Italian Sociological Review, 2012, 2, 3, pp. 137-148

The geography of consumption: an analysis of the purchase choice strategies in Italian families

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the change in consumption strategies of Italian families considering their choice of retail stores. The data are taken from the Observatory of the strategies of family consumption coordinated by the Institute of Social Research, University of Verona and SWG concerning the years 2009-2011[1] and gathered by CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing).

The longitudinal analysis of the phenomenon highlights a division of the sample into two parts: on one hand, families looking for the cheapest price in order to preserve the overall quality of their shopping basket, on the other families driven by the services offered which add a surplus to the shopping cart. Most consumers have modified their shopping habits; price is confirmed as the main element directing consumption strategies while large-scale retail trade continues to absorb most of the demand, especially as regards food products. The level of the consumer's selectivity in the choice of retail stores grows as much as his tendency to discuss the standard of the offered service.

Dynamism is a characteristic of the wandering consumer's behavior in order to interpret the constant change of the retail stores, that does not only express the profile of the "sovereign consumer" but expresses also a constant level of uncertainty about the future. The change in purchase strategies, and consequently in the choice of retail shops has involved most families, forced to readjust both the purchased goods in the basket and the quality of these goods by the means of a "new" choice of the retail stores. The understanding of consumption strategies proves again to be a field of analysis about the changes inside both society and social stratification.

Keywords: consumption, social stratification, retail shops, longitudinal research.

1. Where production and consumption meet: retail shops

In contemporary society the retail shop represents a particular observation point of families' consumption strategies. The growing level of autonomy that the structure of "distribution" has acquired as regards "production", has unbalanced the economical power in favour of distribution companies selling the product on the market, thus undermining the power of production firms. It is a process that has involved, without distinction, all the sectors of production in which the bargaining with the sales network, if it is not managed directly by the production business itself, becomes of the highest importance in order to remain on the market.

The distributor, always subordinate to the producer, becomes a creator of wealth for the consumer, so that the retail store becomes a value in itself, partially separated from the role granted by production and able to direct consumption strategies. The traditional retail shop represents the widespread access network to consumption although it is slowly emerging, actually it has already forcefully emerged the existence of new distribution channels that, being outside the classical logic

[1] Year 2009 - Survey on a sample of 2022 individuals. Year 2010 - Survey on a sample of 2.007 individuals. Year 2011 - Survey on a sample of 2008 individuals. The sample is proportionally stratified according to sex, age and geographic area of residence – Northwest, Northeast, Central, South and the Islands – of the individuals. Source: Institute of Social Research, University of Verona and SWG S.r.l. (Director: D. Secondulfo – M. Pessato, Methodological coordinators: L. Tronca – I. Di Pelino). See: http://profs.formazione.univr.it/crisvr/

of "production-distribution", enable the consumer to manage on his own the goods' distribution (GAS Gruppi di acquisto solidale[2]). The adoption of a socio-anthropological perspective in the study of consumption, centered on the concept of "cycle of material culture" (Secondulfo, 2001; 2012) means to interpret jointly both money and goods circulation according to four main stages: production, distribution, consumption and rejection. A single "cycle" consisting of many-sided dimensions: «the "vital" one linking birth and death of goods, of objects»;« the "symbolic" one that follows the different transformations of sense and meaning objects undergo, becoming each time goods, instruments, gifts, […]» and «the "social" one following the course of the objects through the many different sub-cultural worlds making up the uneven mosaic of a society, of sub-cultures either ethnical, or generational, or local, or working, etc.» (p. 55). If we assign to the production phase the function of transforming natural environment into a "socially useful form", the phase of "distribution" emerges as a representation of the meeting point between goods and final consumer. In fact, the phase of distribution implies that production has already «transformed the natural datum in something else socially useful» (p. 69) and that material culture, in its form of goods, is ready to be "handed out" to the final consumer.

In Italy, in the years after the Second World War, the process of the supremacy of distribution over production thanks to the products' serialization developed together with the birth of mass-market. It passed from a «structure based on small shops selling specialized goods for socially recognizable consumers to more generalized mass-consumption oriented structures» (p. 71): thus the shop is transformed into a department store, into a supermarket becoming in the end a "consumption cathedral" (Ritzer, 2005). The places of sale lose their appearance of simple go-between, becoming a place thick with meaning: a place where the relationships with producers are hidden. Distribution acquires symbolic meaning because it becomes the setting for the goods as a show. Material culture is told through the symbolic construction of the brand, as a "place of metaphors" (Minestroni, 2002), emphasized in the retail store and subsequently re-interpreted by the consumer himself when the object "ceases" its life as goods and becomes an object of everyday life (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). It could be argued that this is a twofold story told by material culture: one is represented by the "social history" of goods and it is created starting from the image of the brand and of the retail shop; the other reproduces the "personal history" of the object linked to the process of consumer's identity construction (Bartoletti, 2007). The door to the world of consumption is the window, either of a shop, a factory outlet, a department store, a shopping centre or a virtual outlet. The great importance a retail store holds is particularly evident if we consider the attention companies pay to the creation of experiential marketing strategies (Schmitt, 1999) in order to create a setting: a social context around goods.

The analysis of the evolution of retail store, from specialized shop to consumer's cathedral means to focus our attention on the rise of "mass-consumption society" which, first considered as central both work and emerging consumption, but later it acquired the figure of the consumer as a central fundamental element of the dynamics of social construction. Consumption is part of the socialization process: the rules, the practices, the behavior models are learned and reproduced during the span of a subject's life. And it is precisely the hegemonic position taken by consumption that causes alarm since, starting from childhood, the socialization of consumption is oriented to the deceptive satisfaction of desire and, consequently, to the permanent dissatisfaction of one's needs. As Schor (2004) clearly points out when retracing the range of the influence and pressure to consumption since childhood, she also states how the companies' attention addresses the expression of children's desires, both as reference targets being independent consumers, and as subjects able to condition the strategies of family consumption.

The retail store represents a further privileged observation point to examine the change in social stratification. Lifestyle is expressed through the choice of the "access doors" to the world of distribution (Codeluppi, 2000) and the basket of goods chosen, characterizing the "taste" and the preferences of the consumer, and it is only in part influenced by the economic capital at one's disposal (Sassatelli, 2007). The primary source of access to the world of consumption is undoubtedly the possession of income or wealth; it is money, as symbol of modernity (Simmel, 1984), which enables to create social meaning through consumption. As we will see later from the

[2] See: Lori M., Volpi F. (2007); Forno (2009).

results of the factorial analysis concerning the motives driving a family to visit new retail stores (post-crisis), the sample concentrates around two factors: one is centered on the dimension of "service", the other on the dimension of "price". This division surely identifies consumption strategies as strongly influenced by price, that has again become a key variable in consumption choices. Nevertheless, the economic capital, although central in the analysis of the basket of goods of Italian families, cannot alone explain all consumption behaviors. The stress on the central position of economic capital in the analyses about family consumption opens the way to an endless series of considerations regarding further endowments of "wealth" of the individual, and of collectivity: human capital and social capital. They represent, together with the study of the subject's life path, his attitude to cope with the "biographical fractures" and, in more general terms his activation of a reflexivity process caused by a biographical fracture, the variables that together with economic capital, allow the analysis of the change in social stratification.

What is evident through the analyses on Italian families is that almost the total number of the samples has been involved in the change in consumption styles. Motivations are different, as are different the product sectors where a higher or lower tendency to retail shops fidelity can be registered, but change is generalized. This reinforces the idea of a general transition and the violent appearance of a biographical discontinuity touching the world of consumption (Mortara, 2006). With the stress on the "figure" of desire, consumption society ceases to be a place where needs are satisfied and becomes a social dialogue where the principle of non-satiety reigns. The socio-economical crisis brings to the forefront themes such as waste, sustainability, and the redefinition of individual and collective standard of needs that, now more than before, is no more only object of discussion about the "sustainable consumer", but widens its potential of changing into a "responsible consumer" (Paltrinieri, 2009), better aware than before of the effects of his actions. Thus a change in the cultural categories regarding both the definition of "need", "waste", "desire" and their level of social legitimacy can be witnessed. The analysis of consumption strategies, intended as the interpretation of the social meanings connected to consumption acts, inevitably leads to take into consideration the theme of social stratification (Di Nicola, 2010). This consequently leads to understand in what ways families are coping with the change in the economical and cultural sphere of individual action, although with different levels of freedom. As Tronca (2011) maintains: «The target of economic crisis are children, young workers and the areas needing a higher economic development: in other words, the target of crisis is the future of the Country.» (newsletter OSCF, p. 4). It is evident how the final choice of the retail store is the final phase of a decisional process of consumption synthesizing a wind of uncertainty and difficulty, the long-lasting effect of the individual's working instability.

From a phase of "wariness" as regards the purchased goods in the basket involving, with different shades, the whole of Italian families facing "anti-crisis" strategies, the catchment area making "sacrifices" as to quality and quantity of purchased goods has widened to families of the socio-economical middle class level (Setiffi, 2011). Consumption, the choice of retail stores, the criteria of selection of goods in the basket, all these synthesize the difficulties some Italian families find in trying to make money last until the end of the month, or to keep unaltered their consumption level in recent years and leading to the decision to abandon retail stores where the offer of goods' quality and services has diminished. Veblen (1899) already showed the relationship between consumption and social stratification, since consumption evolved into a value of ostentation of one's social position, stating the relevance of the "quality" of goods, and consequently of the choice, together with "quantity" and the variation of the goods basket considering only the variable of price. As Ragone (1992) underlined, the turning point introduced by Veblen enables to shift the attention from the study of the value of use, detached from the social context, to the analysis of lifestyle.

Retracing the functional and aesthetic evolution of the retail stores in Italy in the 20th century means to tell the progressive and inexorable independence of the consumer's profile from the worker's one[3]. Since the rise of mass consumption society, the direct relation between production and consumption declined. During the years of the Italian economic miracle Italy «is still a many faceted country. Nevertheless, the great changes of the period unbalanced the equilibriums,

[3] See also: Viviani (2007).

redefining differentiations, ascribing to social classes new identities. [...] the new material class forms an important part in the construction of new identities, gives shape to values and behaviors, becomes a means to create relationships and finally becomes integrated inside society.» (Scarpellini, 2008, p. 139). As objects and goods mark cultural evolutions and changes in social stratification, purchase places too are a "trace" of the evolution of Italian society in the last century. Nowadays the "consumption cathedrals" seem to have reached their point of maximum evolution: leaving "the consumer alone in front of goods" (Secondulfo, 2012). Social change, tied to the construction of a lifestyle, can thus be analyzed through the consumption strategies of everyday goods. The change in the basket goods used by Italian families is nothing but the sign of a change in values (already under way) that will have effects on lifestyle. The gathering and analysis of these changes will provide the bases for future interpretations of family consumption strategies, since we are witnessing a substantially generalized challenge to the acquired social positions of the previous decades. The "wandering consumer" (Secondulfo, 2010) is an emblem of contemporary society because it synthesizes the need to consume inside a frame of growing instability, which, having no boundaries, encompasses the manifold vital worlds of the subject.

2. "Quantity" and "Quality" of the deserted retail stores[4]

The desertion of the "customary" retail stores is substantially generalized to the whole sample; although we register a slight reduction in the number of those who keep changing their way to shop, changing from four to five retail stores as to the previous year. The families who adopted this strategy were 54,6% in 2009, and diminished to 53,1% in 2010 and to 50,4% in 2011. The data about the change in the selection of the retail stores strengthen the existence of a "wandering" consumer. If we add the consumers who radically changed from one to three retail shops as to the previous year, the number rises to more than 80% of the interviewed sample for each year of survey. On the other hand, the share of "faithful consumers" declaring they did not change their consumption habits shows a slight grow, but this regards only some families, probably because of the rebuilding of their consumption strategies into new ones: 7,2% in 2009, 10,4% in 2010 and 11,8% in 2011 (tab.1). As it can be seen from the data, consumption habits, and consequently the retail stores choice, are radically changing and only a small number of families seems not to have been affected by the consequences of the recent socio-economical changes. Among the families with unaltered consumption habits more than 80%[5] (surveys of the years 2009-2011) considers their monthly income as satisfying to meet their expenses. These are substantially "constant" consumers because they are only partially touched by economic crisis and by the weakened purchasing power of their own income.

It is interesting to note how the desertion of the customary retail stores has been confirmed for all product categories[6]; this means that, on one side there has been the transition among different distribution categories of sale and on the other there has been a growth in comparing, and consequently in selection, among retail stores of the same market category. First of all, everything has changed regardless of the quality of the offered goods; probably, it was a swift reaction to crisis which found in change a solution to crisis. For each year of survey (tab. 2): about 20% of Italian families changed their customary retail stores because of "unreasonable prices"; more than 30% of families changed simply because of a lower level in products' quality and of the products' poor quality as to price. Only about 10% stated they changed their "reliable" retail stores because of inadequate choice of products.

[4] The data gathered by the Observatory can be considered an interesting source of analysis of the retail store choice strategies because they allow to detect the "wandering level" of the consumer, and consequently his diminishing level of fidelity to his usual distribution places. These data cannot be compared with the Survey on family consumption (years 2009-2011) carried out by ISTAT, since the two researches' objectives are different. The Observatory's data aim at detecting the choice of the retail shop according to product, while Istat data investigate the retail store choice according to purchase needs. See: http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/4021 (consulted on 06.12.2012).

[5] Survey: 2009 - 88,8%; Survey 2010 - 83,6%; Survey 2011- 80,9%.

[6] The analysis on the retail stores desertion was gathered by a *set* of multiple-choice questions asking to mark, for each product category, which retail stores had been deserted.

Table 1 – *In the last year did you chance to change your customary retail stores?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
No change	7,2	10,4	11,8
From 1 to 3 retail stores	38,2	36,5	37,8
From 4 to 5 retail stores	54,6	53,1	50,4
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

The change in shopping habits, and consequently of the reasons that drive Italian families to change their retail stores, is a snapshot of the reduction of the purchasing power some families have experienced, being thus forced to change their shopping habits because of product prices, while others, realizing the growing poor quality of the offered products, move to other retail stores. The change of retail outlets in large scale retail trade (in Italian Grande Distribuzione Organizzata, GDO) mirrors the change in the Italian families' purchase "trajectory"; on one hand trying to keep unaltered their segment of customers, on the other trying to create a varied offer inside the retail outlet, in order to keep as stable as possible their presence on the market. If the choice of the retail stores is constantly subject to an incessant test, the motivation driving families to change their shopping habits remains substantially unvaried. The "low quality-price value" is the reason why a stable 26%-27% of families, during the three years considered, deserted the retail store. On the other hand, we witness a decreased number of families that choose to change the retail place because of the "very poor quality of the products", turning from 17,3% in 2009, to 17,2% in 2010 and to 13,8% in 2011, and maybe this is a faint sign of stability in the retail store choice, a direct consequence of the consumer's "cautiousness" strategy in the products' selection and distribution channels.

Table 2 - *In general, which is the main reason for your choice not to go to these retail stores?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Very poor quality of the products	17,5	17,2	13,8
No good value prices	21,9	18,8	21,0
Low quality/price ratio	26,6	27,0	27,5
Poor variety of choice	10,9	10,9	10,8
Farther from home	5,3	7,7	6,5
Low level of trust in the retailer	5,1	4,1	4,0
Impoliteness of the retailer	2,6	1,9	2,0
Poor transport and parking services	1,5	0,8	0,8
Poor offer of extra services (ex. Home delivery)	1,4	1,4	1,7
Missing System	7,2	10,2	11,9
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

3. The new retail stores: the supremacy of large scale retail trade

Let's now investigate which are the *new retail stores* chosen by Italian families for each single product sector. The purchase places used in the surveys are: large scale retail trade (in Italian Grande Distribuzione Organizzata, from now on GDO), considering shopping centre/supermarket and discount market; stalls and market-places; specialized shops; "gruppi di acquisto solidale" (GAS in Italian), formed by groups of people meeting regularly in order to buy large quantities of food or common goods at wholesale prices and who subsequently divide or redistribute them[7], and second-hand shops. Besides dividing the distribution places into GDO, stalls/market-places and second-hand shops/GAS, these five categories can be placed along a *continuum* line, where at one end of the line the offered service is highly impersonal, mainly represented by the shopping centre, the supermarket and the discount market, and at the other end where the personal relationship with the customer is grows more and more central as in stalls, exchange circuits managed directly by consumers, swap and used products. It is precisely the supremacy of the relational dimension over

[7] See: http://www.retegas.org/ (consulted on 06.12.2012).

exchange that characterizes all non-conventional circuits, placing them as antithetical as to the de-personalization of consumption society. Nevertheless, both second-hand market, that bears the same characteristics of "traditional" distribution, and the relational circuits where purchase and distribution are shared, the so-called "GAS sharers", are still examples of marginal market forms. The "sovereign" place shopping centre and supermarkets have acquired in western societies can be ascribed to the distinctive inelasticity of the cycle of material culture (*see above*), the passage from the phase of "distribution" to the one of "consumption" is marked by all those resistances both symbolic and communicative which prevent the "movement" of goods in the opposite direction, that is to say from "consumption" to "production/distribution".Distribution is the place socially legitimated to convey the dimension of the New (Secondulfo, 2012; Setiffi, 2009, 2012), it represents a discipline of order that, by contrast, shows as "out of place" everything that goes back to the circuit of exchange as second-hand. The supremacy of New, accompanied by the supremacy of traditional distribution (Fabris, 2003) made up of shopping centres and supermarkets is opposed to all those consumption circuits where the consumer regains possession of a space, participating directly to the purchase and distribution of the product. In short, together with the unquestioned supremacy of GDO especially in the food sector, and the resistance of specialized shops, in particular those connected with body care products, in the panorama of families' consumption strategies there emerges a faint sign of innovation that is expressed precisely by a small market share addressing non-conventional purchase circuits (from 1% to 3% for each year of survey). After having suggested a classification of the different retail stores, the next step analyses the purchase places chosen by Italian families divided according to product sectors. As regards the purchase of "food" products, there is a substantial stability in the sample's choice of new retail stores (tab. 3). Both in 2009 and in 2010 more than 40%[8] of Italian families prefer the shopping centre and the supermarket; they are less interested in stalls and markets since these are chosen as "new" purchase places only by 5% of the families, while about 10% of them has included the discount supermarket in the "new retail stores choice". These choices are both the result of constant discussion inside the family about its consumption strategies and part of a wider context of uncertainty about the future. The progressive evolution of the economic situation amplifies the "wandering" character of the consumer, stressing the dimension of "selectivity" in the process of choice.

Table 3 - *Which are as to the "**Food**" sector, the* **new retail stores** *where you mainly buy your products?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Stalls/Market	3,9	5,4	5,5
Discount outlets	9,0	8,2	11,6
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	46,6	43,2	63,3
Specialized shop (for ex.: grocery, furniture outlets, etc.)	5,8	5,3	6,9
New forms (ex.: GAS, second hand, etc.)	0,9	1,1	1,0
Missing System	33,8	36,8	11,7
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

If in the food sector both shopping centre and supermarket seem the favorite food shopping places for half of the Italian families, in the sector of clothes and shoes products there is a persistence in the choice of specialized outlets involving 40% of consumers for each year of survey (tab. 4). Considering home furniture, from the purchase of furniture to gifts and fancy goods, there is a growth in the choice of the specialized outlet that in 2011 fell to 48,4% of the consumers (tab. 5). The second-hand circuits, that are slightly growing in 2011 (2,6%) and the forms of "low cost" distribution (stalls/discount), which together make up 5% of consumers, remain nevertheless marginal.

[8] It can be noticed a substantial growth of the presence of the shopping centre and the supermarket in consumption strategies of Italian families; in 2011 63,2% of Italian families declared to have chosen them as "new retail stores". Probably there is a growth in the families' trust for traditional large-scale retail trade but the datum needs to be confirmed by future surveys, since there seems to be also a concomitant growth in the preference of these two retail stores together with the drop of missing values as regards the two previous surveys.

Table 4 - *Which are as regards "**Clothes and Shoes**" products, the **new retail stores** where you mainly buy your products?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Stalls/Markets	7,8	6,1	9,0
Discount outlets	2,8	2,8	3,5
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	29,6	24,8	31,5
Specialized shop (for ex.: grocery, furniture outlet, etc.)	37,2	40,9	42,4
New forms (ex.: GAS, second-hand, etc.)	1,2	1,2	1,8
Missing System	21,4	24,2	11,8
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

In the furniture sector we witness a substantial consolidation of the "traditional offer", split between large scale retail trade and specialized outlets. About 30% of Italian families choose the specialized outlet to buy drugs, hygienic and body care goods (tab. 6).

The small shop seems to have a higher appeal in the eyes of the consumer in 2011; the Italian families declaring to choose it as "new retail stores" are in fact 56,9%. More in general, we can say that body care goods sector is still oriented to a generalized *face to face* customer retention since the relationship with the retailer is a constitutive part of the purchase process and consumption strategy[9].

Table 5 - *Which are as to **Home Furniture** the **new sales outlets** where you mainly buy the products you need?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Stalls/Markets	2,2	2,2	2,7
Discount	3,0	2,3	2,8
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	27,6	24,3	31,9
Specialized outlet (for ex.: grocery, furniture outlet, etc.)	36,6	40,3	48,4
New forms (ex.: GAS, second-hand, etc.)	1,4	1,4	2,6
Missing System	29,2	29,5	11,6
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

Table 6 - *Which are for the goods sector "**Drugs and hygienic and body care goods**" the **new sales outlets** where you mainly buy the products you need?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Stalls/Markets	0,5	0,4	0,2
Discount	1,9	1,4	2,2
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	22,4	18,9	28,0
Specialized shop (for ex.: grocery, furniture outlet, etc.)	29,6	31,0	56,9
New forms (ex.: GAS, second hand, etc.)	0,4	0,6	0,9
Missing System	45,2	47,7	11,8
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

Finally, we come to consider the technological products sector: in 2011 the purchase in the shopping centre is chosen by more than 40% of Italian families (tab. 7).

The 2011 survey particularly interesting because the results on one hand strongly highlight the presence of the shopping centre/supermarket (46,1%), on the other they reveal the existence of forms of exchange alternative to the large-scale retail system chosen by 3,1% of Italian families. It can be said that, together with a substantial hegemony of the shopping centre/supermarket, the specialized shop succeeds in keeping a check on large-scale retail trade centers and exactly the year 2011 shows a first hint of novelty in purchase strategies.

[9] It is probable that the placing side by side "drugs" and "body care products" could have led families to choose specialized shops because in the same product category are included both health care products and body care ones. Health in particular drives the consumer to prefer, regarding the choice of products, a trustful relationship with the retailer.

Table 7 - *Which are for the goods sector "**Technological products**" the **new retail stores** where you mainly buy the products you need?* (percentage values)

	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%
Stalls/Markets	0,4	0,4	0,4
Discount	1,8	1,9	2,0
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	38,5	33,6	46,1
Specialized shop (for ex.: grocery, furniture outlet, etc.)	30,1	33,0	36,7
New forms (ex.: GAS, second-hand, etc.)	1,4	1,7	3,1
Missing System	27,8	29,4	11,7
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(2022)	(2007)	(2008)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

Shifting our attention to online purchases we discover that the share of families buying on the Internet is growing[10], from 65,2%[11] in 2009, to 71%[12] in 2010, to 73,7%[13] in 2011. There are still differences of use in the virtual distribution channel among the different socio-economical classes[14]: in 2011[15] 78,9% of the higher classes families bought online, 75,4% of the middle class and 69,7% of the lower class ones.

4. A focus on the "essential" goods: food

After having analyzed which are the motifs that drove Italian families to desert the retail stores, and which are the consumption places chosen according to single goods category, the aim of this section is to study the new places chosen to buy food according to the socio-economical status of the family. Since a transition is pointed out by the change of the retail stores as regards the former year's habits, the decision to investigate thoroughly the food sector allows us to study closer the daily behavior of the consumer. Sacrifices that involve other product sectors, such as for example clothing and fancy goods, are linked more to the composition of the goods in the basket, and consequently to consumption deprivation, than to retail store choice, and the latter remains the only possible, variable means to keep unvaried the composition of the essential goods in the basket. As regards food consumption, the preservation strategy of the same lifestyle established in the previous years is necessarily associated to the selection of the distribution channel.

In the three years of survey[16] consumers who placed themselves in a "low" socio-economic[17] class choose more often a discount outlet if compared to families of "middle" and "high" level; middle class consumers are more oriented towards a shopping centre and a supermarket, if compared to low and high status families; while the specialized shop is chosen more often by families of high socio-economic status. The difference among social groups is substantially marked by the variable of "price" that characterizes the three distribution channels, discount, shopping centre/supermarket and specialized shop. The geography of social stratification is materialized through food purchase trajectories expressed by the choices of the sales channel. Among high socio-economical status families (tab. 7) we find a growing preference for markets and stalls that from 2009 to 2011 grow 4,2 percentage points and that could be somehow counterbalanced by a fall in the specialized shop (3,3 percentage points).

[10] See also: Stanzani (2010).

[11] N = 2022.

[12] N = 2007.

[13] N = 2008.

[14] The reference is to the socio-economical level self-perceived.

[15] Pearson Chi-Square 10,583, df 2; *p-value* < 0,05.

[16] Datum confirmed by a bi-varied analysis carried out on the self-perceived socio-economical level (independent variable) and the classification of retail stores (dependent variable) for each year of survey. Values Chi-square as follows, Survey 2009: Pearson Chi-square 33,346; df 8; *p-value* = 0,000; Survey 2010: Pearson Chi-square 77,992; df 8; *p-value* = 0,000; Survey 2011: Pearson Chi-square 32,690; df 8; *p-value* = 0,000.

[17] The data gathering of the self-perceived socio-economical status was carried out by the following question: *How would you define the socio-economical level of your family? High, middle-high, middle, middle-low, low*. In the analyses we proceeded in re-codifying the levels in three categories: high (high and middle-high); medium (medium); low (middle-low and low).

Table 7 - *Comparison among those who answered "high" to define their socio-economical status* (percentage values)

	High socio-economical Level		
	2009	**2010**	**2011**
Stalls/ markets	3,8	5,3	8
Discount	10,6	8,6	7,4
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	68,2	67,1	69,9
Specialized shop	15,2	17	11,9
New forms (ex. GAS)	2,2	2	2,8
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(132)	(152)	(176)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

As regards middle class (tab. 8) food consumption habits are not substantially differentiated in the three years of the survey. We observe a stability in traditional large scale retail trade that in 2011 was chosen by 73,9% of families and it, together with the appearance of discount outlets in the choice of retail stores, attracts more than 80% of middle class families when choosing large scale distribution.

Table 8 - *Comparison among those answering "middle" to define their socio-economical status* (percentage values)

	Middle socio-economical Level		
	2009	**2010**	**2011**
Stalls/ markets	5,1	5,4	6,2
Discount	10,7	10,1	11
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	73,3	75	73,9
Specialized shop	9,6	7,6	7,6
New forms (ex. GAS)	1,3	1,9	1,3
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(731)	(699)	(952)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

From the substantial immobility of middle class, we now shift our attention to the lower class (tab. 9) which shows an essential consolidation in the choice of discount: in 2011 it was chosen as retail stores by 17,8% of consumers. We observe a slight increase (2,7 percentage points) as to the shopping centre and we could suppose that this growth in preferences is the counterbalance of the fall in the choice of markets and stalls, that shifted from a peak value of 15,1% in 2010, to 5,7% in 2011.

Table 9 - *Comparison among those who answered "low" to define their socio-economical status* (percentage values)

	Low socio-economical Level		
	2009	**2010**	**2011**
Stalls/ markets	7,8	15,1	5,7
Discount	18,7	19,3	17,8
Shopping Centre/Supermarket	66,3	57,9	69
Specialized shop	5,9	6,5	7
New forms (ex. GAS)	1,3	1,2	0,5
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0
Total N	(476)	(416)	(645)

Years of survey 2009, 2010, 2011

5. The polarization between hunting for the best "service" and the assessment of the best "price"

As already highlighted by the previous analyses, the extremes of GDO are strengthened in all sectors, although with some differences, since they are more marked in the food sector, and less in the body care one. There are some faint signs of change but they require a future longitudinal study in order to understand if they are a faint answer to crisis or they are the sign of a more substantial change. The consumer's habit to express distinct levels of fidelity to the retail store is on the other hand, a sign of the worsening of the crisis which has had as a primary effect the families' attempt to keep the same lifestyle consolidated in the previous years. The effect was trying to keep the same consumption goods basket, modifying first quantity, and later, at least partially its quality, in order to keep unaltered its overall composition (Setiffi, 2011).

The factorial analysis[18] was carried out after having considered the KMO points as satisfying (tab. 10), and that the sphericity test is statistically significant. The presence of two eigenvalues can be pointed out, both inferable by their value higher than 1, and by the scree-plot where they can be detected before the curve inflection (graph 1). On the whole the two factors explain 67% of the variability of the items (tab. 11).

The results of the analysis (tab. 12) clearly show two latent factors, that influenced consumers towards the choice of a new retail store: place and product. The change of retail stores has influenced the goods basket of most Italian families, nevertheless the extent of this change can be expressed on one hand by a growing attention to the product's characteristics and on the other by a growing attention towards the retail store itself. The "place factor" describes the attention the consumer pays to everything that constitutes the "frame" around goods while the "product factor" synthesizes the consumer's attention to consumption goods themselves. These factors can be interpreted as follows:

-First Factor – "Place": it represent the consumer's interest to the retail store in itself and to the relational dimension of exchange.

-Second factor – "Product": it describes the consumer's attention as regards the consumption goods in its twofold quantitative (price) and qualitative (choice) component.

Table 10 - *KMO and Bartlett's Test*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0,822
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8520,898
	Df	36
	Sig.	0,000

Table 11 - *Explanation of total variance*

Component	*Initial eigenvalues*			*Weight of non-rotated factors*		
	Total	% of variance	% cumulated	Total	% of variance	% cumulated
1	4,350	48,339	48,339	4,350	48,339	48,339
2	1,682	18,694	67,033	1,682	18,694	67,033
3	,760	8,444	75,477			
4	,561	6,229	81,706			
5	,482	5,361	87,067			
6	,425	4,723	91,790			
7	,340	3,779	95,569			
8	,251	2,787	98,355			
9	,148	1,645	100,000			

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Graph 1- Decreasing diagram of eigenvalues

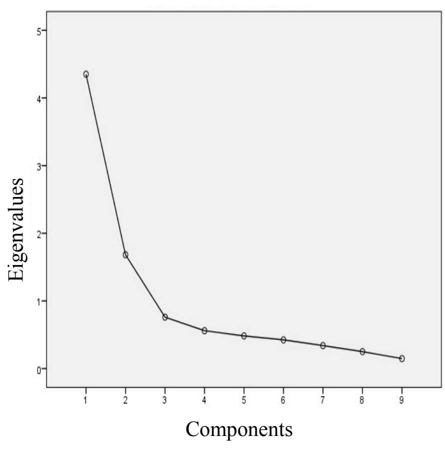

Table 12 - Matrix of rotated component

	1	2
Best quality of products	,305	**,717**
Cheaper prices	,065	**,800**
Best quality/price relation	,091	**,904**
Wider variety of choice	,316	**,723**
Shop nearer to my house	**,742**	,158
Trust in the retailer	**,852**	,158
More polite retailer	**,844**	,214
Better park and transport services	**,734**	,284
Best offer of additional services	**,789**	,088

[18] Survey 2011, N = 2007.

As already pointed out by the previous data, the numbers of large-scale retail trade are strengthening in all sectors, although with some differences since they are higher in the food sector and lower in the body care one. Some faint signs of change are emerging but they need a future study on the longitudinal axis in order to understand if they are only a faint reaction to crisis or the first sign of a more substantial change. The consumer's tendency to express different levels of fidelity to the retail outlet is on the contrary a symptom of the worsening of the crisis which has as a primary effect the families' effort to preserve their lifestyle established in the previous years. The result has been the attempt at maintaining the same consumption products basket, first trying to modify its quantity, and later, at least in part its quality, in order to keep unaltered its composition.

6. Conclusions

This study has pointed out the Italian families' consumption strategies starting from their choices about the retail outlet. The three years survey enabled to grasp signs of change in selecting the distribution channels according to the different goods sectors. Large scale retail trade confirms itself as the main place of consumption in Italian families' choice. The survey showed that the change of retail stores involved the sample as a whole. This means that, setting aside their socio-economical status, most Italian families have reconsidered their choice strategies because of the crisis.

This change can certainly be inscribed in a wider trend of transformation of the consumer's profile, possibly synthesized by different expressions such as "sovereign consumer", "postmodern consumer", "wandering consumer" (Secondulfo, 2010), and all three definitions possess the common feature of a growing selectivity in purchase and consumption processes. Nevertheless, besides this profile there is a first sign of change of value, given by the "responsible consumer" who, in all his aspects (critical consumption, political consumerism, etc.) still holds a marginal position to the fringes of the market. Reverting to the theme of change of the "sovereign consumer" we can add that the crisis modified the choices about shopping places because it strengthened the level of awareness in consumption strategies in all social classes.

The detection of the reason of the retail store desertion has caused the reappearance of the influence of price in consumption choices. This attention is a direct expression of the central position taken by the process of choice *tout court*, caused by the change in the management of the exchange relationship between consumer and company and by the changed socio-economical situation. The comparison of consumption goods passes necessarily through strategies of retail stores selection that, as it happens with single products, are placed in competition the ones against the others. The change from one retail store to the other regards both the change of the distribution channel, and the change of the single place of consumption that, when compared, loses the consumer's preference. The factorial analysis allows to detect two latent dimensions we have called "place" and "product" stressing how the choice of a new retail store implies two different dimensions; one focused on the communicative dimension of consumption linked more to the retail store and the sales staff, the other on the consumption goods as it is.

In conclusion, we have tried to highlight which are the strategies developed by Italian families, which is the change detected in these three years, and which are the social class differences in the purchase of food. If change is generalized, its conversion in choice strategies is certainly varied. The economic and social transition, with all its related uncertainties, emerges from the choice strategies of Italian families so that, once again, consumption becomes an instrument of analysis of social change.

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