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Does forest certification matter in furniture trade fairs? Insights from the 2025 Salone del Mobile di Milano, Italy



Silvana Calvano¹, Pipiet Larasatie^{2*}, Simone Blanc³, Francesco Negro⁴

Abstract: Certification of sustainable forest management (SFM) is widely adopted in the forest sector, yet its marketing role in design-focused contexts remains underexplored. This study investigates the visibility and perceived value of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) SFM certification in the furniture sector at the 2025 Salone del Mobile di Milano, Italy, a leading trade fair. Data were collected through an in-person survey and structured observations to assess certification presence, communication practices, and exhibitors' perceptions of wood's ecological value. Results show that while 73% of respondents consider certification important for product valorization, the overall visibility of FSC and PEFC labels was limited. Statistical analysis showed significant differences in visibility ratings ($p < 0.001$), indicating a marked gap between perceived importance and actual marketing use. The findings suggest that SFM credentials are underutilized in trade fair branding, where other elements such as aesthetics tend to dominate. Integrated strategies, like combining certification with storytelling and experiential marketing, are recommended to enhance consumer engagement and strengthen competitive positioning of certified wooden furniture.

Keywords: furniture; sustainable forest management; certification; trade fairs; wood.

1. Introduction

Sustainable forest management (SFM) certification has become increasingly central to ensuring responsible resource use in the wood sector. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) are the most adopted SFM schemes at the global level. They aim to ensure and promote economic, ecological, and social benefits in forest management, reflecting the

evolving notion of forest multifunctionality, where production activities support forest conservation (Bruzzese et al. 2025). SFM certification is a relevant part of the broader theme of sustainability reporting and company performance in the bioproducts sector (Meriç and Meriç 2024).

Beyond operational management, certification also functions as sustainability communication instrument that influences consumer purchasing decisions. Research consistently shows that credible certification labels can increase consumers' willingness to pay a premium for certified wood products. This premium is often 10%–20%, particularly among environmentally conscious consumer segments (Panico et al. 2022; Poratelli et al. 2022). However, the promotional impact of certification is moderated by factors such as consumer knowledge, perceived credibility, sociodemographic characteristics, and clarity of communication (Aguilar and Cai 2010; Cai

1. Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Sciences, University of Turin, Italy; email: silvana.calvano@unito.it

2. Department of Sustainable Biomaterials, Virginia Tech, USA; email: pipiet@vt.edu

3. Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Sciences, University of Turin, Italy; email: simone.blanc@unito.it

4. Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Sciences, University of Turin, Italy; email: francesco.negro@unito.it

* Corresponding author

et al. 2017). This highlights the need for integrated marketing strategies that bridge the gap between positive attitudes and actual purchase behavior.

Commercial trade fairs remain a powerful business tool, even in today's globally interconnected markets. They provide unique opportunities for companies to showcase products, strengthen brand visibility, and engage directly with customers and stakeholders (Sarmiento and Simões 2019). Recent research emphasizes that trade fairs are not only sales venues but also engagement and learning platforms, where actors co-create value through resource integration and interaction (Sarmiento and Simões 2019). Modern trade fairs occur in two main formats: physical platforms, where participants interact face-to-face (physical trade fairs – PTFs), and virtual platforms, where interactions are computer-mediated (virtual trade fairs – VTFs). To date, PTFs remain predominant in the furniture sector for their ability to build relationships and provide tangible experiences.

The *Salone del Mobile di Milano* (SdM) in Italy, which translates as “Furniture Fair of Milan”, stands out as one of the most influential international exhibitions in the furniture sector. Primarily a PTF with a minor VTF section, the SdM offers an interesting context for examining SFM communication. Unlike specialized fairs focused on wood or forest products, where sustainability aspects might benefit from a positive sector bias, the SdM is a general furniture exhibition mainly focused on design and innovation. This makes it a critical setting to assess whether forest certification is effectively leveraged in marketing strategies.

This study aims to evaluate how sustainable forest management certification was perceived and communicated by furniture manufacturers at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano 2025*. The main purpose is to understand whether certification, although widely adopted and acknowledged as valuable (Boubacar and Sissoko 2025), is still underutilized as a communicative and branding tool in design-oriented settings. The SdM was selected as a relevant case study of PTFs, where face-to-face interaction and sensory engagement remain irreplaceable in the furniture sector, as product aesthetics, material quality, and tactile experience strongly influence purchasing decisions. In parallel, the research seeks also to clarify whether SFM certification functions as a genuine marketing asset or

remains secondary to other competitive factors in the furniture sector.

The study addresses these objectives through the following research questions:

- i. How do exhibitors perceive wood in terms of characteristics and associated values?
- ii. To what extent are sustainable forest management certification schemes visible at the fair and communicated by exhibitors?
- iii. What is the level of exhibitors' awareness, and how do they perceive the contribution of sustainable forest management certification schemes to product value?

2. Research context: *Salone del Mobile di Milano 2025*

The *Salone del Mobile di Milano* (<https://www.salonemilano.it>) is one of the most prestigious international trade fairs dedicated to furniture and interior design. Established in 1961, initially to promote the excellence of products “Made in Italy”, the event has evolved into a global platform attracting professionals, including manufacturers, designers, architects, and buyers. In recent years, over 370,000 visitors attended annually, nearly 70% from abroad, representing more than 188 countries, along with more than 5,000 journalists and approximately 27,500 public attendees (Salone del Mobile Milano 2025). The SdM has adhered to the United Nations Global Compact and implemented Green Guidelines to steer exhibition design toward eco-friendly practices. This commitment is further validated by the ISO 20121 certification (International Organization for Standardization 2024), which confirms the adoption of a sustainable event management system across all organizational stages.

Within this context, wood is widely displayed at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano*. This is because it is one of the most appreciated materials for furniture, for reasons ranging from traditional use to aesthetics to functional qualities. In addition, wood is continuously gaining value by presenting a sustainable image. In particular, large amounts of biogenic carbon are stored in wooden furniture (Negro and Bergman 2019). Also, wood is increasingly associated with enhanced comfort and psychophysical well-being, as

it markedly contributes to the experiential quality of indoor spaces (Cavaliere et al. 2026). It is therefore no surprise that exhibitors at the SdM use wood extensively in their furniture items, leveraging traditional or advanced processing techniques to harmonize aesthetics, functionality, well-being, and sustainability (Salone del Mobile Milano 2025).

3. Literature review

3.1 SFM certification and sustainability communication

SFM certification schemes, such as FSC and PEFC, are voluntary systems that aim to verify and promote environmental, social, and economic benefits, providing assurance to consumers and business partners. They are based on two areas: forest management (FM) certification that ensures compliance with sustainability principles in forest management; and chain of custody (CoC) certification, which ensures that certified materials remain traceable throughout the entire supply chain.

Beyond forest-specific schemes, other certification programs are frequently encountered in the furniture sector, including ISO 9001 for quality management (International Organization for Standardization 2015) and ISO 14001 (International Organization for Standardization 2026) for environmental management, as well as mandatory certifications such as CE (*Conformité Européenne*) marking for wooden floorings. Although these certifications can enhance credibility and market access, they are not considered in the present study, which focuses on FSC and PEFC certification schemes only. These schemes are specific to the forest/wood sector and are widespread and widely regarded for contributing to environmental sustainability (Chen et al. 2020). However, adopting them can present some challenges and even drawbacks. Previous studies have highlighted the additional costs, administrative burden, and weak price premiums, particularly for small and medium enterprises (Bulkan 2020; George et al. 2022; Fagundes et al. 2024). Proper communication is therefore an important element that can support companies in fully benefiting from such certifications.

Recent literature suggests that certification labels are most effective when supported by clear sustainability communication and credible third-party

verification. Trust in certifying organizations and detailed information about environmental benefits significantly enhance consumer preference for certified products (Cai et al. 2017; Larasatie 2018; Panico et al. 2022;). Conversely, low awareness or confusion about the meaning of labels can limit their impact (Kozak et al. 2004; Ota et al. 2022). Eco-labelling alone is in fact insufficient to convey sustainability narratives without broader strategies such as advertising, education, and storytelling (Testa et al. 2015; Majer et al. 2022).

3.2 Trade fairs as marketing ecosystems

Trade fairs are strategic platforms for business development, combining product showcasing with relationship building and knowledge exchange. They allow companies to present new concepts, engage with stakeholders, and observe market trends. From a consumer perspective, fairs provide opportunities to compare products and learn about innovations and build professional networks. According to Sarmento and Simões (2019), trade fairs should be understood as “engagement platforms” within service ecosystems, where value is co-created through dynamic interactions among multiple stakeholders.

PTFs account for a significant share of marketing expenditure and remain central to industrial firms’ strategies for product promotion, lead generation, and relationship marketing (Blythe 2002; Rinallo et al. 2010). They bring together large numbers of potential customers, fostering trust and learning through direct engagement (Rosson and Seringhaus 1995). Unlike virtual platforms, physical fairs allow visitors to see, touch, and evaluate products in real time, creating immersive environments that strengthen trust and facilitate relationship building. Furthermore, PTFs still dominate marketing expenditure and continue to be the primary channel for business to business (B2B) networking and brand positioning in the furniture industry, making them the most relevant context for assessing how certifications are communicated and valued. In contrast, VTFs, an emerging phenomenon, offer cost and time savings and enable global reach, particularly when physical proximity is challenging (Day and Bens 2005). Also, hybrid models combining physical and virtual touchpoints emerge as a dominant trend, enhancing customer engagement and learning processes.

Despite the rise of digital platforms, physical fairs remain irreplaceable for experiential engagement and trust-building. For sustainability communication, fairs represent a critical moment to demonstrate environmental responsibility and differentiate products in competitive markets. Literature suggests that integrating certification narratives into booth design and experiential marketing can strengthen consumer trust and engagement (Testa et al. 2015; Majer et al. 2022).

For example, insights from the furniture industry in Jepara, Indonesia, reveal that participation in trade exhibitions can serve as a critical capacity-building strategy for small-scale producers, enabling them to access new markets and learn quality standards (Larasatie 2018). However, these benefits require training in exhibition management, IT skills, and design innovation—areas where small firms often lack expertise. This parallels European contexts, where exhibitors should integrate SFM narratives into booth design and experiential marketing to maximize certification visibility.

4. Methods

To achieve the research objectives, the study adopted an in-person survey and observational approach at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano 2025*. This method was chosen to ensure direct interaction with exhibitors, enabling clarification of questions and reducing the risk of misinterpretation. The in-person approach also allowed the researchers to assess booth layouts and marketing materials firsthand, complementing questionnaire responses with contextual insights. The combination of face-to-face engagement and a structured questionnaire provided a comprehensive dataset capturing exhibitors' perceptions and actual communication practices related to sustainable forest management certification. This approach enabled a comparison between the perceived importance and the actual visibility of certification.

The observational approach consisted first in verifying the presence of wood furniture in the booths. Exhibitors not dealing with wood or dealing with it marginally were excluded. Second, when the relevance of wood was confirmed, the presence and display of FSC and PEFC labels within the booths were assessed.

4.1 Questionnaire development and refinement

The questionnaire was collaboratively designed by three university professors with expertise in wood technology, forest economics, and forest products marketing. The selection of items was informed by a review of existing questionnaires in the literature related to both the wood sector and interior furnishing.

An initial version of the questionnaire was tested at the *Restructura* fair in Turin, Italy, in November 2024. Although this event primarily targets the construction sector, it includes numerous exhibitors of interior furnishing, such as windows and parquet flooring manufacturers. This context was considered sufficiently similar to the *Salone del Mobile di Milano* to serve as a screening and validation environment.

The test was conducted over two days by a graduate student, who administered the questionnaire to booth personnel. Twenty-two questionnaires were collected during the test. They were used to refine wording and sequencing and were excluded from final analyses. This process assessed question clarity, identified potential issues, and evaluated overall receptiveness to the survey. Feedback was generally positive, with only a few exhibitors declining participation. Insights from this pilot led to revisions, including clarifying ambiguous questions and adding new items suggested by exhibitors. The pre-test also helped estimate completion time, which averaged approximately 15 minutes per booth, deemed practical for both data collection and minimizing respondent fatigue. The screening also provided useful training for the graduate student, who practiced interacting with booth operators and gained a better understanding of the purpose of the study. Based on the findings from the *Restructura* fair, the questionnaire was refined and finalized for its final use (Appendix A).

Presence of wood furniture in booths at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano* in April 2025 was verified by visual inspection focused on the semi-finished wood products and on the wood species used. When wood presence was confirmed, the presence and display of FSC and PEFC labels within the booths were verified. Only FSC and PEFC were considered because they represent the dominant SFM certification programs used in the furniture sector. Also, limiting the scope was a way to favor respondent clarity during the

fast-paced trade fair interactions. Visibility of display was rated through a five-point Likert scale (1 = very limited display; 3 = displayed but not prominent; 5 = prominent display); intermediate values (2 and 4) were used when needed. All evaluations were made by the same person to ensure a consistent assessment. When it was possible to take pictures, these were checked afterwards by the authors to validate the on-field assessment. Of the 36 booths that were contacted over the course of two days, 34 accepted to participate in the survey.

4.2 Statistical analysis

Data collected through the questionnaire were first analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the main characteristics of the sample and the variables considered. Subsequently, Goodness-of-Fit test was performed to determine whether observed frequency distributions differed significantly from an expected uniform distribution. For variables showing significant differences, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using Chi-square tests with Bonferroni correction. Statistical significance was always set at $p < 0.05$. All analyses were conducted using the R software (version 4.4.2).

5. Results

5.1 Use of wood

The preliminary visual check of booths revealed that the most common furniture items were tables and chairs, accounting for around half of all wood products observed. Sofas, wardrobes and parquet floorings were also well represented. Other categories included kitchen furniture and some specialized items, such as thermal-insulating components. The most common wood species were oak, black locust, walnut, beech, and teak. Several other temperate and tropical species were also present, both in primary structures and decorative elements. Wood furniture was made from a wide variety of semi-finished products, commonly solid wood, plywood, sliced veneers and particleboard.

Overall, the preliminary visual screening revealed a strong presence of wood and derived products in the booths. This confirmed the relevance of the *Salone del Mobile di Milano* for assessing the role of SFM certification in the marketing of wood furniture.

5.1.1 Role of wood in product design

The majority of exhibitors (54%) considered wood as a crucial element for furniture aesthetics. Conversely, 26% of respondents reported that wood played a medium role in their products. The remaining 20% indicated that wood played a marginal role only. Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences among these categories ($\chi^2 = 50.08$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$).

5.2 Visibility and role of SFM certification

FSC labels were present in 43% of contacted booths, while PEFC labels were present in 27% of them. The visibility of FSC labels was very limited in 64% of cases. PEFC exhibited a similar pattern, with 70% of labels minimally displayed. Only a minority of exhibitors showcased certification prominently: 12% for FSC and 10% for PEFC (Figure 1). Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences in visibility levels for both FSC ($\chi^2 = 125.98$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$), and PEFC ($\chi^2 = 170$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$).

5.3 Questionnaire insights

Figure 2 shows the perceptions of exhibitors about wood and sustainability. Notably, the highest rating (“a lot”) scored around 60% of responses in all questions. The results for each question are reported below.

5.3.1 Ecological value

The majority of respondents (62%) stated that the ecological value of wood adds “a lot” to the overall value of their products (Figure 2a). In contrast, 15% reported that it contributes “little”, while an additional 15% indicated “I can’t say”. Only 8 % indicated a “medium” contribution. Statistical analysis revealed significant differences among response categories ($\chi^2 = 74.32$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$), with particularly pronounced contrasts between “little” and “a lot”, and between “medium” and “a lot.”

5.3.2 Positive environmental effect

When asked whether companies use wood for its positive environmental effects, 58% of respondents indicated “a lot” (Figure 2b). At the same time, 19% selected “little”, 15% reported uncertainty (“I can’t say”), and 8% indicated a “medium” level of agreement. The resulting differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 58.32$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$), particularly between “little” and

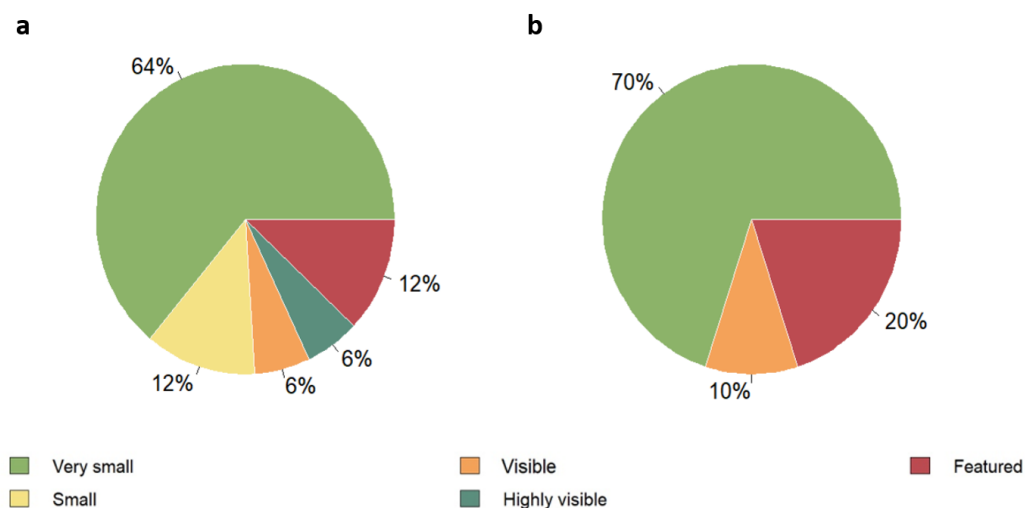


Figure 1. Degree of visibility of (a) FSC and (b) PEFC certification.

“a lot” ($p < 0.001$), between “medium” and “a lot” ($p < 0.001$), and between “a lot” and “I can’t say” ($p < 0.001$).

5.3.3 Aesthetics as a sustainability message

Regarding the aesthetic dimension, 62% of respondents indicated that the appearance of wood conveys

“a lot” regarding a message of sustainability (Figure 2c). Smaller shares selected “I can’t say” (15%), “medium” (12%), or “little” (11%). The distribution of responses differed significantly across categories ($\chi^2 = 73.36$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a clear consensus among exhibitors.

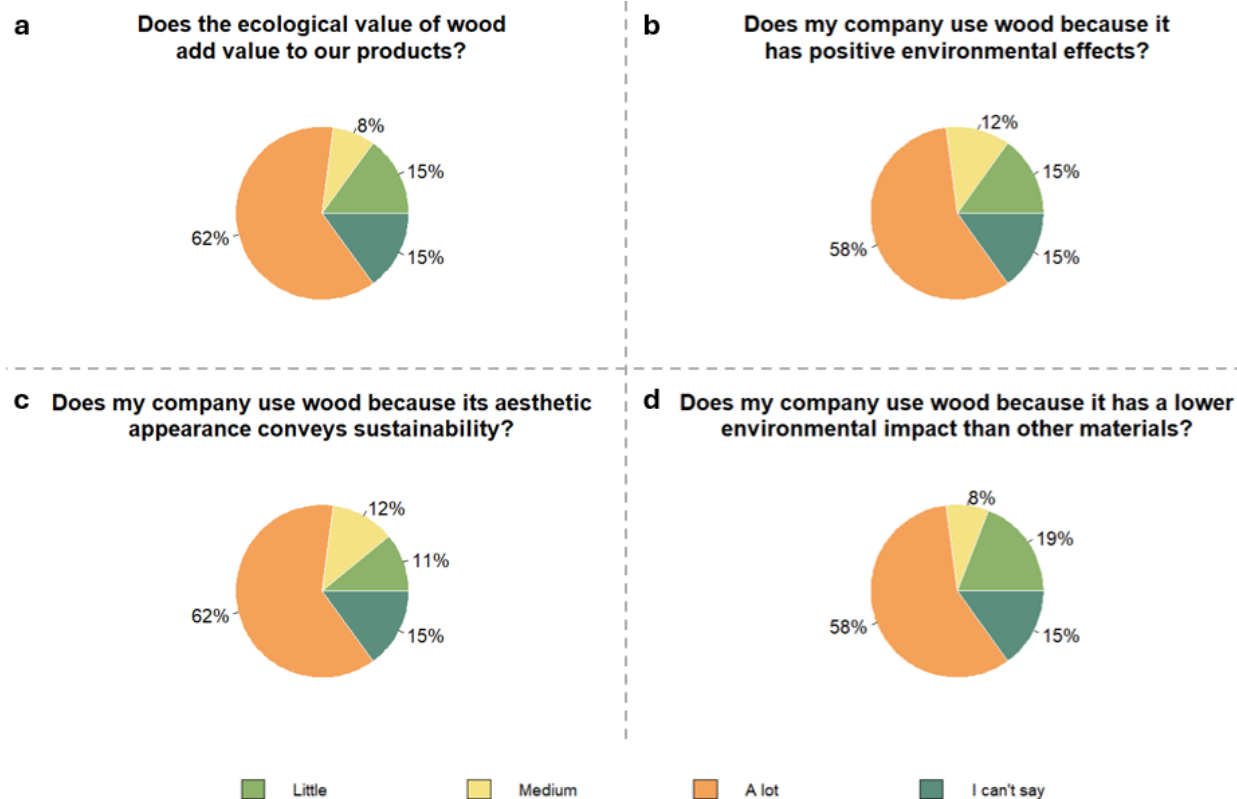


Figure 2. Exhibitors' perceptions regarding wood and sustainability.

5.3.4 Comparison with alternative materials

When asked whether companies choose wood because of its lower environmental impact compared to alternative materials, 58% of respondents answered “a lot” (Figure 2d). However, 15% selected “little”, 15% “I can’t say”, and 12% indicated a “medium” level of agreement. The statistical analysis confirmed significant differences among categories ($\chi^2 = 60.56$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$).

5.4 Importance of SFM certification for product valorization

Despite the limited visibility of certification labels observed in booths, 73% of respondents indicated that FSC and PEFC certification are important for product valorization and marketing. A limited number of respondents rated their importance for product valorization as “slightly important” (16%), “moderately important” (6%), or reported uncertainty (“I don’t know”, 5%) (Figure 3). Statistical analysis revealed significant differences among response categories ($\chi^2 = 125.84$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$), with particularly pronounced contrasts between the “a lot” category and all other responses ($p < 0.001$).

6. Discussion

Wood has historically been a cornerstone material in interior furniture design, valued for its workability,

availability, and aesthetic appeal. Recent advances in processing technologies have expanded its applications in furniture, enabling interpretations that range from traditional styles to innovative design. A wide range of wood-based products are currently used in furniture production, including veneers to replicate the appearance of solid wood (Ratnasingam et al. 2020) and particleboard for its cost-effectiveness (Rashid et al. 2024).

In recent years, sustainability has become an increasingly important dimension of wood’s appeal, as it is able to convey a sense of naturalness and environmental responsibility. The findings from this study confirm that exhibitors at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano 2025* recognize the ecological value of wood as a significant contributor to product differentiation. Most respondents indicated that wood’s environmental benefits and aesthetic qualities enhance product value and align with consumer expectations for sustainable materials. This reinforces the role of wood as a functional and symbolic element in sustainability communication, positioning it as an important visual cue in sustainable design. Wood is indeed appealing to consumers’ growing desire for products that can align with their environmental values (Harju and Lahtinen 2021).

However, while most exhibitors acknowledged the importance of wood in their products, many did not emphasize it as a central element in their brand-

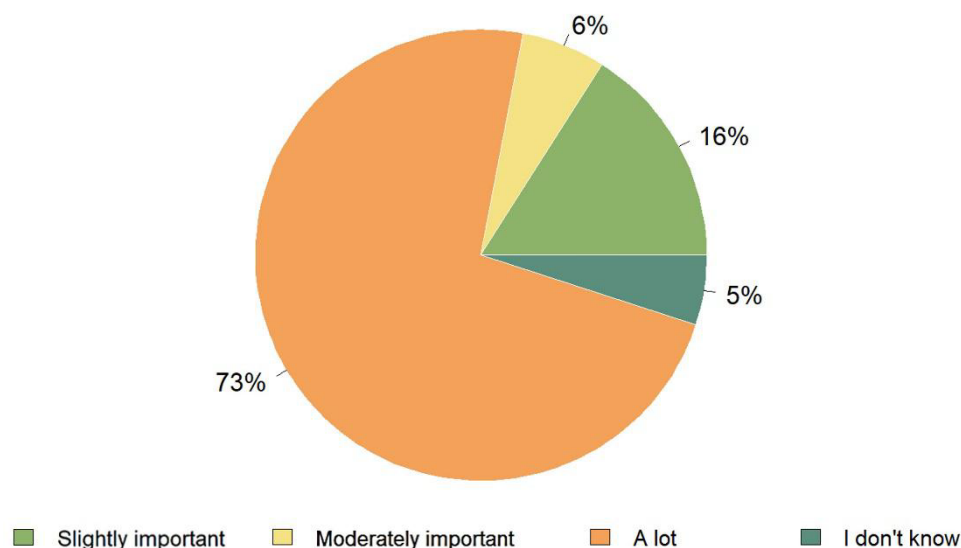


Figure 3. Exhibitors’ perception of the importance of FSC and PEFC certification.

ing or marketing strategies. This may stem from a more industrial-focused approach, where factors like functionality, price, and production efficiency often outweigh the material itself (Varol 2023).

The results also reveal a remarkable imbalance between the perceived importance of sustainability certification and its actual visibility in marketing practices at the SdM. While FSC and PEFC certification were present in many booths, their labels were often minimally displayed or absent from prominent marketing materials. This suggests that many companies did not leverage certification labels as central elements of their marketing strategies during the fair, despite their potential to add value (Calvano et al. 2025). In fact, the statistical analysis confirmed that visibility levels were significantly skewed towards the lowest categories. Factors such as design, aesthetics, functionality, and price often dominate consumers' choices (Millaniyage et al. 2024), leaving sustainability credentials underutilized as branding assets.

This gap can be particularly relevant in high-profile trade fairs, which serve as strategic platforms for product promotion and brand positioning. This disconnection mirrors findings in literature, which highlight an attitude-behavior gap: consumers express a willingness to pay for certified furniture, yet actual purchase rates remain lower due to price sensitivity, limited awareness, and skepticism about label credibility (Kozak et al. 2004; Panico et al. 2022). Effective sustainability communication and education campaigns are still necessary to bridge this gap and increase market share for certified products (Testa et al. 2015; Majer et al. 2022).

The literature also emphasizes that trust in certification schemes and clarity of communication is critical for influencing purchasing decisions. Without these elements, SFM certification risk being perceived as mere compliance tools rather than marketing assets (Aguilar and Cai 2010; Lee et al. 2020). Strategies such as storytelling, experiential marketing, and integration of certification labels into booth design can enhance visibility and consumer engagement.

Additionally, case studies from Indonesia reinforce the notion that certification alone does not guarantee competitive advantage. Without complementary strategies such as association-based capacity building, collaborative supply-chain models, and targeted marketing, small producers remain vulnerable in

globalized markets (Larasatie 2018). Insights from strategic-planning research further support this view. Structured business modeling and scenario-based approaches, such as those applied in the kitchen manufacturing sector (Rodriguez and Kolyada 2025), demonstrate that competitive positioning improves when firms integrate sustainability signals within broader strategic narratives, rather than treating them as stand-alone attributes. Similarly, at the SdM, exhibitors who fail to integrate certification into compelling narratives risk underutilizing its branding potential.

Consumer research further suggests that hedonic appeals, such as emphasizing aesthetics, exclusivity, and emotional satisfaction, are more effective than utilitarian messaging in promoting certified furniture (Larasatie et al. 2023). This aligns with the experiential nature of physical trade fairs, where sensory engagement and storytelling can activate hedonic values and strengthen green perceptions. Conversely, utilitarian-driven consumers may resist price premiums, highlighting the need for differentiated communication strategies.

Finally, some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the relatively small sample size ($n = 34$) limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the nature of the data collected at a single event may not capture differences across different contexts or time. Future studies, therefore, should consider larger and diverse research setups across multiple trade fairs and geographical contexts.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This study highlights a critical gap between sustainability discourse and marketing practice in the furniture sector. While exhibitors acknowledge the ecological benefits of wood and the strategic importance of forest certification, these elements were substantially under-communicated at the *Salone del Mobile di Milano 2025*. Certification programs such as FSC and PEFC remained often “just a label” rather than a prominent feature of brand identity, limiting their potential as signals of environmental responsibility.

To fully explore the real magnitude of this potential, certification schemes and furniture manufacturers should pursue integrated communication

strategies that make sustainability credentials more visible and meaningful to consumers. Actions may include

- incorporating certification labels into booth design and promotional materials;
- developing joint marketing initiatives between certification schemes and furniture brands; and
- educating consumers on the value of certified products through storytelling and experiential marketing.

From a research perspective, future studies should aim at deepening the knowledge by addressing larger samples and comparing different types of subjects and events. In addition, qualitative studies could provide further insight into the reasons behind how companies approach forest certification communication.

Enhancing the visibility and relevance of SFM will not only strengthen the competitive positioning of certified products but also contribute to broader sustainability goals within the furniture industry. Lessons from Indonesia indicate that eco-labeling and legality verification systems succeed only when paired with capacity-building initiatives and collaborative governance structures (Larasatie 2018). For European exhibitors, this translates into the need for integrated approaches that combine certification with design innovation, emotional branding, and consumer education.

Moreover, given that hedonic shopping values significantly enhance green perceptions (Larasatie et al. 2023), marketing strategies should prioritize emotional engagement through booth aesthetics, storytelling, and digital campaigns, rather than relying solely on rational appeals. By leveraging these insights, trade fairs can become transformative platforms for sustainability communication and market differentiation.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

[The questionnaire was drafted in Italian.]

Dear exhibitor,

We are conducting a study on the use of wood and derived products in the furniture sector, as part of a Masters' Degree thesis in Forest and Environmental Sciences at DISAFA, University of Torino, Italy. Filling in this questionnaire takes around 5 minutes. Participation is voluntary. All answers will be kept anonymous and treated as aggregate data. By answering the following questions you agree with this setup. For any further question, please write to francesco.negro@unito.it.

Thank you for your kind cooperation.

Appendix table

	How important is wood for the aesthetic appeal of the furniture produced by your company?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	
	Does the ecological value of wood add value to your products?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	
	Does your company use wood because it has positive environmental effects?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	
	Does your company use wood because its aesthetic appearance conveys sustainability?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	
	Does your company use wood because it has a lower environmental impact than other materials?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	
	How important is SFM certification for your company?
1-little; 3-medium; 5-a lot; 6-I can't say	