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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to identify the choice and purchase profiles that can generalise consumer groups among Italian families. By means of multivariate research, the author has been able to identify three choice profiles, three strategic summaries that direct consumers when they make their purchases. The choice tendency composition that was used to create the various profiles has remained constant over time and has allowed, furthermore, the author to pursue its progress over the passing of time and compare its extent and evolution.

Keywords: consumer groups, Italian families, sociology of consumption.

1. Introduction

Within market research, the attempt of identifying consumer profiles, which are chosen on the basis of characteristics that have been, at times, objective and motivational, has always been a priority objective. This type of tendency, which has become particularly widespread and stronger, even on a level of research techniques and data processing, from the 1980's, sustained on a theoretic level by the observations and studies carried out on consumption in the key of projected life styles, instead of behaviour connected, above all, to the censured placement of consumer groups (see Calvi 1977, 1980, Fabris - Mortara 1986, Meroni - Veccia 1982). These were the years in which the famous Italian consumer groups were conceived, produced by technical psychographics as tendency aggregates that were not only connected to consumption but also to other tendency and preferences elements which, when woven together, produced overall life models and famous lifestyles, to which the consumption and purchase tendencies are connected.

Consumption behaviour was no longer a rational or irrational component of individual behaviour, an autonomous process to be studied in itself, but it became the expression, in the field of purchases and consumption, of the consumer's particular "life project", which is also achieved by means of consumption, which become a means of communication to others concerning one's own personality and a place of expression, even reflexive, concerning one's own multiple or multi-faceted personality, dear to the observations made on post modernity, thus, completing the picture, connecting purchase and consumption behaviour not only to a dominant personality to be communicated socially, but to endless recreational and transitory personalities, which the consumer may interpret and communicate, especially, at this point, by means of his/her purchase and consumption behaviour.

From that time onwards, the construction of profiles, whether they were of the psycho-value type or the behavioural type or even another one, became an almost obligatory step conducted in research into consumption and consumers, just as the idea that consumption behaviour tends to blend into an overall tendency and a sort of overall project concerning one's own life, giving rise, precisely, to different life styles that are not necessarily hinged into the system of class differences or are merely economic (see Crompton 1995, Featherstone 1990, Ragone 1985, Shields 1994, Shulman 2008 and Secondulfo 1995).

In our research into the consumption styles adopted by families, we have used the same type of logic to try to understand, if strategic aggregates exist, which might characterise the various types of families, on the basis of the type of choices they make in relation to their purchases of various types of goods. All this, starting from the conviction that the various types of behaviour adopted by families, in their attempt to defend their consumption levels, in view of greater, economic difficulties, do not represent isolated and unconnected choices, but which is the fruit of complex and coordinated purchasing styles that might be gathered together into behavioural profiles and characterised by some precise purchasing styles.

The behaviour that has merged into these profiles, which we might call purchasing styles, paying homage to the theory of lifestyles, is essentially made up of two types: on one hand, the choice of goods strategy such as price comparison, for example, or the search for the lowest price of all; on the other hand, the important characteristics of the sales outlets, such as the ample choice among the various products, the sellers' courtesy and proximity to their homes. As we shall see, from the profiles extracted by means of multivariate analysis, elements of choice and tendency have been inserted, which go from the dominion of the first price to evaluation of the environment and atmosphere in which the purchase is placed.

In a panorama that is dominated by economic crisis and the loss of Italian families' purchasing power, the idea was that of differentiating purchasing styles simply aimed at defending one's own income and, amongst the latter, those that were obliged to make a drastic reduction in their purchase levels and those who not only enjoyed greater freedom of choice thanks, naturally, to greater purchasing power, but who also managed to maintain, within their own purchasing style, the choice criteria concerning the sales outlet connected with the relationship with the shopkeeper and the additional services present, criteria that we might call "intangible", which are not connected solely to the goods' characteristics or price, before which all sales outlets become necessarily equal. Over all, the choice tendencies adopted, from which purchasing styles were created, were the following ones.

With reference to the choice strategies concerning goods: attention was paid, first of all, to quality and to price, attention was paid to the relationship between quality and price, hunting down offers, systematic comparison between prices, renunciation of more expensive goods, a decrease in quality and the reduction of waste.

With reference, instead, to the sales outlet's characteristics: proximity, loyalty, courtesy, the existence of additional services, parking facilities and range of products available. At this point, a small table summarising the three profiles' strategic characteristics might be useful (Table 1).

Tab. 1 – The three profiles: clients, shrewd consumers and foragers – The characteristics

	GOODS	STRATEGIES	SALES OUTLET
CLIENTS	QUALITY	LOYALTY	LOYALTY, COURTESY, SERVICES
SHREWD CONSUMERS	PRICE/ QUALITY	COMPARISON	VARIETY
FORAGERS	PRICE	REDUCTION	OFFERS

In this table, we have summarised the main tendency characteristics present in the purchasing choices of our three profile groups. For the Client one, the relationship with the shopkeeper is essential, from which the penalty of sanctions transpires in the case in which the consumer's loyalty is betrayed, and the presence of additional services; it is this attention to the intangible and not merely economic characteristics concerning the sales outlet that led us to identify this profile with the better off classes.

With reference to the Shrewd Consumer, it is above all the variety of choice that allows them to operate a vast selection of different quality/price combinations. In the case of the Foragers, it is especially the presence of economically advantageous offers. The necessity of reducing their shopping spend characterises this last group of consumers, making their profile, unfortunately, very essential, considerably conditioned by the price offered by the market.

2. 2009

From the very first research conducted in 2009, the multivariate analysis extracted three profiles, which, then, were revealed as being stable over the passing of time: the clients, shrewd consumers and foragers. These are purchasing tendencies and styles which, at times, may be presented in a more emphasised or even univocal way in a specific family, but which often represents behavioural models in which one usually prevails but, very often, in part, is also flanked by others. Each family, in making its purchases, mainly follows one of these models, but under particular conditions or with reference to particular choices may also move even according to a momentary combination of the diverse profiles. One might be a saver but, then, in relation to the purchase of a particularly important object, be prepared to spend even for courtesy, the type of shop and not only for the quality or price-quality relationship; or spend freely for some items, but assert particular attention to the price-quality relationship of others. The profiles, therefore, are widespread, behavioural models among families, which have been translated into conduct faithful to the profile but, under particular circumstances, may blend different profiles together.

Our three profiles (clients, shrewd consumers and foragers) emerged right from the very beginning and, as we have already said, have been maintained over the passing of time, and may be characterised in this way.

We called those families "clients" who, through their own good fortune, have an income that allows them to still pay attention to those characteristics of loyalty, service and courtesy that represent the necessary dowry of any shop that aims to have a loyal and prosperous clientele. The attention to the loyalty relationship with the shopkeeper, but also his courtesy and a number of other characteristics connected to the commodity of the shop and the additional services it is able to offer, identify these families as being the current nucleus of that wealthy, middle class, which has headed the development of consumption over the past years.

The attention paid to the quality of the goods, in this way of consumption, is almost completely absorbed into the idea of loyalty towards the shopkeeper, loyalty that naturally stands on the necessity, for the shopkeeper, to act as the guarantor of a demanding but wealthy clientele, in the attempt to obtain their loyalty and in the capacity of this clientele, where the latter in their capacity of consumers often know each other, if not completely, at least, in sub-groups, to penalise the shopkeeper who no longer deserves their loyalty, moving as a group toward other sales outlets. Decisive, from our point of view, is the fact that in this group, sales outlet choice criteria continues, which is not only connected to the goods sold but also to a wider relationship, which we might even call "intangible" with the sales outlet as a whole. Something that approaches this tendency to that which the shop had established as being a point of arrival, representing much more than a supermarket or shopping mall, from which the idea to call them clients was derived.

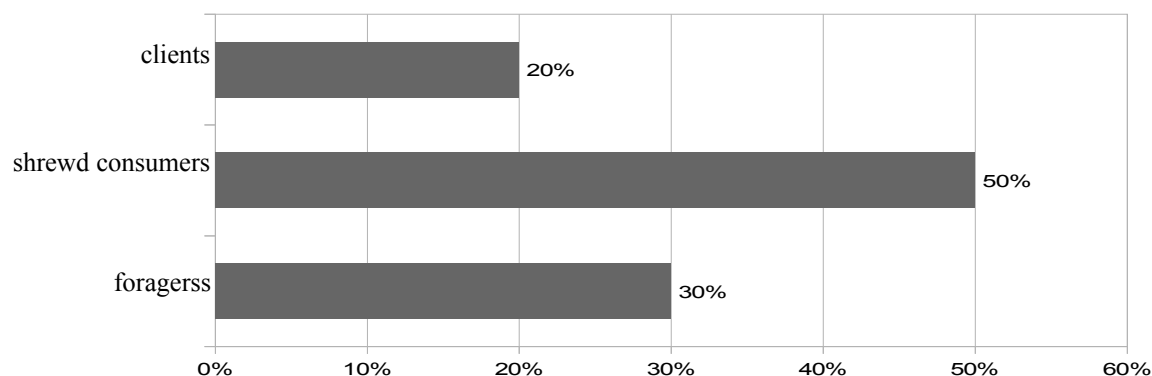
The great majority of consumers who do not fall into this first group are essentially divided into two sub-groups: those families that have had to concentrate especially in the reduction of their shopping and those, instead, who were able to invest in the rationalisation of their shopping, and succeeded in maintaining a certain level of consumption. We called the latter "shrewd consumers"; they include those families who can still count on a certain income to be used in consumption and who, therefore, have mainly invested in the rationalisation of their shopping. A purchasing style that is strongly directed towards a competent choice and the best quality within a certain price range, which appreciates the variety of choice offered by shops. A careful and well-informed consumer, who does not just stop at the first place he sees. It is a purchasing style that places the emphasis on transformation, which has been widely consolidated among consumers, by now, and has led them from living a rather passive role, conditioned as they are, especially, by advertising, to

adopt a more active role that has been established, above all, on a skill acquired with the passing of time of comparing goods, their quality, yield and prices, as well as exploiting the ever more numerous sources of comparative tests, which have been provided not just by consumer associations but also by the press and television communications.

An awkward consumer, who has not yet been completely swallowed up by the mass distribution system, who is not really used to going beyond the sale of goods or a service, establishing a transparent and loyal relationship with the consumer; but also a consumer who has been obliged to spend even more time and attention to liberate himself from the jungle of information, goods and services, in an attempt to optimise income and requirements.

We have called the last ones "foragers" in such a way to emphasise the primary necessity of reducing the consumption practised by those families. They are those families who have had to renounce designer labels, more expensive goods, who have had to renounce quality and even reduce the quantity of goods purchased, who defend themselves by comparing prices but also by chasing special offers and promotions, they are those families that the economic crisis has placed in the greatest difficulty.

In 2009, the relative extent value of these three groups was as follows: clients, shrewd consumers, foragers.



Except for that 20% of families who were not placed in any particular difficulty by the economic crisis, the most common reaction to these difficulties (50% of Italian families) has been to increase the attention and time dedicated to choosing their purchases. In spite of being obliged to pay greater attention to the change in their pockets, the families in this group still continue to safeguard quality and they have found, especially, in information and the variety of choice, the key characteristics of approval in the sales outlet. Comparison and information were the basic strategies adopted to try to defend their lifestyle and previous consumption, in the light of their reduction in purchasing power.

Shopping malls and supermarkets are the places chosen by this group of families, a good summary of this strategic attitude can be given by the following tendencies, typical of this group of families, "reducing waste", "comparing prices and quality". As we have already said, this kind of strategy has undoubtedly been encouraged by the progressive education, over the past few decades, of a consumer who is already used to greater attention and higher, individual autonomy in his choice and purchase strategies (Secondulfo 2012). It is no mistake identifying this group of consumers and families with that aggregate of social groups that we might call the middle classes, whose growth, during the 1960's onwards, was the main engine in the boom driving consumption that characterised, up until just a few years ago, our society.

In the foragers group (30%), we might estimate that there are groups of families who were in difficulty even during the years prior to our observations, due to structural conditions of disadvantage, as well as those families that became a part of the group, further to the blows inflicted by the economic crisis; unfortunately, we have no data prior to 2009 with which we might be able to make comparisons of this type, but ISTAT (*the Italian Institute of Statistics*) suggested (ISTAT 2010), which mainly refers to 2008, that the contraction in shopping carried out by Italian families has become sensitive. We can thus suppose that the data we recorded in 2009 was not

much higher than the base situation, in other words, of Italian families with reference to the necessity of having to adopt consumption strategies and that the low profile, which is particularly aware of prices and is distinguished by the necessary restriction in quality, but also with reference to the quantities of goods purchased, might at its core be, not be much lower than what we actually observed.

With reference to territorial distribution, it is still in consideration of the ISTAT data available that we were led to believe that this increase process concerning the foragers group might have been active, especially, in Southern Italy, the area in which the contraction in the average family shopping spend allocated to consumption, was not just more conspicuous but it had began much earlier than in other areas in our country. This is a general strategy that can be significantly characterised by the following behaviour: "hunting down offers", "reducing both the quality as well as the quantity"; the places where this group of families shopped were mostly at *hard discount* stores and market stalls, but clearly the search for good deals and the best possible prices has also extended to supermarkets and shopping malls, in the attempt to defend, as much as possible, the shopping basket's quality.

This refers to those families who have traditionally been in greater, economic difficulty: large families, elderly people living alone, families with members who have lost their jobs and a category that has only recently developed, unfortunately, in our country too, those people who are more or less established in the labour market but whose income is no longer sufficient to maintain a style of consumption that might be considered as being adequate to meet the general standards in force in the country. They are represented by that category made up of "poor workers", which has unfortunately taken root in this country, further to delocalisation processes and labour precariousness. A series of families who are structurally in difficulty, inasmuch as it is not just the lack of employment, which might be resolved by returning to work that highlights their difficulties, but precisely their "normal" working conditions that oblige them to restrict their living and consumption styles. With reference to that 20% of families, which have only slightly sustained the impact of the economic crisis, or indeed, not at all, and who we have labelled as "clients", we are able to say that their average spend is approximately the double of that of poorer families (information that has been confirmed by ISTAT), and who are, naturally, more numerous in the Central North than the South of Italy. Their purchasing strategies, as we have previously indicated, are especially connected to the relationship they enjoy with the shopkeeper and the additional services offered by the sales outlet, since they have sufficient income to guarantee, in any case, the quantities and quality that they wish to have. As already indicated, their relationship with the shopkeeper characterises them in a way towards strategies that refer to the phase that was even in force prior to the expansion of supermarkets and shopping malls (Secondulfo 2012), and it is for this reason that we thought of labelling them as "clients".

3. 2010

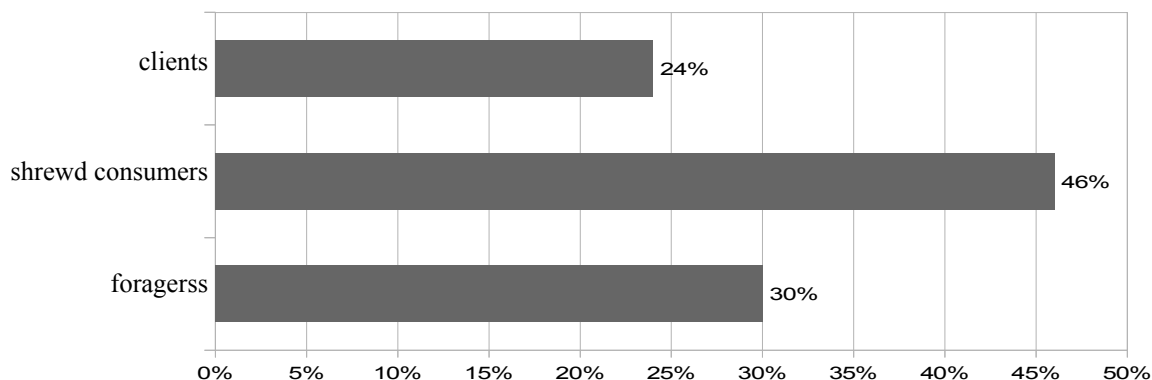
As we have said, from the very beginning, the division into the three profile groups resulting from the first research conducted in 2009, continued to be stable in the following research activities and this has allowed us to quite reliably trace the foreseeable, temporal evolution of these, three, macro, family groups.

This stability in behaviour and in strategies, if it pleases the researcher, allows him to easily perform diachronic comparisons, and suggests to us, however, that the economic crisis has by now become, from this very year, a consolidated aspect of our society, so much so as to be embedded in family purchasing strategies and lifestyles.

In the research relative to behaviour in 2010, the extent value relative to the three groups was distributed in the following way.

The general impression, as we have said, is of substantial, overall stability, both from a qualitative point of view, or rather, the strategic combination used by the families (collected together under the three profiles), as well as from a quantitative point of view, that is to say, from the numerical consistency of the family groups that mostly meet each of the three profiles.

Reading the results obtained from the research conducted in 2010, just a little more carefully, a certain improvement in our families' situation can be seen, or at least, for some of them. This, in all probability, is due to that consolidation of consumption strategies that had become necessary due to the economic crisis that we referred to. Possibly, a number of our families have succeeded in restructuring the overall reorganisation of their lifestyles and family expenditure and this has allowed them, very probably, to be able to liberate a quota of their income to be used in improving their general purchasing and lifestyle strategies which has consequently permitted, in other words, their being able to recapture purchasing strategies that are less connected with the economic emergency, less linked to the latter inasmuch as family reorganisation has allowed for normalisation by absorbing it into, one might say, their ordinary lifestyle and consumption strategies.



A small quota (approximately 4%) of Italian families, which could have been defined as being "shrewd consumers", have succeeded in recovering purchasing styles that are less tied up with strictly economic criteria and more alert to the relationship concerning the sales outlet, those characteristics that we ascribed to the "clients" group and which we can suppose these families had had to abandon under the initial impact of the restrictions placed on their purchasing power. All this, in that part of our society that we might imagine as being the hinge or a system of revolving door between the middle and upper middle classes. This, with all probability, has also been encouraged by the reorganisation of sales outlets, which have learned that in order not to lose significant clientele quotas, they have had to amend the prices that were usually charged; in fact, more than 50% of families declared that they had left the sales outlet they previously frequented because of the lack of reasonable prices, very often, also, in relation to the quality offered. Further proof of the consumer's increased autonomy in relation to the sales outlet and the progressive difficulty for the latter to be able to guarantee loyalty.

During 2010, in fact, the extent relative to the "clients" group went from 20 to 24% and, in the same way, the four percentage points relative to the group of "shrewd consumers" dried up.

Thanks to the stabilisation of consumer styles or the reassurance generated by their capacity to respond to the economic crisis, even the families in this group, which we cannot ascribe among the "clients", were able to recover, for example, in their selection of sales outlets, some of those intangible characteristics that they had had to renounce out of caution. Furthermore, the search for quality goods and sales outlets increased considerably, in spite of the control between price and quality remaining dominant, once again, among the "shrewd consumers", whilst simple searching for the cheapest product, once again among this latter group of families, became less important. The significance of the range of products offered in the sales outlets and comparisons among the latter became slightly less important, which indicated a new stabilisation in purchasing behaviour to us even, in all probability, in response to corresponding loyalty strategies undertaken by the sales outlets.

If, from the intermediate group of shrewd consumers, we can see some families recovering the purchasing styles of the upper classes, this does not occur in the foragers' group, whose numerical consistency has remained stable, around 30%, and whose response to the economic crises and the reduction in purchase power remains that of renunciation: renunciation of quality, quantity,

expensive products, designer products, all this taking place by making constant comparisons with prices and seeking products that are on special offer.

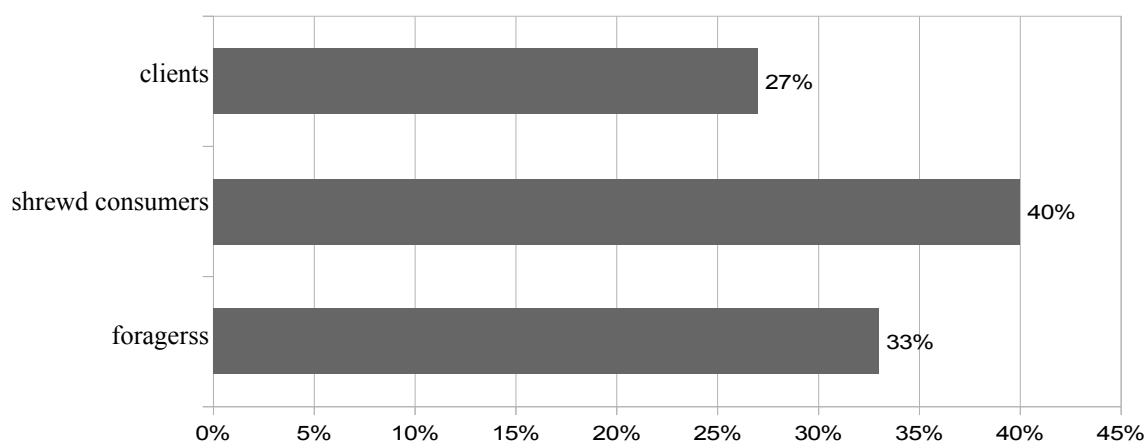
A general consideration, at this point, arises spontaneously, and it is: if there are some groups of families that manage to adopt consumption strategies that make it possible to save and even improve their lifestyles, by means of considerably rationalising both their lifestyles and purchasing strategies, the fact, in any case, remains the same that the economic crisis has required almost all Italian families to dedicate more time to "struggling" with the distribution system, in such a way as to obtain the maximum possible result from the purchasing power; time that has almost undoubtedly been taken away from some other activity, probably their free time activities, and, very possibly, was distributed in an unbalanced way, even if the consumption time of the "shrewd consumer" has seen both men and women on the front line.

This process has also been understood by other sectors of our research, such as, for example, the one dedicated to the extent value of the designer product in purchasing tendencies, from which it very clearly emerged, as it had during the rationalisation of purchases during the economic crisis, those motivation elements, of an emotional and symbolic type, very often put into effect in attraction to the designer label, have been drastically down-sized, in spite of still being at the third place (concerning all the families) immediately after quality and price and they continue to count much more than those aspects, for example, connected to ethical components or the origin of the goods themselves, which continue to be intangible characteristics of goods that are the prerogative of rather small groups, which are characterised by strong ethical and critical components, even in their consumption behaviour.

4. 2011

The division of Italian families into the three profile groups described up until now continues even in our latest research; the movement of groups of families from one profile to another one also continues, even if the overall design of this movement takes on aspects that are rather different from what we had imagined with the data available in 2010.

This is how the Italian families, illustrated in the by now well-known three profile groups, stood during 2011.



Even during 2011, the economic crisis continued to scourge Europe and, in particular, the countries in Southern Europe, even more violently than had been the case in the past and, fortunately, in spite of Italy not sharing the problems of other countries in Southern Europe, it has seen its population becoming progressively poorer and having its families' purchasing power reduced, in particular those families in the by now unravelled middle class. Ever more often, the press pauses on the worrying decrease in the sales of consumer products that, beforehand, had created the fortune of a number of European countries, for example the car industry that has, for some time now, only submitted negative balances in its sale of vehicles.

We have seen, from 2009, how this situation of progressive contraction in families' purchasing power and especially the drastic change in the prospects of future income which, as has already been confirmed, is one of the strongest key motivations in the shopping tendencies of both singles and especially families, has considerably changed the purchasing strategies of various family groups, striking almost a third of Italian families, who have been obliged to renounce not just the most expensive goods but also, in general, the quantity and even the quality of the objects purchased. Apart from this situation of powerful and objective poverty, the group in which the decision-making processes were and are still changing is the one that sees middle class families tackling the situation of defending their own lifestyle and attempting to avoid its drastic downsizing by means of reorganisation and rationalisation strategies concerning their consumption behaviour. First of all, through the comparison of sales outlets and the information on the quality-price relationship of the goods they want and are on offer. We have seen how in 2010, this strategic reorganisation allowed some of these middle class families to reacquire some quota from the income available, to be reinvested in the search for quality or in consumer behaviour that is the privilege of that confined group of families, which has not felt the impact of the economic crisis and has been able to maintain its behaviour and expectations in relation to the distribution groups intact.

We have, in fact, seen that during 2010 a small but significant quota of family units succeeded in sustaining and recovering the mainly economic-commodity characteristics that had guided them in the past, the characteristics of relationships in force with sales outlets, typical of the more prosperous classes, such as the loyalty relationship and the courtesy of the shopkeepers or the presence of additional services compared to merely the simple sale of the product. Although the numerical information is not very high, as we have just said, it provided a very important indicator which showed the reactive capacity of family units who, once they had absorbed the impact of their fall in purchasing power, were able to reorganise their consumption strategies in such a way as to recover the behaviour and selection attention of sales outlets which, initially, they had been obliged to abandon in favour of more economic and defensive criteria.

We can give an idea of this situation by means of some indicators relative to 2011, which can help to explain the profile concerning these three groups of families. The majority of the "foragers" have a monthly income that is insufficient to cover their monthly expenses and therefore continue to struggle with the reduction of their purchasing power and with a structural condition of economic insufficiency. Even among the "shrewd consumers", the group of families that has an insufficient monthly income is quite high; in fact, as we shall see, year by year the groups of shrewd consumers are compelled to adopt the behavioural profile of the foragers. With reference to the clients group, the division is, instead, net. So, if income is insufficient, how do these families reach the end of the month? The first solution is that of working longer, which implies that everybody in the family who has an occupation doing more overtime; a second solution, if the first is not enough, is resorting to obtaining loans from relations or friends, whilst they try to avoid resorting to banks and finance companies. In some cases, but only a few, they try to postpone the debt for a while, paying by credit card or pay pal, but this is still very limited. Doing more overtime is the most widespread solution, if not the only one, even among the shrewd consumers. It is useless to say that their capacity to put aside any savings has been reduced to almost zero and this not only in those groups of families that have more problems, but even in those families who still enjoy "higher" purchasing styles.

We can continue with this profile of our family groups, by taking a look at their composition. With reference to their number, this increases as we move towards those families who have the most problematic behavioural problems, as we move from the clients towards the foragers; it has been observed, in particular among the foragers, that a discreet number of families who have four members and in general families who have more than six members undergo critical conditions in whatever strategy group they find themselves.

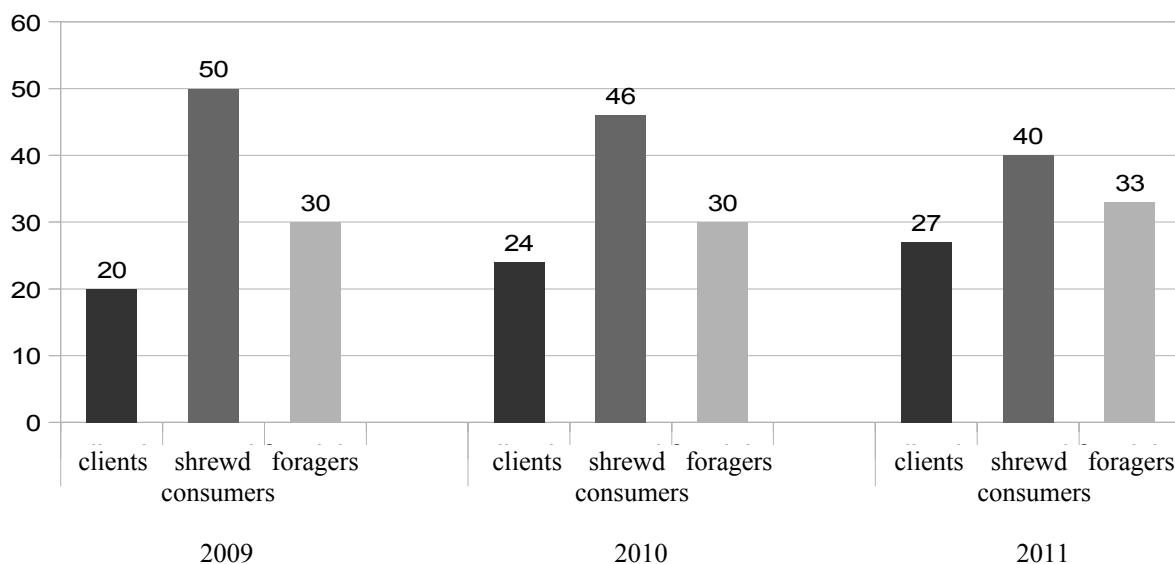
With reference to income, we can place the "foragers" profile boundary as having a family income of approximately € 2,000 monthly and the boundary between the "shrewd consumers" and "clients" at between € 2,000 and € 4,000. The consequences of the winds of economic crisis appear to be much clearer if we observe the classes that our families have placed themselves in autonomously, both the "foragers" as well as the "shrewd consumers" have placed themselves on

the lower or medium level of social stratification, the clear impact of the necessity felt to contain or, in any case, reorganise their purchasing behaviour; the “clients” have placed themselves a little higher up the scale, among the middle and upper middle classes but nobody, in spite of their levels of income or consumption habits, has perceived themselves as belonging to the “upper” class.

From a regional point of view, Sicilian, Sardinian, *Pugliese* and *Marchigiane* families are mostly “foragers”; Venetian, *Molisane*, *Marchigiane*, Ligurian and Friulian families are, instead, mostly “shrewd” consumers; “clients” are, instead, represented by *Pugliesi* and *Molisane* families; whilst, in the other Regions, the three purchasing profiles are distributed according to proportions similar to the National ones. Lastly, it might just be interesting to note that in spite of the necessities that have been highlighted with reference to reorganisation, rationalisation and even a reduction in purchasing behaviour, the three profiles that have been identified are not significantly characterised by the use of internet in their purchasing behaviour. In other words, the possibility of obtaining the best, possible special offers, by making a broader comparison by means of internet, is an alternative that has not yet entered the rationalisation strategies portfolio with reference to Italian families’ shopping experiences, whatever their level of difficulty might be.

But, as we just said, in the light of observing 2011, the reorganisation and rationalisation movement in purchasing strategies and lifestyle, which had led a certain number of families from the “shrewd consumer” profile to “clients” one, with a greater capacity and autonomy of choice compared both to the products and the sales outlets, adopted a different conformation. Not the one that was solely the recovery of the possibility of choice by family groups in the intermediate group that we associate with that of the middle class, which was the engine driving the economic boom, but also the less positive one, concerning a loss of choice possibilities and thus purchasing power by further groups of families coming from the intermediate profile, but on this occasion, marching towards the groups of families going through greater difficulties, those that we referred to as “foragers”. If we take a look at the performance of the three groups of families over the three-year period, we can quite clearly see how the scissors cutting income are represented here by the scissors cutting purchase strategies, consequently, progressively eroding the central group in favour of the two, external ones.

Here is the summary concerning the performance of the profiles during the three years that have been taken into consideration by our research.



The most important information that has been gleaned from the graph is, unfortunately, confirmation of what the statistics have been suggesting for some time now or rather, that the scissors cutting income are operating ever more decisively and one of the most negative consequences of this crisis, which has by now become structural, is that a world is being created where the difference in income and status among citizens is becoming ever vaster and solidified.

In fact, the “foragers” group is, unfortunately increasing in size, whilst the “shrewd consumer”

group is slowly disintegrating; even the “clients” group is increasing, even if not as fast (the data at our disposal has presented a number of panoramas, but we will abide by the average performance), anticipating the continuation of a trend that began back in 2010, or rather that in which some families, thanks to both particularly shrewd and rational lifestyle and purchasing strategies, succeeded in recovering the purchasing styles of the upper class, moving up from those in the “shrewd consumer” group. The change is that there are also many more families who are breaking away from the “shrewd consumers” group and going down to join the “foragers” group. Very probably, this means that in spite of the fact that there are some families who, due to a greater rationalisation of their consumption strategies, as well as due to a better capacity in dealing with the economic crisis, were able to recover broader profile purchasing strategies, there is a growing number of families who, on the contrary, are unable to deal with the fall in purchasing power by means of consumption or lifestyle strategies and have to renounce both quality and quantity to be able to concentrate solely on the price.

The scissors cutting income, the progressive loss of that position of social equilibrium and widespread equality that had been created during the 1960's onwards, appears to be breaking up under the doubled blows of the economic crisis and the neo-liberalism of privatisations without liberalisation.

In spite of the families' efforts, even in Italy, these scissors are widening their range and being consolidated and the consumption system cannot but follow and express, in its own way, this new reality.

Observing the data acquired from the three research activities carried out, we can see that the process of “descent” towards the “foragers” group began late compared to the process of “achievement” towards the “clients” group, and this confirms the organisational capacities and resilience of Italian families, but it will be research conducted over the following years that will let us know if the social “gains” in the Italian version of the scissors (the number of families who are moving “downwards” are fewer than those who are going “upwards”) represents a constant or a transition phase and, as often happens, it will be the down side of the scissors that wins in the end.

However it goes, the broadening of the scissors' action, in itself, and the transition from a situation that might be considered as being quite egalitarian, especially in the essential services, to a condition of clear differences, however it goes, will lead, with all probability to a worsening of the living conditions of our families, both for those who will have to adapt to adopting the “forager” strategies, as well as all the other ones, which has been clearly proven by the literature on this issue (Pickett - Wilkinson 2009).

5. Some unexpected consequences: *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*?

This is, unfortunately, the general panorama that can be imagined starting from the evidence recorded by the research conducted by the *Osservatorio*; it should however be said that the economic crisis has also achieved some positive results, in spite of wanting to avoid the theme which is often expressed by the press of eventual, new consumption socialisation, in a mainly frugal, ecological and critical key, the result of the forced restrictions and reorganisation of consumption by families, but destined to constitute the departure point for a new model of Society, which is no longer established on waste and destruction of the environment; our information has revealed an almost counter intuitive trend and, for this reason, it is interesting, inasmuch as being the element that measures the impact of the economic crisis on gambling, clearing implying by this, the legal kind that is connected to the various lotteries, scratch cards, etc.

Very often, at times of recession, especially at the beginning, when the labour market begins to absorb, irregularly and scantily, and the possibility of social mobility upwards is easily eroded, it is easy to see an increase in gambling, especially inside those groups in society that have been particularly hit by the uncertainty of their working futures and, therefore, they lose hope in the fact that a better future might be obtained, through commitment, for themselves or their families. In these cases, a fatalistic attitude often emerges that soothes the sense of guilt and frustration and if, on one hand, any lack of success is blamed on bad luck, they entrust their futures especially to good luck, attempting to obtain their "turning point" in the arms of Lady Luck.

This behaviour is often connected more with what might happen than to the real situation of want and need suffered by the family or the individual and is, especially, connected to the lack of faith in the credibility of commitment and the sacrifice of work in the key of social and economic mobility and security.

This complex mechanism is very serious because it nullifies the attitude to work, commitment and investment in the future of a large number of the population, inasmuch as it also attacks many people who do not turn to gambling and, in spite of carrying on a "normal" life, feel the sense held in those "middle-class" virtues of commitment and work disappearing, which are so important for society's future. Resorting to gambling, even in its mildest form of legal lotteries, can therefore represent an important, general indicator of the cultural state and values of society in relation to work and the future.

Our annual research has also, therefore, habitually recorded the frequency of gambling and the behaviour that has emerged over this three-year period has been really quite singular.

We will have immediately noticed that gambling by our families has decidedly increased since 2010, especially in the intensity of those families who were already gamblers. In fact, those families who played once or twice a year, buying tickets for the New Year Lottery, for example, and just that, has considerably increased, especially in the number of those families who went on to play more compulsively, gambling more than twice a week. We might say that from 2009 to 2010, in a certain number of families, habitual behaviour is less connected with gambling, in itself, on some traditional occasions, such as the New Year lottery or similar moments, has been transformed into behaviour that is much more orientated towards gambling, connecting the behaviour to a weekly basis, taking part once or twice a week. It should be observed, and this is really quite interesting, that it was mostly the families in the central consumption style band, the famous "shrewd consumers", who went more easily from a habit that came to the fore once a year, to one that went on to be manifested on a weekly basis, in net contrast with the reorganisation strategy and reduction of waste that characterised this consumer profile. Clearly, the impulse to resolve the worsening in their general condition and their future prospects, suddenly abbreviated by means of the short cut represented by the stroke of luck, was just too strong to be suppressed by the rationalisation strategies that are typical of this consumer profile.

But what happened in the research conducted in 2011?

The families increased, as never before, who, during the year in which the data was recorded, confirmed that they had never gambled and these families come from all the high frequency types, in which there is, however, a small decrease as the frequency of the behaviour increases. In other words, it was those families who had started to play a little more often who were the ones who stopped, while those who gambled more frequently did, effectively, stop, but in numbers less significant, which was also confirmed by the ISTAT data relative to gambling costs. Further confirmation of the characteristics of the dependency created by gambling, even when it is only presented in its mildest forms by way of lotteries or scratch cards. The habits connected with the annual appointments of the habitual kind are returning slightly; this is also a sign that a number of families are succeeding in recovering elements relative to their lives prior to the crisis, thanks to the rationalisation of their consumption and purchasing behaviour.

Therefore, when the panorama created by the economic crisis, which was believed to be merely fleeting, establishes itself and even gets worse, especially with reference to future prospects, we can see that a considerable number of Italian families abandon the type of faith in destiny, which had, instead, slightly increased during the previous year. Clearly, within a crisis and an ever more significant fall in purchasing power, the rationality criterion and proactive rationalisation commitment prevailed in the majority of families, and in some cases, the reduction of purchases and consumption, setting aside and considerably down-sizing the temptation to abandon oneself to fate.

6. A brief conclusion

In concluding, we can therefore say that the majority of Italian families have reacted rationally to the economic crisis and the fall in their purchasing power, by reorganising their behaviour and purchasing and consumption strategies, in such a way as to normalise the effects of the crisis,

enduring them as little as possible. This has permitted a great number of families to deploy resources that allowed them to recover the selection and purchasing criteria that they had had to abandon and that are typical of the more prosperous classes, which are removed from merely economic valuations connected to the price-quality relationship, to expand towards a more personalised relationship with the sales outlet, evaluation of the additional services that the latter is able to provide, into general behaviour that appears to be less oppressed by economic necessities.

All this, however, accompanied by a general panorama in which the difficulties of our families is progressively increasing, a significant number of which, in spite of their rationalisation efforts, are obliged to aim their purchasing and consumption behaviour in a crudely economic way, being constrained by the price, hunting down sales and special offers, reducing not merely the quality but also the quantity of the goods purchased and it is a number, especially during the last year, that has substantially increased. Now, more than 30% of Italian families are obliged to behave in this way.

The general panorama is therefore a general cooling off in consumption but it represents, especially, the polarisation trend concerning groups of families, who are succeeding in staying within or migrating towards larger consumption levels and those, instead, who have been crushed by the crisis and must struggle with the fall in their purchasing power. Both groups are progressively increasing and this implies that the social scissors are increasingly at work among the more prosperous classes and those, instead, who are living in poverty, creating a general situation that will considerably change our society, which has come from a number of decades of very egalitarian conditions among families, symbolised, above all, by its large middle class, a middle class that is falling apart and disintegrating under the blows of the economic crisis.

This will inevitably lead to the re-organisation of the distribution system, with the growth of distribution systems that are aimed at the first price, or in some particular commodity areas with the resumption of the used property market and mending, and the growth, on the other hand, of distribution systems aimed at the negotiation system, with an extensive offer of services collateral to the simple purchase. The thing that will really change will also be the consumer profile, which the economic crisis has, in any case, obliged to considerably rationalise their purchasing behaviour, the habit of comparing prices and sales outlets and seeking information on which to base their choices, which in spite of the faults of the economic crisis will undoubtedly lead to an increase in critical consumption and the consumer's ability to fend for himself, together with the consequent rationalisation, improvement and innovation of the distribution structure.

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