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Our Purchases. Where and what we buy

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of several places of consumption (stalls and markets, discount stores, specialist shops, shopping centres and new forms of purchasing) and what is bought there. In particular, it will show that the so-called cathedrals of consumption – shopping centres – are the favourite shopping destinations of today's consumers, whose expenditure choices are irreversibly directed towards basic essentials, namely food. Indeed, this is the most substantial item of expenditure in family budgets, especially those that declare a low or medium-low socio-economic status. Albeit in a well-structured context with established forms, there is a slight increase in consumer practices linked to responsible, critical and sustainable consumption, taking shape in new forms of purchasing that differ from the traditional modes.
Keywords: places of consumption, family budget, consumer practices.

Introduction

In the last few years of economic and social crisis, consumption, consumption behaviour and places of consumption reveal information about how individuals are coping with the times, what choices consumers make on the basis of their family budgets and what they see as more important than anything else in their expenditure choices. Places of consumption are at the same time containers of trade and relations, objects of attraction in themselves and the expression of certain social, demographic, economic and ethical characteristics of the people who shop in them. Consumption is also the language that communicates an individual's social, cultural and generational identity. Places of consumption are used for making purchases, but also for expressing lifestyles, living conditions and beliefs; people pamper themselves and enjoy sensory stimulation in such places. Indeed, consumption is often amalgamated and confused with free time (Franchi, 2008). Most of all though, it is amalgamated with certain beliefs related, for example, to the cultural trait that we now call responsibility, which we have also learnt to apply to consumption and socio-economic conditions that make consumers move from one place to another in search of a number of elements: making savings either out of necessity or choice, encountering the other, the range of goods and a rewarding consumption experience.

These issues will be addressed by analysing survey data regarding three different years: 2009, 2010 and 2011.

What and how much we buy: the homogenisation of consumption in primary goods

When they were interviewed, respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of certain product groups in the expenditure choices made by their family at that time on a scale of 1 to 10. The sectors in question were:

1. food;
2. clothes & footwear;
3. home furnishings;
4. medicine and hygiene and personal care products (medicine etc.);
5. technological products.

Unsurprisingly, the first sector was chosen as the most important one with an average of around 8.5 (8.49 in 2009 and 2011, and 8.48 in 2010). Sufficient averages are recorded for clothes & footwear at 6.5 and for mobile phones, televisions, household electric appliances (whether kitchen appliances or not),… therefore for all items covered by the blanket label "technological products", which also fluctuate between 6.12 (2010 and 2011) and 6.4 (2009).

Medicine etc. presents averages with reasonable values of 7.5 for all three years. The least importance is given to items for home furnishings (from fancy goods to more sizeable items), which do not achieve sufficient average values, but always remain one point below (table 1).

Table 1 - Average values by year regarding the question "At the moment, on a scale from 1 to 10, how important is each of the following product sectors (food, medicine and hygiene and personal care products, clothes & footwear, technological products and home furnishings) in the purchasing choices made by your family?

	Food	Medicine etc	Clothes & footwear	Technological products	Home furnishings
2009	8.49	7.54	6.71	6.40	5.74
2010	8.48	7.51	6.56	6.12	5.58
2011	8.49	7.51	6.56	6.12	5.58

If we analyse the aforementioned averages in terms of age, sex, educational qualifications, employment status, net monthly income, area of residence and presence or absence of children in the respondent's family, there are no significant variations that help to assign distinct characteristics to respondents according to how they are distributed in terms of the importance that they attribute to different products. In other words, the average marks given to the five product sectors are similar for the variables listed above and the only differences observed amount to a few decimal points at most. The variations between the different years are even more insignificant.

However, some interesting differences can be noted by comparing the average of the marks of importance given with the family socio-economic status declared by respondents. The latter variable is divided into five categories: high, medium-high, medium, medium-low and low. If the two extremes – high and low – are analysed closely, we can see that there are variations in the averages for each one and in the different years, providing some information which would not emerge otherwise (table 2).

Table 2 - Average values by year regarding the question "At the moment, on a scale from 1 to 10, how important is each of the following product sectors (food, medicine and hygiene and personal care products, clothes & footwear, technological products and home furnishings) in the purchasing choices made by your family?" distributed according to the family socio-economic status (SES) declared by respondents

Socio-economic status	High			Middle high			Medium			Middle low			Low		
	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011
Food	6.39	8.36	6.89	8.10	8.04	8.28	8.50	8.51	8.48	8.59	8.62	8.58	8.78	8.44	8.6
Medicine etc	6.38	8.07	6.22	7.17	7.29	7.41	7.61	7.61	7.52	7.54	7.63	7.49	7.52	7.50	7.71
Clothes & footwear	6.39	7.12	5.11	6.7	6.8	6.87	6.86	6.90	6.65	6.52	6.57	6.37	6.25	6.47	6.42
Technological products	6.80	6.25	4.89	6.56	6.56	6.59	6.58	6.43	6.24	6.12	6.14	5.90	5.41	5.53	5.57
Home furnishings	5.77	6.29	4.22	5.82	6.06	6.03	5.91	5.92	5.73	5.49	5.53	5.30	4.96	5.09	5.19

With reference to high socio-economic status, although the general average for food products over all three years is 8.5, the figure drops to 6.39 in 2009 and 6.89 in 2011. The figure for 2010 is again lower (8.36), but the decrease is much less than in the previous years and in the other socio-economic categories (from medium-high to low).

The same pattern is seen for medicine etc. with average figures lower than the general averages in 2009 and 2011 (7.54/6.38 in 2009; 7.51/6.22 in 2011), although the average for 2010 (8.07) is higher than the general average for that year (7.51). In the same socio-economic category, the average figures for 2011 are also much lower than the general averages for clothes & footwear (5.11/6.56), technological products (4.89/6.12) and home furnishings (4.22/5.58). At the opposite extreme – low socio-economic status – the trends are partly similar and partly contrasting. They are similar in the sense that the recorded values are much lower than the general average, although with reference to different products. For all three years the figures for furnishing products are lower than average: 4.96/5.74 in 2009; 5.09/5.58 in 2010; 5.19/5.58 in 2011. They contrast because the importance given to food in the low category is higher than the general average in two out of the three years: 8.78/8.49 in 2009; 8.6/8.49 in 2011. Furthermore, a general overview reveals that the importance given to food, medicine and hygiene and personal care products increases as we move down the scale of socio-economic status, although the pattern is not perfectly linear.

How much do we spend and what do we spend it on?[1]

In terms of the importance given to the 5 product sectors, with the exception of home furnishings there are no great differences between the general average results: 8.5 for food; 7.5 for medicine etc.; 6.5 for clothes and technological products. Given this lack of radical divergence between choices, we might also expect to find a similar trend with regard to expenditure and the amount of the family budget dedicated to each of the four sectors. However, when we make the transition from a theoretical declaration of the importance of a certain product type to a "real" statement regarding actual expenditure on such purchases, certain imbalances become apparent (table 3).

Table 3 Average percentage values given by respondents between 2009 and 2011 to the question "What percentage did your family spend on the following goods? Food, clothes & footwear, home furnishings, medicine, hygiene and personal care products, and technological products"

	Food	Clothes & footwear	Medicine etc	Technological products	Home furnishings
2009	49.34	15.71	13.65	11.64	9.44
2010	49.36	16.23	13.9	11.46	9.05
2011	51.07	15.55	13.59	11.27	8.99

Given the importance placed on food, it is not surprising that it is the most significant item of family expenditure, accounting for between 49% and 50% on average. The other half of total family expenditure is divided between products attributed average levels of importance ranging from sufficient to reasonable. While the category clothes & footwear came third in terms of declared importance, it accounts for the second highest percentage in terms of real expenditure (once again as an average value of the percentages given by respondents). It is now above medicine and technological products, which also "slip down" a place. Home furnishings remain some way behind in an isolated position (table 4).

Table 4 - Comparison between declared order of importance and actual expenditure with regard to food, clothes & footwear, home furnishings, medicine, hygiene and personal care products, and technological products. The order in both instances is ascending, from the most important and from the highest expenditure.

DECLARED IMPORTANCE (from 1 to 10)	ACTUAL EXPENDITURE
1 Food	1 Food
2 Medicine etc.	2 Medicine etc.
3 Clothes & Footwear	3 Clothes & Footwear
4 Technological products	4 Technological products
5 Home furnishings	5 Home furnishings

The data regarding the average expenditure of families interviewed over the three-year period shows that women only spend a little more than men on food, medicine and hygiene and personal care products:

- in 2009 women spent 49.87% on food, while the figure for men was 48.75%; similarly women spent 14.97% on medicine etc., while the figure for men was 12.20%;

[1] The following section refers to the question "What percentage did your family spend on the following goods? (with 100 as the total of percentages)".

- in 2010 the average expenditure on food for women was 49.53% compared to 49.17% for men, while the relative percentages for medicine and hygiene and personal care products were 14.98% and 12.72%;
- in 2011 women spent 51.54% of their family budget on food, while men spent 50.58%; with regard to medicine and hygiene and personal care products the former spent 14.42% and the latter spent 12.72%.

Men invariably spend more than women on the remaining three products, although the differences are minimal. There are no real differences in terms of age, presence or absence of children and employment status, but divergences emerge with regard to net family income (table 5): the higher the income, the lower the expenditure on food and medicine and the higher the expenditure on clothes, home furnishings and technological products.

Table 5 - Average percentage values given by respondents between 2009 and 2011 to the question "What percentage did your family spend on the following goods? Food, clothes & footwear, home furnishings, medicine and hygiene and personal care products, and technological products" distributed according to four income categories

	Less than 1000€			1001€ - 2000€			2001€ - 4000€			Over 4000€		
	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011
Food	52.30	52.13	56.66	51.93	51.84	53.46	48.92	48.61	50.28	43.47	44.89	46.06
Clothes& footwear	14.18	15.10	13.68	15.03	15.36	14.87	16.38	17.14	15.97	17.66	18.72	17.66
Home furnishings	7.69	8.32	7.98	8.19	8.30	7.63	10.29	9.23	9.56	12.47	10.75	11.12
Medicine etc	14.49	14.30	13.73	13.41	13.91	14.07	12.86	13.35	12.84	11.82	12.44	12.08
Technological products	10.09	10.16	9.39	11.09	10.59	10.25	11.85	11.68	11.81	13.69	13.19	13.43

In a similar way to the above comparisons between the importance of the five product types and socio-economic status, information can also be garnered about consumption patterns among respondents by comparing the percentage of family expenditure assigned to the products with their economic status (table 6). Indeed, the trend identified above regarding different income categories is confirmed.

Table 6 - Average values by year regarding the question "What percentage did your family spend on the following goods? (with 100 as the total of percentages)" *distributed according to the family socio-economic status (SES) declared by respondents*

Socio-economic status	High			Medium High			Medium			Medium Low			Low		
	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011
Food	49.5	**46.74**	**34.44**	45.6	44.53	45.13	49.25	49.3	49.31	49.81	50.74	54.29	55.73	54.05	60.48
Clothes & footwear	14.74	14.78	17.56	17.39	18.58	18.35	16.21	16.6	16.45	14.62	14.72	13.83	12.71	14.8	11.68
Medicine etc.	10.18	14.49	13.33	11.54	12.85	12.21	13.07	13.29	13.38	15.38	15.54	14.18	14.96	14.45	14.6
Technological products	12.59	11.84	19.44	13.5	12.91	13.13	11.63	11.74	11.72	11.42	10.65	10.42	9.02	9.29	7.98
Home furnishings	**16.4**	**12.15**	**15.22**	11.86	11.13	11.66	9.73	9.08	9.53	**8.44**	**8.31**	**7.61**	**6.55**	**7.41**	**6.5**

High socio-economic status is accompanied by average percentages of expenditure on food that are below the general average of family expenditure in 2010 and 2011, while average expenditure on technological products and home furnishings is higher than the general average in all three years. In the lower categories (medium-low and low), the data regarding food is completely in keeping with the average values of importance given to such products. The average score for food on a scale from 1 to 10 is 8.5: in terms of the corresponding average percentage of expenditure we find the highest recorded figures, which are also above the general average expenditure, ranging from 49.81% in the medium-low socio-economic category in 2009 to 60.48% in 2011.

A comfortable socio-economic status leads to less attention paid to goods that can reasonably be defined as primary (related to food in general) and a greater likelihood of also dedicating portions of the family budget to goods that are not basic necessities. With regard to medicine and hygiene and personal care products, there is a reasonably stable trend close to the general averages for each year for the socio-economic categories from high to medium, while the percentage values for average expenditure in the medium-low and low categories are about two per cent higher than the others. In this respect it should be noted that in 2009 the bottom two categories account for 40.6% of over-65s (for whom greater expenditure is expected on medicine and healthcare products than for younger age groups); the figure is 32.2% in 2010 and 36.8% in 2011.

Abraham Maslow and Ernst Engel: two possible self-sustaining explanations

Today’s society is often defined as a “society of surfeit” or perhaps more accurately a “society of food surfeit”. These terms refer to the saturation of the market and the transfer of consumer choices in the food sector and elsewhere to products of an increasingly high quality, which satisfy the constantly growing sensitivity of consumers to aspects related to health and the symbolic cultural and ethical values now embodied in each purchase. In addition to perceiving food products as a way to satisfy basic physiological needs, consumers now also seek experiences, emotions, sensations, service, nature, culture and so on.

It could be said that the heterogeneous nature of the needs that one product type such as food can satisfy or is asked to satisfy is reminiscent of the classic five-level hierarchy of needs put forward by the psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1954. His motivational model of human development is constructed on a pyramid of needs arranged in a hierarchy starting from the most important ones in terms of necessity:

1. physiological needs (food, water, shelter, clothes, other basic essentials).
2. safety needs (personal, protection from heat and cold, etc.).
3. social needs (human need for affection, friendship, team spirit and solidarity, sense of belonging, etc.).
4. esteem needs (search for a certain status, prestige and social recognition: car, furniture, jewellery, etc.).
5. self-actualisation needs (desire to accomplish one’s aspirations both at an individual level and with regard to others).

Maslow (1954) felt that each individual only tends to satisfy a need of a higher order if lower-level needs have already been met. In this sense, the consumption of food satisfies physiological needs. Although this is undoubtedly true, consumers in high-income/Western societies use food products to satisfy a variety of needs positioned at different levels of the hierarchy: sense of belonging and esteem (food as a status symbol or lifestyle), safety (search for food which is as natural as possible, more organic food to protect individual and family health),…

As members of a society of surfeit, we might be inclined to think that we have satisfied our food needs in full, consolidating this thought in a continuum between certainty and complacency. However, the data collected here suggests that such needs are probably not taken for granted so much after all, or that satisfying them is starting to become a little more problematic than it used to be, even in the recent past. It might be because they are not fully satisfied that food purchases are one of the most significant items of expenditure. It is therefore also possible that in a situation of general economic and social structural crisis, expenditure levels out on essentials as consumers increasingly perceive their socio-economic status to be between medium and low. In tandem with the growth in economic uncertainty over the last five (or more) years, there has also been a rise in the difficulty of allocating amounts of expenditure to non-essential items: from safety needs to self-actualisation needs. In this sense, the non-essential status of the latter derives from the fact that if consumers do not satisfy the first level of the hierarchy, they become insensitive to satisfying the following four. The tendency, above all in the lower socio-economic categories, is thus to concentrate purchases on goods that satisfy what Maslow defines as physiological needs. There is, however, one clarification to make: an increase in family income does not lead to a corresponding rise in expenditure on food; the percentage of income spent on food products tends to decrease systematically as expenditure capacity increases (Pilati, 2004). This is fully borne out by Ernst

Engel's law[2], according to which consumers do not increase expenditure on basic essentials in proportion to rising levels of income, but instead transfer their consumption choices to higher-level or luxury goods. Indeed, expenditure on primary goods does not increase by the same proportion as the growth in income: if a family's income triples, it is improbable that consumption of these goods will also rise threefold. Furthermore, above a certain level of income the demand for such goods stabilises, as consumers are no longer interested in increasing their levels of consumption (Antonelli, 2006). When consumers experience a rise in income, they adapt their expenditure over time and progressively modify their food purchases: as income increases, there are percentage changes in the expenditures assigned to the different items in the budget; those set aside for essential needs (such as food) decrease, while expenditures on items with a symbolic value connected to status continue to increase. In other words, in conditions of great wealthiness, food expenditure is surpassed by many categories of luxury consumer goods (Pilati, 2004). In summary, the law claims that the poorer a family is, the greater the percentage of its total expenditure that must be set aside for purchasing food and this has been confirmed by the data analysed above.

From the micro-community of the local market to the secular cathedral: the places of consumption

Each product has its own ideal point of purchase. If we analyse the data about where respondents made their last purchase for each of the five product types studied (table 7), it is immediately clear that there is a division between places and goods: consumers buy food and technological products in shopping centres, while they go to different places to buy the other products. We will now analyse these.

Table 7- Think about the last time you went to buy the following goods: food, clothes & footwear, home furnishings, medicine and hygiene and personal care products, technological products: which point of sale did you go to? Percentage values for the three-year period 2009 – 2011

	Stands & corner market			Discount			Shopping centre			Specialized retail store			New forms of purchase		
	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011	2009	2010	2011
Food	5.60	6.60	6.60	12.60	10.80	12.30	**76.30**	**75.80**	**75.40**	5.00	6.10	4.90	0.60	0.80	0.80
Clothes & footwear	11.20	9.60	11.10	3.50	3.80	3.90	34.20	29.90	33.50	**50.20**	**55.60**	**50.30**	090	1.20	1.10
Home furnishings	3.20	3.10	3.50	2.80	2.30	2.90	31.50	28.40	31.80	**61.60**	**65.40**	**60.65**	0.80	0.90	1.30
Medicine etc	0.70	0.70	1.40	2.30	2.50	2.70	31.90	29.40	29.10	**64.80**	**66.80**	**66.40**	0.30	0.60	0.40
Technological products	0.70	0.90	1.40	2.00	2.00	2.0o	51.50	48.50	53.10	**44.90**	**47.20**	**41.80**	1.00	1.40	1.70

The small community: stalls and markets

Local markets are a traditional form of distribution in Italy, a form of retail trade doing daily business in public areas on stalls or from vans. Local markets, which are often located in the heart of a district and are held once a week, offer stalls with food and other products for daily and midweek shopping. Products are often characterised by a wide range, a good price-quality ratio or varied price range (from very low to high/very high for products made by hand or packed directly by the seller) and convenience, as people usually go to the nearest market to their home. The products most frequently bought from stalls and local markets are food and clothes/footwear (table 7), while women are far more likely to go shopping there than men (table 8).

[2] After analysing the family budgets of around 200 Belgian families, the German economist Ernst Engel (Dresden 1821-Oberlässnitz-Radebeul 1896) noted that when there is an increase in income, the amount spent on food decreases. Engel showed that the amount of expenditure on food is inversely related to the income of the family unit in question and that demand for basic essentials increases less than proportionally to income. It should be stressed that Engel's law refers to expenditure on food rather than the quantity of food consumed. The law does not apply to extremely poor families (on the poverty threshold), whose expenditure on food increases proportionally or even more than proportionally as their income rises.

Table 8 - Food and clothes & footwear purchases at stalls and markets distributed according to type

	2009		2010		2011	
	Food	Clothes & footwear	Food	Clothes & footwear	Food	Clothes & footwear
Male	38.10	26.90	42.40	32.20	46.60	30.90
Female	61.90	73.10	57.60	66.80	53.40	69.10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

With regard to food shopping at markets in terms of age, we see that over-65s register the highest percentage of presence: 38.9% in 2009; 41.2% in 2010; 36.8% in 2011. The youngest age groups are much less likely to buy clothes & footwear from markets (table 9), but from 35 onwards presence by age is distributed more uniformly, with over-65s again accounting for the highest presence.

Table 9 - Distribution by age group of those who made their last purchase of clothes & footwear at stalls and markets

Age	2009	2010	2011
25-34	15.90	15.00	13.50
35-44	19.90	22.30	22.00
45-54	20.40	17.10	19.70
55-64	15.00	16.60	23.30
Over 65	28.80	29.00	21.50
Total	100	100	100

The Islands boast the highest percentage of food purchases at markets with 8.1% of total purchases made from market stalls, compared to 3.1% in the North-East. As far as clothes are concerned, Central Italy registers the highest percentage of expenditure at markets, 17.1%, compared to 5.9% in the North-East, where shopping habits are based around shopping centres for food (80.2%) and specialist shops for clothes (53.6%).

Discount stores

A discount store[3] is a shop that offers many different product types including food, for which they are best known. Low prices are the essential feature of a discount store, made possible by a series of distinguishing characteristics such as a smaller range, the sale of lesser known brands, few checkouts, few members of staff and a basic layout, thereby optimising the plain and simple product model (Secondulfo, 2012).

The data studied showed that discount stores are the second most common point of purchase for food after shopping centres, while they are used much less frequently for the other products (table 7). This was backed up in 2011 by the Italian Farmers Confederation, which noted that purchases from discount stores were on the increase, so much so that they have held up well during the recession and registered an increase in food sales of around 2% (1% according to data regarding 2011 issued by Istat in 2012).

Equal numbers of male and female consumers shop there, but there are differences in terms of age, with the highest percentage for over-65s in all three years in question (table 10).

Elderly people clearly have more limited financial assets than others on a much more frequent basis: in such cases the discount store is a good way to reduce expenditure.

This is borne out by the distribution of those who buy food there by socio-economic status, which also suggests that discount stores can act as a kind of sanctuary combining savings with sufficient quality, given that they also stock some brand products typically found in hypermarkets or specialist shops.

[3] According to Istat, a discount store is defined as a retail business in a fixed location with a medium-large surface area that offers a limited range of mostly non-brand products in self-service format at lower prices than the market average by operating a policy of cutting start-up, management and service costs.

Table 10 - Distribution by age group of those who made their last food purchase at a discount store

Age	2009	2010	2011
25-34	19.00	20.80	15.80
35-44	19.40	24.50	17.00
45-54	17.40	19.40	23.10
55-64	11.50	8.80	16.60
Over 65	32.80	26.40	27.50
Total	100	100	100

The biggest concentration of those that made their last food purchase at a discount store is in the medium and medium-low categories (table 11).

Table 11 - Distribution by socio-economic status of those who made their last food purchase at a discount store

Socio-economic status	2009	2010	2011
High	0.00	0.50	0.40
Medium high	7.50	7.80	7.70
Medium	42.90	46.10	42.10
Medium low	41.70	35.50	36.40
Low	7.90	10.10	13.40
Total	100	100	100

However, the discount store phenomenon, which is widespread and established, cannot be ascribed solely to the increase in insecurity and poverty; as Lipovetsky (2006) claims, it can also be attributed to the huge rise in needs, the desire to escape and communications, meaning that priorities have to be established in personal and family budgets. According to Lipovetsky, the discount store is a way to exert control over certain types of expenditure in order to be able to have access to recreational consumer goods, communications products and items of personal interest. Indeed, savings are often made on food so that the money can be spent on other goods such as telephones or holidays (Lipovetsky, 2006).

New forms of purchasing

New forms of purchasing are the "place" least frequented by all respondents over the three-year period (table 7). The percentages of those who made their last purchase of any product from ethical purchasing groups or second-hand shops and other similar points of sale are negligible, always below 2% (table 7). These shopping methods reveal a cultural tendency to act responsibly (Paltrinieri 2007), which can be aimed at individuals, for example by choosing organic food as a healthy alternative (Paltrinieri, 2007; Bovone and Mora, 2007), other people by opting for products that support solidarity initiatives or the environment through purchasing eco-friendly sustainable products chosen for environmental reasons (Paltrinieri, 2007). In addition, distribution networks such as these (whether different from traditional forms or not) that reduce the distance between producers and consumers are also a resource for consumers that have seen their purchasing power reduced (Sassatelli, 2008).

We will now provide more detailed analysis of some of these new forms of purchasing: second-hand shops, ethical purchasing groups and farmers markets.

Second-hand products are purchased in shops that specialise in such goods and offer advantageous prices. Franchise networks of second-hand products are also growing in Italy (with numerous products or specific products such as clothes, accessories or children's toys). This practice can be viewed as a micro-economy dedicated to the reuse of items that have not finished their life cycle, evidence of a restrained form of consumerism aimed at reducing consumption and recycling cast-offs. It also shows that some consumers place importance not only on the price but also on the image of the product, in the sense that there is no shame in paying less. Indeed, making a saving is seen as a sign of independence (Lipovesky, 2006).

The most recent forms include ethical purchasing groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale or GAS in Italian)[4], which are also enjoying a fair level of success. These are groups of people who buy

[4] There are approximately two thousand ethical purchasing groups in Italy, 890 of which are registered on the website http://www.retegas.org/. Overall they involve around 200 thousand people in 50 thousand families. On average, each

food or other products in common use on a wholesale basis and redistribute them among themselves. However, this is not all: the word 'ethical' differentiates a GAS from any other purchasing group because it adds a guiding criterion in the selection of products. The ethics start among the group members and extend to the small producers that supply the products, the due regard shown to the environment and people in the southern hemisphere. Forms of responsible consumption such as a GAS therefore create an ethical network that becomes a cornerstone of the experience itself, making it possible to practise what is defined as critical consumption […]. A GAS is the product of the desire to build a healthy economy from the bottom up, in which ethics have more value than profit[5]. Alongside ethical purchasing groups, farmers markets have also been growing in number over the last few years[6]. «They are markets, generally held in the open air on a monthly basis, where agricultural producers sell their produce directly. These markets have spread rapidly at a national level in the last few years, following a trend already underway in many other western countries in Europe and before them in the United States […]. They form part of the group of initiatives commonly defined in our country by the term short supply chain […] or alternative food farming systems» (Rossi, Brunori, Guidi, 2008: 1). The philosophy underlying these forms of purchasing and selling food products is to adopt methods that are alternatives to the logic and corresponding organisational methods of the dominant food farming system, moving towards a rapprochement, shortening the physical, social, cultural and economic distances between the world of production and the world of consumption (Rossi, Brunori, Guidi, 2008). Unlike ethical purchasing groups, farmers markets are less collective entities, even though they can still be interpreted as initiatives that show the adoption of socially responsible behaviour by focusing on organic food and reducing supply chains.

The data collected shows that the typical consumer using these new forms of purchasing is a young woman with high educational qualifications and medium/medium-low socio-economic status.

Table 12 - Distribution by type of those who made purchases through New Forms

	2009		2010		2011	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
Food	50.00	50.00	37.50	62.50	56.20	43.80
Clothes & footwear	26.30	73.70	39.10	60.90	39.10	60.90
Home furnishings	41.20	58.80	66.70	33.30	34.60	65.40
Medicine etc	16.70	83.30	54.50	45.50	37.50	62.50
Technological products	75.00	25.00	60.70	39.30	67.60	32.40

Some features of this data are confirmed by other studies (Bovone and Mora, 2007; Lori and Volpi, 2007). For example, the main protagonists of responsible/ethical consumption are women rather than men, under 45 years old, with high educational qualifications and good levels of cultural and social capital, while they are less likely to follow the trend as they get older (Paltrinieri 2007). The data collected and discussed here also shows that customers of second-hand shops, ethical purchasing groups and farmers markets are in the younger age groups (25-34 and 35-44) (table12).

These other national studies also indicate that this type of consumer has a higher-than-average income and is positioned at the highest levels of the job market (Paltrinieri, 2008; Bovone and Mora, 2007; Lori and Volpi, 2007). However, the data presented here suggests that those with a high socio-economic status never make purchases in these places. Instead, these forms of purchasing are most commonly used by young people with high or very high educational qualifications ranging from a high school diploma to postgraduate qualifications. They are clearly also people who place importance on ethical consumption in general and are more willing to accept experimentation, the savings that stem from questioning traditional forms of purchasing and travelling to areas that are not necessarily close to their homes to go to farmers markets or search

GAS consists of a total of 100 people from 25 households, each of which spends around € 2000.00 a year (http://www.retegas.org/index.php?module=pagesetter&tid=3 consulted on 30 July 2012).

[5] http://www.economia-solidale.org/ consulted on 30 July 2012.

[6] Farmers markets are still a small sector compared to local markets or fairs of typical products. According to data taken from the website www.farmersmarket.it, there were 196 active farmers markets in 2009, most of which were concentrated in regions in the north: Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna account for over 120 markets overall. The region with the most farmers markets is Lombardy with 40, followed by Emilia Romagna with 26, Tuscany and Piedmont with 21 and Veneto with 13 (a widely underestimated piece of data). Farmers markets are also slowly growing in number in Southern Italy (Veneto Agricoltura, 2010).

for the best price for a second-hand product. We can imagine that this type of consumption and these places incorporate an uneven collection of practices related to common awareness of the environment or a different model of coexistence, in the sense that these consumers seem to want to reduce the environmental impact of their consumption and choose an ethical lifestyle, although this might still be limited to individual rather than collective action (Sassatelli, 2008; Rebughini, 2008).

The specialist shop

The specialist shop is a point of sale in which the range of products is limited but complete, offering a number of product lines and variations in a specific product sector. It is the breadth of range that makes the difference compared to other types of shop. The specialist shop can also offer the same product (such as a pair of shoes) at many different prices (from highly expensive handmade shoes to inexpensive industrially produced imported footwear). It also offers pre and post-sales assistance and consultancy services: consumers are not left alone to find what they want and make their choices but are guided, helped and advised by qualified staff. Here, therefore, the act of purchasing has not lost its interpersonal aspect and has not yet become an independent choice made exclusively by the consumer, as it has in shopping centres. (Secondulfo, 2001; Viviani, 2008).

The data shows that specialist shops are used indiscriminately by men and women (40% of whom have a high school diploma) and young and older people with a medium socio-economic status. In the regions of North-East Italy this form of shopping achieves the highest purchasing percentages for all the products in the survey except food for all three years in question. In terms of products, we can assume that specialist shops such as pharmacies and parapharmacies are essential for the purchase of medicine and personal care products, as there are no alternatives. With regard to personal hygiene (and partly treatment) products, specialist shops can vary from perfume shops to parapharmacies, single-brand shops that sell different types of beauty products and the latest form of large specialist shop – *CityStores*. These are convenience stores located in major urban centres that are always open and focus on lifestyle and wellness, with parapharmacy goods supplemented by a series of products to meet everyday personal care needs (personal hygiene, cosmetics, dietary supplements, over-the-counter medicine) but also the necessary products for shopping genuinely dedicated to the wellbeing of the whole family: from milk to pasta, sushi and light bulbs (www.esserebenessere.it consulted on 30 July 2012). As far as other products are concerned, again with the exception of food, an additional incentive to shop at specialist stores is that customers know they can find a certain product without having to waste effort and energy to find it among numerous other entirely unrelated products. They also know that different types of this product will be available at different prices, with more variety in general: this is the basic difference between buying a pair of shoes at a shoe shop and at a hypermarket in a shopping centre. These are the likely characteristics that made respondents choose a specialist shop for most of their purchases except food.

Secular cathedrals: shopping centres

We buy food and technological products in cathedrals. This statement is made with reference to two elements. The first is connected to our research data, as the purchase of food is most concentrated in shopping centres[7], accounting for more than 75% in all three years, while technological products are the second most frequently bought item. The second element refers to what the sociologist George Ritzer wrote about shopping centres in 1999, defining them as the new cathedrals of our time used by multitudes of pilgrim-consumers, especially at weekends, who choose to take part in the ritual of the so-called religion of consumption (Ritzer, 1999; Secondulfo, 2012). Shopping centres are therefore magnificent and spectacular places that transform purchasing opportunities into opportunities for spending time and not only money (Franchi, 2007). Shopping

[7] Shopping centres are defined by outline law on commerce no.114/1998, which in art. 4 letter G defines them as a medium-sized or large sales facility in which a number of different shops are located in a structure for a specific use and make use of specific infrastructure and service areas managed jointly (ISTAT, Glossary, http://www3.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non_calendario/20010704_00/testointegrale.pdf consulted on 30 July 2012).

centres have absorbed and surpassed the typical function of a traditional shop, taking shape as enormous areas containing not only different types of shops but also opportunities to have fun, acting as meeting places and recreation centres in their own right. They are most commonly found in suburban areas bordering urban centres. Unlike the purchasing process in shops and market stalls, the procedure in shopping centres is based on perceptual, sensory and emotional stimuli, becoming a global experience that involves the consumer's senses and heart (cfr. Viviani, 2008). The nucleus of a shopping centre usually consists of a hypermarket, around which numerous shops are arranged.

The structure often duplicates the layout in a city centre with main and secondary roads, crossroads, squares, fountains, benches, signs, stairs, cinemas, restaurants, bars, banks, offices (Codeluppi, 2000) and, a recent addition, fitness areas. A shopping centre is a simulacrum of a country village (Viviani, 2008), as it offers a concentration of shops, products and activities. It enables consumers to go shopping with a single stop (Ritzer, 1999): everything can be found in one place from food to clothes, medicine and the most sophisticated technological products. Shopping centres contain large well-stocked hypermarkets[8] or supermarkets with large areas dedicated to technological products, which are also sold in equally large shops devoted to them in the same malls.

The data clearly shows that most respondents in the survey do their food shopping and buy technological products there. These shoppers are not in the youngest age groups; they are concentrated in the 35-44 and over-65 categories in all three years (table 13).

Table 13 - Purchases of food and technological products at shopping centres, distributed according to age, in 2009, 2010 and 2011

	2009		2010		2011	
Age	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products
25-34	17.50	17.50	17.80	18.30	14.70	14.70
35-44	22.00	23.90	21.20	22.00	23.50	21.90
45-54	18.70	18.30	18.80	20.70	22.20	22.80
55-64	16.90	15.80	17.60	14.40	19.80	19.60
Over 65	24.90	24.50	24.60	24.70	19.80	21.00
Total	100	100	100	100.1	100	100

However, on closer analysis there is a drop in the presence of older people in 2011 (table 14). A possible response to this negative trend can be seen in the corresponding, albeit minimal, rise in the presence of the oldest age group at discount stores in 2011, especially for food (an increase of 1.1% compared to 2009). This is also suggested by ISTAT data for 2011: among food-based non-specialist shops there are increased sales in discount stores (+1.0%), while there is a decrease in hypermarkets and supermarkets (respectively –4.4% and –2.0%) (Istat, 2012). With regard to socio-economic status, there is a concentration of medium and medium-low categories in shopping centres (table 14).

The other socio-economic categories are much less present but are all on the rise in 2011, a "terrible" year in which according to Istat data the seasonally adjusted index of retail sales registered a decrease of 1.1% for the period in question.

On average, the index dropped by 1.0% in the three-month period October-December 2011 compared to the previous quarter (Istat, 2012). In this case, given the concentration of sales it is possible that purchases have moved to those places where promotions are more frequent and are not only limited to end-of-season sales; brand products are available with specialist and quality goods as well as lesser known brands at lower prices, and convenience packs are always available, especially common for food, goods for cleaning the home and personal hygiene products.

[8] Istat defines a hypermarket as a retail shop with a sales area of more than 2,500 square metres, arranged in departments (food and other products), each of which has the respective characteristics of a supermarket and department store.

Table 14 Purchases of food and technological products at shopping centres, distributed according to socio-economic status, in 2009, 2010 and 2011

	2009		2010		2011	
Socio-economic status	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products
High	0.30	0.30	0.50	0.50	2.60	0.40
Medium high	10.60	9.80	11.60	11.50	13.40	8.90
Medium	58.70	58.20	58.30	59.70	45.20	53.00
Medium low	25.70	26.70	25.50	23.90	28.80	31.60
Low	4.70	5.00	4.20	4.40	10.00	6.10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The destinations for these pilgrimages are concentrated in the northern regions of the country (tab. 15). If we take the percentage for the place where the last purchase of food and technological products was made and observe the geographical area of residence of the respondents, we can see that in the North-West and North-East around 80% of food purchases are made at shopping centres, while the corresponding figure for technological goods is over 50%.

Table 15 Purchases of food and technological products at shopping centres, distributed according to geographical area of residence, in 2009, 2010 and 2011

	2009		2010		2011	
	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products	Food	Technological products
N/E	80.70	52.0	80.80	51.00	76.10	55.00
N/W	80.20	53.1	80.40	46.00	83.20	51.00
C	74.10	46.1	73.60	49.00	77.00	50.00
S	76.30	57.7	69.10	48.20	71.10	54.20
I	63.70	44.6	73.10	45.20	67.20	54.10

It should also be considered that there are fewer shopping centres in other regions, although it is difficult to find data on the exact number in Italy and different sources provide somewhat varied results. The LargoConsumo database indicates just under a thousand: 348 in the North-West, 246 in the North-East, 180 in the Centre, 152 in the South and 69 on the Islands. Finally, it should be said that the situation has changed over the last few years. Some of the biggest regional shopping centre projects have been completed in the South, with the simultaneous arrival of specialist companies moving to areas which might be less wealthy but are also less competitive, in keeping with the logic of territorial coverage after extensive development in the north. In just a few years the quantitative gap between the north and the south may be largely bridged, while the persistence of different development dynamics can be envisaged (Panu, 2012).

Given the scenario, we will conclude by observing that the critical level of purchasing trends means that these secular cathedrals of consumption are experiencing a period of crisis. This is not, however, vocational but is linked to difficulties faced by pilgrim-consumers who are increasingly unable to satisfy many of their needs regardless of their position on Maslow's hierarchical scale.

Conclusions

Purchasing behaviour takes shape in places of consumption, creating certain features which characterise groups of individuals that share tastes and routines (Franchi, 2007). It is, however, often difficult to identify uniform trends, just as it is difficult to find interpretative criteria that take account of changeable and ambivalent behaviour, which alternates between individual and collective practices – purchases made at a shopping centre or through an ethical purchasing group.

Consumption undoubtedly presents itself as a social practice, an expressive practice and a constitutive practice of the identity of a social actor, just as the world of goods reflects the society that uses it and creates it on a daily basis (Secondulfo, 2012). The goods and consumption analysed thus far reflect a social scenario that is built on four aspects with regard to places and goods purchased:

- the notable importance attributed to food compared to other non-food products;
- the large proportion of the family budget assigned to food primary products;
- the influence of socio-economic status on expenditure choices, in terms of quantity and product type;
- the negligible presence of new forms of purchasing – method or place of purchase and their underlying philosophy and meaning, namely critical and sustainable consumption.

The fourth and final aspect is currently a purchasing method associated with a certain type of consumer: young, usually female with a high cultural profile. In this situation, the incursion of the principle of reality, induced by the emphasis on more aware and responsible consumption (Secondulfo, 2012) is in its embryonic stage, even though, as we have seen, there are many different commercial entities and methods that we can include as new forms of purchasing.

It seems that the society of surfeit is moving elsewhere: to shopping centres, where there is a wide variety of different product types, a more varied price range for the different products and greater opportunities to manage budgets in the best way possible. The latter factor currently applies most of all to expenditure on food, which is the most significant item in terms of quantity and quality, especially for those who declare a low or medium-low socio-economic status. This does not seem to reveal much in itself. However, if we apply Engel's law to this data, which is summarised in the first three aspects of the current scenario, we realise that the high percentages of expenditure on food among those with low socio-economic status disclose a trend of consumer impoverishment.

The society of consumption aims to gratify desires more than any other society in the past (Franchi, 2007), but the current economic and social difficulties often frustrate these desires, whether they are small or large. We need to ask ourselves whether it is still desire rather than necessity that drives consumption behaviour and the choice of places where purchases are made.

Last: to the question of what and where do we buy, we must answer that we buy especially food and technological products in our postmodern cathedrals. For sure.

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