioning - rebalancing qualitative component and social identity, in the belief that a brand identity exclusively or mainly of social-nature exposes the brand to cultural fluctuation (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 81).

Successful brand positioning is inextricably linked to well-designed communication strategies: priority objective for ethical brands should be the design of communication activities intended to develop and/or recover consumers' confidence in the specific brand. De facto, several surveys on consumption choices highlight how the lack of trust in the brand and the ignorance of existing responsible consumption tools represent major barriers to purchase (OCIS, 2018). A redesign of information and communication activities is therefore needed aiming on the one side at captivating new market shares, on the other side at resolving the crux of scepticism on the effectiveness of controls on products and processes. For this purpose, key concept to be communicated is the transparency of production processes, enabled by a gradual disintermediation between producer and end consumer; the latter can thus become active part of the production chain, which modern agribusiness has made excessively fragmented (Pirani and Zandonai, 2017, pp. 17-18).

4.3 Replicability, sustainability, and competitiveness

The generation of the broadest possible impact - both economic, social, and environmental - should be an integral part of social enterprises' missions, that is, to promote emulation processes by other for-profit and non-profit actors to direct a positive contamination affecting local communities.

For Libera Terra's business model to be sustainable, competitive, and replicable, a key role has been played by Libera Terra Mediterraneo Consortium. Indeed, we may observe how social reuse projects tend to acquire an excessively local and fragmented dimension, which results in those experiences being barely scalable (edited by Pellegrini, 2015, pp. 40-47). The consortium model represents an effective tool for those actors to pursue economies of scale and increase the capacity to face the market in a shared and effective manner, by increasing critical mass, bargaining power and competitiveness of small-scale producers, as well as stabilizing existing and new relationships with large-scale retailers. Through the lens of branding, the Libera Terra Mediterraneo Consortium represented a strategic instrument for creating a unique and recognizable brand identity, starting from the cultural and historic heritage of the brand Libera.

4.4 Social reuse of seized assets

In a context of growing global uncertainty - in terms of lack of trust in institutions, growing poverty and inequalities, intolerance, underdevelopment - civil society plays a key role in developing virtuous economic models that enhance local development, social innovations and social capital in environments and sectors where we often observe shortcomings in State interventions. Indeed, social economy initiatives - like social reuse projects of seized assets - are spreading as attempts to face emerging societal challenges (Birkhölzer, 2009, p. 16).

Those business projects are capable of generating not only economic development within local communities, but also social capital of both primary-type or "bonding" - i.e. referring to primary informal networks and aimed at strengthening their boundaries - and of secondary-type or "bridging" - i.e. related to civil society and intended to allow connections beyond primary networks (Martelli, 2006, pp. 15ff.).

We might thus observe how social enterprises working for the reuse of seized assets represent exemplary success stories, able to transform illegal assets in legal and sustainable projects by rebuilding local economies and building social consensus in contexts that are afflicted by high levels of corruption and crime (Mazzanti et al., 2016, pp. 22ff.). Contextually, those

projects were able to respond to the growing share of critical consumers that are willing to vote with their wallet through the exercise of responsible consumption choices.

Notes

[1] Social dumping is defined as *«the decision of a business in a developed country to supply its domestic market through production located in a developing economy where labour standards do not comply with the minimum requirements adopted by the home country, therefore allowing the firm to enjoy lower production costs»* (EurWORK, 2016).

[2] <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/globalizzazione>

[3] The survey was conducted on the 9th of February 2018 with the *Computer Assisted Web Interviewing* methodology.

[4] The European Commission defined CSR as *«concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis»*. (Commission of the European Communities, 2002).

[5] Social innovation is defined as *«conceptual, process or product change, organisational change and changes in financing, and can deal with new relationships with stakeholders and territories. 'Social innovation' seeks new answers to social problems by: identifying and delivering new services that improve the quality of life of individuals and communities; identifying and implementing new labour market integration processes, new competencies, new jobs, and new forms of participation, as diverse elements that each contribute to improving the position of individuals in the workforce»* (OECD, 2000).

[6] *«Libera. Associations, Names and Numbers Against Mafia Organizations was created on March 25, 1995 with the purpose of buttressing civil society in its fight against mafia organizations and with the hope of promoting legality and justice. Currently Libera coordinates more than 1600 regionally-based associations, groups, and schools committed to constructing political-cultural and organizational synergies, synergies which will spread a culture of legality»*. Source: <https://www.liberaterra.it/en/world-libera-terra/>.

[7] According to Italian Law 8/11/1991 nr. 381, social cooperatives type B exist to *«pursue the general interest of community to human promotion and social integration of citizens through the implementation of activities - agricultural, industrial, commercial or service-providing - aimed at integrating disadvantaged people into the labour market»* (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1991).

[8] Libera Terra brand is owned by Libera. Yearly, the Consortium Libera Terra Mediterraneo transfers royalties to Libera for the brand usage.

[9] Italian law nr. 109/96 regulates the public and social reuse of confiscated property (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1996).

[10] <https://www.liberaterra.it/en/world-libera-terra/>

[11] Legacoop Bologna is an Italian cooperative organization that «operates to promote the development of cooperation, mutuality, and solidarity, in order to stimulate economic relations and relations of solidarity among member cooperatives, as well as to favour the spread of cooperative principles and values». Source: <https://www.legacoop.bologna.it/english-version/legacoop-in-bologna/>.

[12] <http://www.cooperareconliberaterra.it/chi-siamo/>

[13] Ordinary members provide the Agency with economic contributions and free-of-charge professional services from own employees and collaborators. Supporting members only provide yearly economic contributions.

[14] <http://www.cooperareconliberaterra.it/banca-delle-competenze/>

[15] <http://www.cooperareconliberaterra.it/banca-delle-esperienze/>

[16] https://www.benisequestraticonfiscati.it/agenzia_1.html

[17] The information provided is partly derived from a series of interviews to: Francesco Paolo Citarda, President of Placido Rizzotto Libera Terra Cooperative and Communication Manager at Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo; Valentina Fiore, Managing Director at Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo; Christian Fossi, Coordinator at Cooperare con Libera Terra.

[18] <https://bottegaliberaterra.it/prodotti/>

[19] <http://ilgiustodiviaggiare.it/chisiamo.php>

[20] In 2004, 95% of food products and 80% of wine products were traded to Coop. Nowadays, despite the reshaping of Coop's weight among Libera Terra's sales channels, it can still be identified as the main client (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, pp. 34-35).

[21] Indeed, Coop Alleanza 3.0 is the most relevant client for Libera Terra turnover. Coop Alleanza 3.0 is a consumer cooperative established in 2016 with the merger of 3 consumer cooperatives in Northern Italy: Coop Adriatica, Coop Estense and Coop Consumatori Nordest. Source: <https://www.coopalleanza3-0.it/cooperativa/coop-alleanza-30/storia.html>.

[22] In recent years, the online shop has been subject of a relevant investment, aimed at renewing the graphic design of the platform and increasing sales service quality (Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo Cooperativa Sociale ONLUS, 2019, p. 10).

[23] On the x-axis: motivation of purchase; on the y-axis: perceived quality.

[24] The survey was conducted by Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo in 2010 by the administration of questionnaires to clients of Coop stores in Bologna, Rome and Milan.

[25] High production costs are mostly determined by complex starting conditions: hard consolidation, hard capitalization due to the fact that assets are not directly owned by Libera Terra cooperatives, high recovery costs for assets that are often allocated in state of neglect. Further aspects that impact on production costs are: the application of organic and sustainable production processes, limited

economies of scale, maximum compliance with the law (tax costs, quality control, etc.) (Cooperare con Libera Terra, 2011, p. 128).

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