



# Luxury economy and uneven regional development in two case studies: high-end fashion and yacht manufacturing in Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Luxury is a major international sector and a significant area of interest for both scholars and policymakers, primarily because of its economic relevance and transversal nature. It generates positive direct effects, particularly in terms of employment and income, while a range of indirect effects are also associated with the sector. At the same time, luxury is frequently criticised for its environmental impact, for the production of low-quality and insecure jobs, and for its close association with exclusivity and socio-economic inequality.

This paper adopts the theoretical framework of the Global Production Network (GPN) to examine how the governance architectures of lead firms shape uneven socio-economic development across territories. Drawing on an extensive empirical research programme based on qualitative data from two case studies in Italy—the high-end fashion industry and the leisure boat industry—the paper investigates the underlying mechanisms at play, structured around two key elements: the strength of local production systems and the construction of symbolic value.

## 1. Introduction

In June 2025, a leading Italian financial newspaper published an article reflecting on the state of the Italian luxury sector. It began with the following observation:

Investigations into the supply chains [of the high-end fashion industry] have taken place in other areas of the country as well, but only in Milan have they targeted the industry's flagships, the major fashion houses that have long been shielded from scrutiny due to their creative prestige and economic impact. The investigations into labour exploitation in Milan have instead shed light on a perverse mechanism of abuse embedded within the luxury supply chain, which the further moves from the parent company, the more become zones of impunity, unregulated and devoid of respect for workers' rights.<sup>1</sup>

In the months that followed the publication of this piece, several similar cases emerged, confirming what increasingly appears to be a systemic issue,<sup>2</sup> as also denounced by trade unions.<sup>3</sup> A recurring pattern

seems to unfold: major fashion houses outsource production to intermediary firms with limited in-house manufacturing capacity (often only producing prototypes or samples). These intermediaries in turn subcontract production to smaller firms that, in the pursuit of cutting costs to the bare minimum, rely on forms of extreme labour exploitation involving informal work, excessive working hours, and degrading conditions.

Judicial investigations consistently conclude with accusations against fashion houses for failing to carry out due diligence across their supply chains. In the most recent case, prosecutors argued that the company had negligently sustained the exploitative system.<sup>4</sup> To respond to the critiques, the president of the Italian National Chamber of Fashion reiterated the strategic importance of the sector for the national economy, downplayed the structural nature of the problem, and concluded with a veiled warning to policymakers: if regulatory conditions become too stringent, production could be relocated abroad<sup>5</sup> with obvious consequences for workers and regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation from Italian <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/moda-un-anno-quattro-inchieste-filiere-lusso-AHXqFFNB> - last accessed 12/12/2025.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/caporalato-13-brand-inchieste-moda-carabinieri-prada-gucci-e-versace-AIWaNP> - last accessed 12/12/2025.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.filctemcgil.it/index.php/notiziario/news/caporalato-moda-l-inchiesta-e-l-ennesima-conferma-delle-nostre-denunce> - last accessed 12/12/2025.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/amministrazione-giudiziaria-loro-piana-l-accusa-agevolato-sfruttamento-lavoro-AHxAXahB> - last accessed 12/12/2025.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pambianconews.com/2025/07/24/capasa-cnmi-sfruttamento-nella-moda-fenomeno-limitato-serve-tutelare-la-filiera-italiana-452810/> - last accessed 12/12/2025.

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This sequence of events captures well the existence and the functioning of the production networks, as well as their economic relevance, their territorial and political implications. It also illustrates the rationale behind development strategies that promote the participation into luxury supply chains, often under the implicit assumption that participation in such networks is inherently beneficial both for single companies and for regions. There is little doubt that the luxury sector generates substantial direct impacts, particularly in terms of employment and revenue. According to [Deloitte \(2023\)](#), the world's top 100 luxury goods companies generated combined sales of USD 347 billion in 2022, up from USD 305 billion in 2021, with an average growth rate of 20% and a profit margin of 13.4%. Yet it remains unclear who actually benefits from these gains, and what negative externalities, such as labour exploitation or environmental problems, are also produced.

Research on the luxury sector has largely been driven by business and management studies, with a predominant focus on brand management, marketing strategies, and consumer behaviour ([Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2012](#); [Gurzi & Woisetschlager, 2017](#); [Kapferer & Bastien, 2012](#)). Some contributions address cross-cultural differences in luxury consumption ([Shukla, 2010](#)), while a wide-ranging non-academic literature — often authored by consultants, strategists, and journalists — has helped shape public and corporate narratives around the sector. As [Donze \(2022, p. 64\)](#) argues, such narratives “give a kind of academic justification to companies’ discourse and do not contribute to a better understanding of the luxury industry”

These partial approaches often overlook the organisational, spatial, and developmental dimensions of the sector. In contrast, a growing body of critical studies seeks to examine luxury goods and services within the broader socio-cultural and historical contexts of their production, circulation, and consumption ([Armitage & Roberts, 2016](#); [Faiers, 2016](#); [Hoskins, 2014](#); [Kuldova, 2016](#)). An important area of concern within this literature is the relationship between the luxury sector and socio-economic inequality. Taken together, these studies and the recent legal investigations suggest that mere participation in the luxury supply chain is not a guarantee of regional development. The outcomes of such participation depend on the quality of employment generated, the role of the various local actors in the production chain, their degree of autonomy, their relative power and so on.

Building on this critical debate, the paper explores the relationship between the luxury sector, regional development, and territorial uneven trajectories. It does so by developing the conceptual and analytical potential of the Global Production Network ([Coe & Yeung, 2015](#)) perspective, which fruitfully combines the analysis of the production networks and the regional development implications.

Two case studies in the cultural and creative sector, the high-end fashion design industry and the leisure boating industry, are observed to demonstrate how different configurations of production networks lead to significantly different socio-economic outcomes in terms of regional and local development. With this aim, in what follows, the next section develops the theoretical framework, integrating the Global Production Networks (GPN) perspective into luxury studies. After outlining the methodology adopted in our study, the GPN theoretical framework is applied to two industries in the luxury sector – the high-end fashion design industry and the leisure boating industry – whose production networks are mainly located in Italy, to examine the patterns of regional development.

## 2. The luxury sector and regional development: some insights from the GPN perspective

Sociology has traditionally examined luxury primarily from the perspective of consumption, focusing on its role in the reproduction of social hierarchies. From a historical perspective, classical sociological works have highlighted the importance of luxury in the development of capitalism ([Sombart, 1921](#); [Simmel, 1895](#); [Veblen, 1899](#)). While Sombart regarded luxury consumption as a motor of capitalist expansion,

Veblen interpreted it as a form of conspicuous consumption that signals social status. Similarly, Simmel understood fashion and luxury as mechanisms mediating processes of individual differentiation and social imitation ([Calefato, 2014](#)). Later contributions by [Blumer \(1960\)](#) and, more substantially, [Bourdieu \(1979\)](#) elaborated on this line of reasoning, demonstrating how luxury operates as a key device in the reproduction of social inequalities through processes of distinction and homologation.

With the advent of late modernity and the post-Fordist transition, a new discourse on luxury emerged, linking consumption and production. Luxury is considered part of the so-called *economy of signs*, grounded in the growing importance of immaterial and symbolic elements within the economy and associated with highly specific yet complex spatial dynamics ([Currid-Halkett & Scott, 2013](#); [Lash & Urry, 1994](#)). In this context, luxury becomes increasingly connected to the cultural and symbolic dimensions of production rather than to its material base.

This perspective is consistent with Throsby’s conceptualisation of cultural value as distinct from economic value. In fact, certain goods or service derive their value not only from market or material logic, but also from their connection with culture. In particular, six forms of value contribute to the creation of cultural value: aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, and authenticity value ([Throsby, 2001](#)). Luxury products can thus be understood as cultural goods, in which cultural value is strategically channelled into economic value, allowing symbolic attributes such as authenticity, craftsmanship, and heritage to be converted into market advantage.

[Boltanski and Esquerre \(2017\)](#) locate the luxury economy at the very core of what they name “enrichment,” a key feature of contemporary capitalism. Within this regime, commodities are valued not primarily for their utility or durability, but for their socially constructed qualities, such as exclusivity, rarity, and distinction, often directly linked to their price. These symbolic attributes are frequently anchored in contextual and territorial references (national, regional, or local), intended to guarantee authenticity or cultural uniqueness. Such associations often stem from the reputed skill of craftspeople, from historical or cultural specificities of a territory, or from a combination of both.

From a different disciplinary perspective, a growing body of managerial literature has shed light on how luxury firms operate as brand-centred organisations ([Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2012](#); [Donze et al., 2022](#); [Roberts, 2019](#)). This literature clearly shows that luxury firms maintain tight control over the entire filiere of production. Production processes are frequently outsourced, yet significant emphasis is placed on symbolic aspects related to manufacturing, such as craftsmanship, limited production runs, and the use of high-quality materials, which reinforce the perception of exclusivity. These features, however, are often mobilised more as discursive resources than as material realities. Despite their reliance on highly skilled craft labour, luxury firms construct and control the symbolic value of products in ways that not only exceed their material value but also absorb and appropriate it ([Boltanski & Esquerre, 2017](#); [Crewe, 2017](#)). For this reason, the core activity of luxury companies lies not merely in producing high-quality goods, but in ensuring that their products are perceived as exceptional, a process that entails simultaneous control over the symbolic narrative and the material chain of production. This entails a strong managerial and communicative grip on all stages of value creation, from design and manufacturing to marketing, retail, and media representation ([Bastien & Kapferer, 2009](#); [Berghaus et al., 2014](#); [Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2012](#); [Okonkwo, 2007](#); [Tungate, 2009](#); [Wiedmann & Hennigs, 2013](#)). In the fashion industry, for instance, where product quality and value are inherently uncertain and difficult to define, goods are increasingly traded in symbolic terms. Labels and brands function as “judgement devices” that provide consumers a metric for evaluating the value of luxury items ([Crewe, 2017, p. 85](#)). The artisanal component thus becomes a narrative element that legitimises the product’s symbolic value, while the material value, rooted in local skills and manual practices, remains largely invisible. This process reflects what Lipovetsky

and Roux has called the aestheticisation of the world, where artistic discourse and the rhetoric of craftsmanship are instrumentalised to reproduce the logic of “artistic capitalism” (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2023; McRobbie, 2016).

Therefore, the very existence of luxury depends on exclusivity and, consequently, on the maintenance of inequalities, which often take on a spatial dimension (Calefato, 2021; Currid-Halkett & Scott, 2013). Such a dimension remains largely unexplored in the socio-economic literature, with notable exceptions (Brenner & Aguilar, 2002; Crewe, 2017; Papa-georgiou & Beriatos, 2011; Salle, 2024). Existing research indicates that revenues in the luxury sector, across fashion, tourism, design, or automotive industries, are highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of actors who capture a disproportionate share of value, often at the expense of workers, the environment, and regional economies. Brenner and Aguilar (2002), for instance, demonstrate that the growth of luxury tourism in Mexico generates limited benefits for local GDP, produces low-quality jobs, and contributes to spatial inequalities. Similarly, Crewe (2017) shows that behind the production of a single pair of jeans lies a long chain of underpaid and vulnerable workers, environmental degradation, and exploitation. Salle (2024) highlights the superyacht industry's massive environmental footprint—ranging from fuel consumption to damage to marine ecosystems—illustrating the broader unsustainability of luxury-led growth.

Alongside this debate, within economic sociology and geography, the GPN literature has developed around analogous concerns, examining how global production networks shape regional development trajectories. Consistent with the literature we use the term *regional development* to emphasise that different scales interact and are co-constituted across territorial levels; accordingly, *regions* are not understood in an administrative sense, but as socially meaningful territorial formations.

Notably, the GPN perspective examines the relationship between firms' activities organised within networks and development outcomes (Coe, 2015; Coe & Yeung, 2015; Gereffi 2005; Greco, 2016, 2019; Rinnie et al., 2024; Yeung, 2021, 2026) and suggests that firms' participation in a production network is not by itself sufficient to trigger regional development. In fact, power relations exist among the different firms involved in the different phases of the production (the so-called ‘input–output structure’ - i.e. design, production, distribution, etc.). The capacity of one or more actors to organise the phases of production and to eventually capture a significant share of generated value —what we refer to as network governance— is key to bridge global production networks and regional development. More specifically, when firms and their regions possess distinctive resources that reinforce the production network, including an active institutional context able to generate local collective goods, and are able to leverage these assets effectively, the resulting impact on regional development is likely to be positive. This dynamic has been demonstrated in several contexts such as East Asia, India, Turkey and so on (Neidik & Gereffi, 2006; Sturgeon & Kawakami, 2011). Successfully and strategically engaging with production networks can generate significant benefits for the broader context. Such engagement may lead to an expanded employment base, as well as the transfer of knowledge and technologies that enable further upgrading and development. Qualified inclusion into production networks can also attract greater capital inflows to the region, either through direct investment, or increased revenues from exported goods and services. Moreover, participation in such networks can stimulate the emergence of additional economic activities. For example, when regional firms upgrade within a particular sector, this often encourages the growth of local suppliers and related industries. By contrast, situations of adverse incorporation may arise, potentially becoming systemic drivers of increasingly impoverishing conditions (Coe & Yeung, 2015; Dawley, 2011; Greco, 2016; Werner, 2016). When local firms occupy structurally dependent positions—providing only generic and easily replaceable resources—regions risk becoming locked into low-value-added activities and remain highly vulnerable to external shocks or disinvestment.

Ultimately, given the significant changes of production systems in the last three decades in the context of globalisation, where production processes tend to be structured around highly fragmented and geographically dispersed networks (Baldwin, 2016), the perspective of GPN allows for far greater complexity concerning organizational power relations and how global linkages impact regional or local development. This stance complements the vast literature on the agglomeration economy (such as the Porterian clusters or the Marshallian districts) by accounting for spatial and organizational interdependencies. Several studies have examined the regional development trajectories of production systems integrated into GPNs (Murphree et al., 2020; Parrilli & Blažek, 2017), highlighting the multifaceted and complex nature of these dynamics. It appears clearly that in the contemporary global configuration of the economy, regions are increasingly embedded into global fluxes, with global dynamics simultaneously reshaping regional and local scale. GPN can therefore be understood as a perspective highlighting dynamics referring to meso- or relational levels that have mainly, but not necessarily, a global scope. Indeed, this perspective has been applied successfully to cases with a local, urban or regional reach.

### 3. Methodology for a GPN analysis

This paper draws on the CICERONE project within which several cultural and creative sectors were analysed using a GPN perspective. We developed a tailored methodology (d'Ovidio et al., 2019) also with the ambition of contributing a research tool to the broader debate on GPN empirical analyses. Researching Global Production Networks requires adopting the production network—comprising all actors involved in a given project—as the primary unit of analysis, with cases understood as projects. Building on an integration of literature from GPN research and Cultural and Creative Sector (CCS) studies, we empirically define the network as composed of different phases—creation, production or manufacturing, distribution, exchange or valorise, and archiving—within which diverse actors perform distinct socio-economic activities (Kloosterman et al., 2026). Empirically, this means starting from a single actor within one phase and reconstructing the entire production network, including its relational structure and the specific activities performed by each actor. As Watson (2012, p. 168) notes, the advantage of such a project-based approach lies in its ability to:

move beyond [solely] structural analyses to allow for an understanding of the importance of agency in project work; [...] to develop an understanding of the complex social networks involved in [production networks]; and [...] to provide micro-level analyses of project work.

In addition, Smith-Doerr and Powell (2005) argue for conceptualising networks both as relational and structural forms, enabling analyses that account for agency and structure as well as for their interaction. Our empirical investigation followed a qualitative case study research design (Creswell, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Two case studies were selected for their empirical richness and theoretical relevance: (a) a fashion collection produced by a high-end fashion company, referred to by the pseudonym *Yellow Co.*, and presented at the Milan Fashion Week 2022; (b) a 24-m luxury yacht built in Italy in 2021 by *Prisma Co.* (also a pseudonym) and later delivered to a French shipowner. Accordingly, the units of observation are the complex of activities involved in creating, manufacturing, distributing, valorising, and eventually archiving a fashion collection or a yacht respectively.

Once the case studies had been selected, data collection was conducted through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, ethnographic fieldwork, and digital ethnography (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Pink et al., 2016). These methods allowed us to access the perspectives, explanations, and experiences of actors embedded within the networks, enabling in-depth analysis of governance dynamics, spatial configurations, and regional development outcomes, as well as the identification of emergent patterns.

During the fieldwork, conducted between September 2020 and November 2021, a total of fifty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out: twenty-three for the fashion case and twenty-eight for the yachting case. Interviews lasted between sixty and 90 min, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed. In addition to field visits to production sites, we participated in trade fairs, public events, and industry seminars and events.

Interviewees were asked to describe the production cycle and its spatial organisation, identify key actors in the network and their relationships, and reflect on issues such as governance structures, territorial embeddedness, and developmental implications. Questions addressed key aspects in the network configuration, including the structure of supplier relations, the geography of partnerships or the various contractual arrangements; other topics concerned the available territorial and institutional resources. Further topics were included, dealing with more immaterial elements such as the interview's perceptions on value capture, or the broader impacts.

The selection of informants was a critical step. Initial access to the field was facilitated by experts, trade union representatives, and collective organisations. Further participants were recruited through snowball sampling, allowing us to expand the network of interviewees iteratively and adaptively. Informants included entrepreneurs, workers, artisans, designers, marketing directors, CEOs, journalists, industry experts, intermediaries, lawyers, trade unionists, brokers, and NGO activists, thus providing a multi-actor and multi-scalar understanding of each production network.

#### 4. Governance configurations and regional development: the cases of high-end fashion collection and a luxury yacht

##### 4.1. The production network of a high-end fashion collection

Yellow Co. is a prestigious fashion house with its headquarters and creative offices in Milan, Italy. Its production network connects a series of locations as the raw material is sourced in China and Romania and the manufacturing is mainly carried out in Italy. The firm's distribution system and reputation are spread all over the world. As noted above, the empirical research unfolded around the production network of a fashion collection, namely a set of clothes designed, manufactured, showcased and distributed in shops in a timeframe organised according to the standard two-seasons calendar, spring/summer and fall/winter (Hoskins, 2014).

The production of a fashion collection involves multiple stages, which can be organised into two main areas: manufacturing, referring to the production of the tangible elements of garments, and the production of symbolic value, encompassing activities such as design, catwalks and fairs, marketing, distribution in dedicated shops, and communication (d'Ovidio & Pacetti, 2019).

Starting with manufacturing, the observed collection includes different garments made from different fabrics, organised on different production networks, which can have even a global reach. Yellow Co. defines colours, textures, and finishing of fabrics, leaving little or no autonomy to textile manufacturers, who are not allowed to use the fabrics elsewhere, including in their own advertising or communication channels.

The collection is then prototyped and presented during the fashion weeks. Catwalk planning and garment prototyping are often frenetic as time is limited and last-minute changes are common. As a result, the two stages of clothes making and displaying in catwalk often overlap, with pieces of the collection being manufactured behind the scenes. For instance, during a catwalk a craftswoman was asked to produce hats in real-time:

[During the catwalk, where hand-made hats were used] we set a workstation for the hat-maker behind the scenes. She prepared the

hats just during the show. (Fashion company – Marketing Office Director)

Informants reported that Yellow Co. manufactures mainly in Italy, with a system of direct contractors and subcontractors in the Lombardy, Tuscany and Apulia regions, with some production lines partly outsourced to Asia and other locations. Once orders are placed, the production process can take different configurations. Yellow Co. engages some manufacturers directly, while others operate as subcontractors, sometimes through commercial intermediaries; producers may work exclusively for the company or for multiple clients.

The geographical proximity to producers is valued as a major asset by Yellow Co. that can check, organise and control the production network at any moment, as explained by the director of the marketing office with years of experience in the industry: "We need that production is close to us because our technicians need to go and see". The spatial configuration of the network is therefore strongly shaped by the choices of the fashion house. Apart from proximity, manufacturers are selected on the basis of several factors, including quality standards, availability of technical tools/machineries, ability to deliver on time, flexibility and overall reliability and trust. As one first-tier supplier to Yellow Co. explains:

When they [the fashion house] realise that you're honest, you work well, you're reliable, it's difficult that they let you down [...] If you answer with quality and delivery, you have no problems. (First-Tier Garment Production Company – Entrepreneur)

In terms of innovation, Yellow Co. imposes very precise technical processes to its producers who are requested to have particular machines if they want to keep working for the company. In the experience of a second-tier producer, not only Yellow Co.'s control over the supply and orders is very strong and tight, but also it imposes the use of certain machines needed in the production process.

The fashion house said: "There is this work for you. Do you have the machines that are necessary [to make it]? Yes or no? If yes, ok, tomorrow we will send you the fabric already cut. If not, what do you want to do? Do you want to adapt, or you are not interested in working? Therefore, either you buy that machine, or you cannot work" (Second-Tier Garment Production Company – Entrepreneur).

Strict control is also exercised over the fabric quantity and quality, the time and the delivery of products. As revealed:

They come to control the state of advancement of production; before producing the whole batch, we make a single model. [...] They come to see if it fits the standard. [...] You have to respect delivery deadlines. You can have a delay of a couple of days but not more than that. [...] Controls aren't anticipated. (First-Tier Garment Production Company – Entrepreneur).

Yellow Co. devotes substantial resources to exchange and communication activities that play a central role in the creation of the fashion collection's value. As explained by a lawyer providing professional services to companies:

We often say, how is it possible that the intrinsic value of a bag is X, and if we add the brand, its value is then Y? Well, it's possible because the product incorporates all the immaterial value of the company. Therefore, there's value in the immaterial (element/dimension) in the creativity. (Consultant Company – Partner)

Communication strategies, in general, are used to build the cultural value of Yellow Co., with a very complex, cutting-edge and curated programme, encompassing marketing, advertising campaign, press communication, but also catwalks, collections presentations, and finally the distribution. The editor of a fashion magazine observed:

Now, companies have several sophisticated communication structures where they insert political, social and emotional values (Fashion Magazine – Senior Editor)

Yellow Co. also has a strong influence on fashion magazines, since its economic power makes it a very important customer for fashion magazines, as one fashion magazine editor explained:

There is for sure the strength of the companies, which say to you, “If you put [on the magazine] this and that, I will not give you the promised 800,000 € every year through my advertisements”. In fact, they pay the magazines at the end of the year. (Fashion Magazine – Senior Editor)

The controlling power of fashion companies are not even jeopardised by the new modalities of exchange emerged with social media, where the supposedly independence of the influencers is managed with different tools aimed to control the public discourse on products on the internet: legal means impose contractual arrangements to influencers, while informal instruments persist, as noted by the editor of a fashion magazine: “Influencers are ‘paid’ [by companies] through fashion products”. (Fashion Magazine – Senior Editor). This is also confirmed in literature (Mensitieri, 2020).

Catwalks and fairs represent an important step in building a narrative of the fashion items and therefore highly contributing to the symbolic value of fashion items. This is the moment in which the collection is displayed to both customers and press and social media and the cultural and symbolic meaning is conveyed to a wider audience. Immediately after the catwalk, buyers examine the entire collection and place their orders.

After the display in catwalk, fairs and showrooms, garments reach the consumers through Yellow Co.’s distribution channels, which are organised in numerous single-brand, multi-brand and department stores. There, not only clothes and accessories are sold, but also the company’s identity is built and reinforced: everything is done so that the consumer is deeply involved in an experience that goes beyond the mere purchase.

The analysis of the high-end fashion production network examined in this study shows that Yellow Co. exercises strong power across all phases of the network. The fashion firm is the lead actor in the network because it holds the power to organise manufacture, construct symbolic value, and manage distribution in line with its market visions and strategies. With its strong power on discourse and narrative around fashion media, Yellow Co. is also able to lead the market choice and styles. Its power finds a source in its reputational and symbolic capital, in its capacity to create original and innovative products as well as in the establishment of aesthetic canons that become market-setters.

#### 4.2. Socio-economic implications for regional development

Yellow Co. has a clear impact on job creation and GDP in the areas where companies involved in its production network are located (Confindustria Moda, 2023; Confartigianato, 2022). However, we argue that the capacity of the network to foster regional development is rather questionable for several reasons.

First, working conditions are not always decent enough, both in creative offices and in production workshops. As in many fashion companies, in Yellow Co. contracts tend to be temporary essentially because many designers are freelance or consultancy workers (d’Ovidio, 2015). In addition, Yellow Co. employs a large army of internships and junior workers often unpaid or paid very little, rewarded primarily with limited skill acquisition and reputational capital (Marchetti & Gramigna, 2007; Arvidsson et al., 2010). In workshops and manufacturing facilities, working conditions are often similarly poor not only because of the widespread presence of non-standard contracts, but also because of heavy physical labour required. For instance, manufacturing textiles requires much physical effort as looms are noisy, workers remain

standing and few pauses are allowed to avoid the stop and go of the machines. Moreover, the global fashion industry is characterised by a highly structured system of seasonal collections, with four primary annual collections complemented by capsule collections, fashion shows, trade fairs and exhibitions (Hoskins, 2014) which imposes stringent work schedules on suppliers, particularly during peak seasons and underscores the pervasive influence of the fashion season on operational practices.

Second, firms report having very limited autonomy within production processes. Fashion houses’ requests do not tolerate any changes in their production demands such as minimal changes in colours shade or textures. One example was provided by a representative of a craft association who reported the case of a leather dyer who spent the whole night working to obtain the exact shadow of yellow requested by the fashion company. This is indicative of the high level of expertise displayed by the craftsman, yet it also serves to illustrate the significant pressure that fashion house exerts on manufacturers. Producers claim that input-output transactions are not always formalized through official contracts that fix prices and production time: all is decided informally via word of mouth. This makes relations ambiguous and often conflictual, exacerbating Yellow Co.’s capacity of control over the manufacturers. This level of control over manufacturers translates into a weakening of social capital among producers that tend to develop a strong competition among them, without any incentive to the cooperation, especially in the field of technical innovation as Yellow Co. imposes the machineries to be used, the process to be implemented, the time needed to do the work and so on. Although of high quality, most production remains largely standardised, and the success for the manufacturer lies in the capacity of making a good work, following the times that Yellow Co. requires.

Two interview excerpts help in understanding this logic:

Our workers made it perfectly. The manufacturing of the sample was perfect. Therefore, the order became ours. (Knitwear Factory – Worker)

The more the project is successful, the more the process shortens: the manufacturer is close by [...] because the technician has to go and check that they sew well, and today our technicians go [from Milan] to Tuscany and Rome, but not in the South of Italy. (Fashion Company – Marketing Office Director)

Third, regional development is hindered by the fact that Yellow Co.’s power extends beyond market transactions. It permeates the realm of cultural production to the extent that the fashion house shapes the editorial policies of major fashion magazines through advertising contracts, which are a crucial source of income for them. The influence of the fashion company extends also to the digital sphere, where the economic and cultural power of Yellow Co. enables it to influence the judgments of fashion bloggers, who command large numbers of followers and to have a meaningful cultural influence. Consequently, their endorsements and recommendations can significantly shape consumer behaviour and perceptions.

#### 4.3. The production network of a luxury yacht

*Imagine* is a 24-m luxury yacht developed in 2021 in Italy by Prisma Co. Founded in the 1970s as a supplier to major industry players, Prisma Co., a small family business registered in the Liguria region, began building its own boats in the 1990s by specialising in the production of artisanal luxury yachts. The production network of an artisanal luxury yacht such as *Imagine* is organised around different yet interconnected phases. In the following, the production network of a yacht is analysed trying to make explicit, when possible, the different phases, bearing in mind that this is a conceptual bordering which may take very different empirical evidence (Kloosterman et al., 2026) and that although several phases are identified, they are not following one another in a simple

linear process.

First, the creation phase consists of the drawing and technical design of the external lines and of the internal spaces and implies the close collaboration of yacht designers/architects and engineers who work to find a compromise between the aesthetic and functional aspects of the yacht. This activity is carried out by a team of Italian and international designers, architects and naval engineers who work as consultants to Prisma Co. and to the shipowner, who is the final purchaser of the boat and whose requests and aesthetic expectations are taken into consideration.

Secondly, the manufacturing of Imagine takes place in the nautical district of Viareggio, Tuscany, where a well-established tradition of professional profiles and organisations historically involved in boat-building exist; here firms, such as Prisma Co., find range of crucial assets for yacht production: the shipyard and the staff of a boatbuilder (namely carpenters, workers and cleaning staff), but also subcontracting companies that are involved in the supply of both high craft components of the yacht (e.g.: the fibreglass mould) and more common activities, such as interior components and accessories (e.g.: painters, glaziers, electricians, plumbers, upholsterers and furniture makers). The production process, generally lasting about two years, begins with the production of the fibreglass hull, externalised to a supplier on the basis of the technical project provided by the boat builder company. The hull is moved to the shipyard where the outfitting of the yacht starts. The wide variety of actors cooperating in this phase makes the shipyard resemble:

a mix between a hive and the 'Milan Cathedral'<sup>6</sup> construction site: a nonstop laboratory, a bustle of artisans who work in teams, respect each other, help each other and collaborate side by side, supporting and enduring each other. (Yacht producer- CEO)

Following the manufacturing, the distribution phase deals with the delivery of the yacht to the customer, which typically occurs at the dock closest to the shipyard. After the launching ceremony, the customer boards and controls the boat with the help of the captain. The yacht is not yet finished and remains on the quay for as long as necessary to fine-tune the details, accessories, and final furnishings.

Within the production network, which includes a vast array of actors, Prisma Co. wields considerable influence, stemming from its reputational capital built over a long-standing presence in the industry. As the lead actor in the network governance, it oversees and regulates the entire production process and, in the event of delivery failure, retains the authority to replace underperforming suppliers. However, Prisma Co.'s first-tier suppliers hold significant power that stems from the highly qualified activities they perform, as, for instance, the making of the fibreglass hull. As explained:

The leisure boat field is something of a paradise for craftspeople: you earn very well, better than in other sectors. (First-tier supplier – Entrepreneur).

The replacement of such suppliers would be extremely difficult for the company: each boat is a unique piece, and it must be built perfectly. For this reason, Prisma Co. seeks to bind its partners through formalized agreements that foster enduring stability.

The people I work with today are descendants of the people my father worked with in the past [...] Our relationships are now solid: we trust them because they are the best, and we have always got on well (Yacht producer- CEO).

Reputational capital and artisanal skills make suppliers relevant players in the network and both the symbolic and material elements contribute to the value creation. Artisans and craft enterprises in the industry are key actors for the creation of value and the realisation of a

high-quality product, allowing them to negotiate adequate economic rewards. Value capture in this segment of luxury sector is therefore more equally shared between artisans, contributing with material attributes that embody also aesthetic canons, and the boat company, whose image is immediately recognised in the product itself. As indicated:

Am I a craftsman or an artist? I don't know ... I come from Pietrasanta, a city where the tradition of marble workers is deeply rooted. Michelangelo Buonarroti also came here to quarry the marbles for the facade of San Lorenzo in Florence. I think my skills comes, to some extent, from the past (Marble enterprise- Entrepreneur).

The situation of second-tier suppliers differs markedly. As explained:

Sub-contracting works like this: take it or leave it. The boatbuilder decides the work budgets and retains a large part of the initial brand order: if we do not agree with it, the boatbuilder will easily replace us (Second-tier supplier – Entrepreneur).

Finally, elements of the communication and exchange phase, such as trade fairs and boat shows (e.g.: Genoa, Cannes, Fort Lauderdale) as well as the media system are crucial aspects for the symbolic production of an artisanal luxury yacht. They represent occasions where companies, boaters and fans of the industry interact and where new models are exhibited. During these events, prizes and awards are also attributed to companies for their innovative contribution; thus, whilst not having a direct impact on yacht sales, prizes and awards make a substantial contribution to brands' reputation. As one informant highlighted, "these awards don't help sell more yachts, but they get reporters to write a lot about the award-winning company, so they have a direct or indirect impact on the winner" (Yacht producer- CEO). Furthermore, the media system contributes to accruing the symbolic value of yachts through traditional advertising promotion channels, social media, technical reviews, and sea trials reports.

In sum, Prisma Co. exercises strong leadership across all phases of the production network. However, other actors, such as boatbuilders and first-tier suppliers, are able to negotiate with Prisma Co., resulting in a greater dispersion of power within a more horizontally structured network.

#### 4.4. Socio-economic implications for regional development

Different and ambivalent implications in terms of regional development emerge from the production network of yachts.

Firstly network activities make a substantial contribution to the creative and innovative capacity of the district and, more broadly, to its economic dynamism. Innovation is mainly driven by Prisma Co., which is eager to "come first, ahead of competitors", working in collaboration with research centres and universities and the support of local credit institutions. In many instances, the company assumes responsibility for the costs associated with training and technical assistance that are necessary for suppliers technological upgrading. As the CEO of the company says, "the researchers [of these centres] go to our suppliers to give instructions on how to work with new materials because they wouldn't know how to do it". At the same time, innovation is also demanded to suppliers: these are encouraged to invest and keep the pace of innovation requirements that affect the domains of products, processes as well as organisations. An example from the case study helps clarify how, starting from the ambition to create "a super-light yacht [...], the most ecological as possible", the company and the technical staff studied a radical innovation which required a deep change in the production process. This change needed the involvement of all production partners to be implemented. When faced with that challenge, the company asked suppliers to "study how to contribute to the construction of this boat [...]. Each brought their personal contribution, which actually improved the product."

Secondly, the vitality of the district tends to produce various spill

<sup>6</sup> The Milan cathedral is known for the very long construction process that took centuries.

overs benefiting the local artisanal fabric and its economy while also enhancing its cultural specificity. As underlined:

Around the artisans' workshop several vital and interrelated economic micro-networks develop. [...] These activities hold a deeply rooted transformative capacity (Artisans' Local Association-President).

The Industry contributes to promote and strengthen the artisanal fabric of Viareggio with multiplier effects on related economic activities, especially on specialised companies. Several interview excerpts highlight this dimension:

It is important to produce in territories where enterprises are located (Artisans' Local Association- President); products are built where there is a [...] specific ability (Research centre on the nautical industrial association- Responsible); it would not be possible to realise our yachts in places others than this: here we have the maximum of quality and specialisation (Yacht producer- CEO).

Thirdly, implications for employment are more ambiguous both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Employment opportunities are significant in the phase of production and exchange; accordingly, the territories where these phases take place benefit from the participation in the production network. According to the CEO of Prisma Co.:

the recreational craft sector employs many people and gives many opportunities for job creation, from artisans to yacht captain, who earn very well, perhaps more than us [...] The same applies to artisans, such as plumbers and electricians. Anyone who can glimpse a niche, or a specialisation can create new jobs in this sector. (Yacht producer- CEO).

The owner of a carpentry firm adds that "our business, and also those of other shipyards and artisans who works with us, are able to create employment in this territory" (Wooden Yacht producer- President).

Assessing job creation across the other phases of the production network proves less straightforward: the evidence suggests that it is limited in the phase of distribution while Prisma Co. participation in fairs and boat exhibitions contributes to the activation of economic activities at the local level such as travel agencies, accommodation, tourism, etc. When considering the quality of employment, one can observe a neat caesura between, on the one hand, creative activities and first-tier suppliers involved in manufacturing and, on the other hand, second-tier suppliers.

Good employment conditions for workers involved in the creation activities, for which tailored and inclusive policies are set, i.e. corporate welfare measures, coexist with adequate conditions for the workers involved in the first tier subcontracting. First-tier suppliers can count on a continuous flow of demand for sub-contracting activities that allows good wages and positive employment conditions and rights to their workers. As the CEO of Prisma Co. asserts:

"we [the company] respect suppliers by guaranteeing them economic stability [...] and they respect us by guaranteeing us the excellent quality of their services. We are not interested in looking around and we are not looking for other suppliers. The quality of our partners is so high that we can only be satisfied".

This situation is different from second-tier suppliers. They often endure the compounded effects of precariousness, inter-group competition, and deteriorating working conditions over time. Moreover, as supplier companies intermediate between workers and firm, workers' agency and collective representation are significantly weakened. As stated:

It is very difficult for unions to have access to shipyards. [...] It would take a small army to verify what happens there (Trade union-Delegate).

Subcontracting companies apply stable yet atypical contracts, which

may be urged by production rhythms or by specific tasks and skills. As explained by one craftsman, it may happen that:

an enterprise [...] does not have enough staff to put on board. [...] Then, they call me to ask if I can lend the necessary workers. [...] I do not replace that enterprise in its formal relations with the company: I just lend the necessary labour for the requested period, and that's all. (Yacht repairing enterprise- Entrepreneur)

Atypical employment disproportionately affects low-skilled workers, who are often compelled to accept harming or exploitative jobs. This group includes a significant number of migrant workers, who are further marginalized by the racialization of the labour market:

We have a lot of jobs [...] and we need foreign workers, especially extra EU, to carry them out ... because they are bad jobs, and Italians don't want to do them ... even if you whip them! [...] So, many young workers come from Senegal, Sri Lanka or other countries, with regular contracts of course. These are jobs that the Italians, justifiably, and now also the Romanians, refuse to do despite the protective devices, the vacuum cleaners and everything. [...] They are harmful, ugly jobs [...] that are not pleasant to do. (Yacht painting enterprise-Entrepreneur)

## 5. Discussion and final remarks

This article contributes to the literature on Global Production Network (GPN) and regional development by examining their interplay within the luxury sector. It demonstrates that the local grounding of luxury GPNs produces divergent developmental outcomes: while leisure boat production network supports locally embedded firms generating benefit for the wider region, the fashion production network fails to sustain regional development, although contributing to economic and employment opportunities. By exploring this divergence, the article challenges celebratory narratives of the luxury sector, and contributes to the current debate on the relationship between GPNs and regional development (Crouch et al., 2001; de Marchi et al., 2018; Murphree et al., 2020; Pareja-Eastaway and Pradel i Miquel, 2026; Parrilli & Blažek, 2017; Pickles et al., 2015; Rannie et al., 2024; Yeung, 2021, 2026).

To account for such a discrepancy, the article points to an underlying mechanism that unfolds across two different yet interconnected elements.

The first element refers to the capacity of local actors to mobilize and valorise contextual resources -competences, skills, traditions, and localized knowledge - that allow them to consolidate their position along the production network and ultimately capture enough value to contribute to regional development. This is a crucial element when the capacity of production networks is tested in their capacity to generate regional development. Forward and backward linkages generate a reinforcing dynamic: the local context strengthens firms' position in the production network; in turn, by capturing value within the network, firms are able to feed back into and support the regional development (Yeung, 2021, 2026; Pareja-Eastaway & Pradel i Miquel, 2026).

This dynamic is clearly illustrated by the case of Prisma Co. Artisanal SMEs concentrated in Viareggio are able to draw on a large and qualified workforce pool, local skills, traditional know-how combined with innovative production practices as well as deep historical and cultural roots. This rich patrimony has become both a defining feature of the region and a crucial source of value that local actors can mobilize within the production network. As a result, they are able to secure a larger share of returns compared to other actors, generating benefits not only for individual organisations but also for the broader region.

A contrasting dynamic emerges in the case of Yellow Co., where local firms' involvement in the network is driven either by geographical proximity to the lead firm - whose tight control over the production process substitutes the need for extensive local competences - or by the

ability to respond quickly to the lead firm's demands at lower price. Interviewees never referred to local know-how or territorial advantages; as a result, firms remain atomized and primarily driven by market logics. This situation fosters competition rather than cooperation and significantly constrains the capacity to generate positive spillovers at the local level. A twofold consequence arises. On the one hand, it undermines the possibility of an autonomous development path at the local level, and, on the other, it reinforces a hierarchical structure that ends up prioritising the company's interests above all others, through a progressive externalisation of the risks and concentration of the benefits.

The second element concerns the relative weight of symbolic and material components in process of value creation, which has been identified as a specificity of luxury products (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2017; Calefato, 2014, 2021; Crewe, 2017; Currid-Halkett & Scott, 2013; Lash & Urry, 1994). In both networks, symbolic value is actively constructed by the lead firm, yet significant differences emerge in the ways local producers are able to position themselves within this process of value capture. In the fashion industry, product value is largely determined by the symbolic components rather than material ones. As illustrated, Yellow Co. not only captures the symbolic value embodied in its name and reputation, but also appropriates the symbolic value associated with material production, often mobilised in the advertising campaigns and in marketing strategies. An exemplification is provided by the use of adjectives such as beautiful, precious, dream, next to pictures of leather manufacturing, workers' hands, needle and thread in advertising campaigns associated with artisans' material practises. This process paradoxically obscures the contribution of actual producers, because it emphasises the brand over craftworkers, resulting in a form of double valorisation. In the case of luxury boat, by contrast, the material components are valorised as such; the symbolic and material elements contribute more equally to the value creation: artisans and craft enterprises in the industry are acknowledged as key actors for value creation and the realisation of a high-quality product. This allows them to be able to negotiate adequate economic returns.

In conclusion, the two cases demonstrate that different governance architectures of the production network generate unequal socio-economic development of territories. A twofold mechanism is used to explain such dynamic: on the one hand, the different capacity of the local production systems to harness local resources and to confront the dictates of the leading organisation within the network. On the other hand, the power of lead organisation to capture the material value by channelling it into the symbolic dimension.

From an academic standpoint, these findings support future research on the interplay between symbolic and material value. As products increasingly acquire symbolic significance, new avenues for exclusionary appropriation emerge, leading to possible further inequalities. The GPN perspective is a useful epistemological and applied tool to move in this direction.

From a policy perspective, these results underscore the complexity of policy-making efforts aimed at fostering firms' participation in global production networks, while simultaneously ensuring that local production systems benefit from such an involvement. This entails not only leveraging local resources such as skilled labour, research capacity, technical innovation, and cultural heritage but also create the conditions that incentivise collaboration and cooperation locally which are key resources to create more balance power relations.

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#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Marianna d'Ovidio:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Lidia Greco:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Paolo Inno:** Writing –

original draft, Investigation.

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