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The Crisis and Italian Families¹

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Abstract

In this article the issue of the effects of the economic crisis on consumption in Italy is discussed. In particular, the authors present some information about the strategies of consumption in Italy, from a part of the data collected during some of the research conducted by the Observatory on the consumption of families (University of Verona, Italy). The data analyzed were collected through several surveys conducted in the five years between 2009 and 2013. After presenting some data on the economic status of the families of respondents, the authors discuss, among other things, the issue of the request for financial help – showing how the primary networks are increasingly over-stressed – and the growth of the incidence of households that reduce their spending in various areas of commodities – which show that the most significant growth appears to medicines and products for personal care and toiletries, and food. Finally, the changes, over time, of the incidence of some general profiles of consumers are shown.

Keywords: impact of the crisis, purchasing strategies, consumption profiles

¹ Domenico Secondulfo wrote sections 1 and 3, Luigi Tronca section 2 and section 4 was written jointly by both authors.

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1. Introduction

The information that follows is taken from the main sources of statistics available (e.g. Findomestic, Istat), and in particular from the annual surveys which have been conducted by the Observatory on the consumption of families (OSCF) (University of Verona) in Italy, on a sample of about 2,000 residents for a number of years. The overall scenario in which the reflections that follow are situated is that of a society which, like many others in Europe, has found itself in about a decade, going from a style of affluent and “carefree” consumption to a rational and limited one, with the need for consumers to reduce their purchases and defend, at the same time, their previous lifestyle (% food products in annual expenditure: 2009: 18.9; 2013: 19.5; source: Istat - Italian National Institute of Statistics - 2014).

Table 1. *Percentage change of some economic variables*

	2011	2012	2013	2014
Italian GDP	0.6	-2.6	-1.8	0.8
Volume of consumption	-0.2	-4.0	-2.3	-
Durables	-4.1	-12.2	-3.9	-
New cars	-10.9	-19.8	-7.9	-

Source: Findomestic Observatory, consumption 2014

It has been a gradual process, with some peaks, as we will show in the following pages, which has slowly transformed not only the purchasing style of the majority of Italian families, but also the overall approach to consumption, with the spread of anti-waste, ecological, conscious and critical consumption ideologies. These were movements in the making even before the start of the recession, but which have given the effort of scaling down that families have had to make, an ideal support that has reduced the perception of impoverishment, emphasizing the ethical and political side of the restrictions and the limitations adopted as time passed. These ideologies, from being minority and marginal, have gradually become majority and dominant. Again from the cultural point of view, this has been entwined with the drive towards the natural and organic, with the promise of a better quality and therefore of a qualitative defence of the lifestyle, despite the quantitative reduction, also because the cost of organic products is significantly higher than that of ordinary products. The defence of quality was the line of resistance taken by most families, compensating with this attitude the objective need to reduce the overall volume of purchases. Naturally, this reduction, as will be seen below,

has had a highly diversified effect in the different sectors of commodities. With this effort, the level of skill of families and also the time they dedicate to shopping, in particular to selecting products and stores, necessarily increased. Again in the logic of the defence of quality, some branded products have resisted in the shopping basket of many families, who have tried not to abandon the usual brands to which they attributed a certain guarantee for the quality of the products. As we will see this was the strategy of most of the families. Unfortunately, there nevertheless exists a quota, which is still growing, of families who have had to reduce both the quantity and the quality of their shopping basket, with a net negative impact on their lifestyle, of an average of about 30%. In the defence of the quality and reorganization of their lifestyle, many families have adopted strategies which are also contradictory, increasing their use of mass retail, but for some products keeping the specialized point of sale, the brand, organic etc.. By reducing in general the volume of purchases and their lifestyle but protecting, at the same time, with greater attention to the quality of a limited range of products, considered of particular significance and importance for the self-perception of the care and well-being of the family.

Overall, the economic crisis has accentuated the differences both between social classes and between the socio-economic areas of the country. If the crisis has fragmented the middle class, pushing a part of it towards purchasing habits and a lifestyle that are definitely lower than those it enjoyed in the past, on the local level, it has accentuated the differences that already existed in the past. In this regard we can mention the situation of north-eastern Italy, an area where targeted surveys were carried out by the Observatory. It presents indicators of suffering which are 50% less than the national averages, with a very low perception of the economic crisis and very low impact on the purchasing habits and lifestyle of families, at the limits of subjective perception. However, the perception of the future shared by our families has changed considerably, despite the reassuring press campaigns and the constant drive towards purchasing and consumption, with income that is protected if necessary by a reorganization of the lifestyle and purchasing strategies, has gone massively in the direction of hoarding, a clear indicator of fear and little confidence in the future. This occurs both in the socio-territorial areas suffering the most and in those less affected, such as the north-east for example, where the volume of bank deposits has more than doubled in the past few years.

Again from the point of view of the perception of the future, a great divarication can be seen between the convictions and the strategies of families and government or media projections. The latter make every effort to dispel the fear of the economic crisis and to convince families to resume carefree

lifestyles and ways of spending, whilst the families, having necessarily found new balances that give better protection to their incomes, remain wary and accumulate what they can in view of even worse times. The flare-ups of relative recovery or of slowdown of the decrease in purchasing in some sectors usually go out quickly, marked by being highly seasonal in nature. The government's actions implemented so far have also had a generally weak impact, both direct ones (such as the amount of 80 euros for a range of families in particular socio-economic conditions) and indirect ones, such as changes in the laws on employment, which are producing positive effects but which, considering the legislative-fiscal device, risk not lasting in time. From the fiscal point of view, to conclude, there remains a very large area of evasion (17% of the GDP, cf. Istat 2010), which the various government initiatives have not succeeded in significantly affecting, also because this allows vast territorial and social areas of the country to better resist, obviously, the crisis, although it is easy to imagine that, in the medium term, the chronic deprivation of tax revenues will lead to a fatal decline in actions for the least protected social groups and in general that support that a welfare state guaranteed to society and which did a great deal to tranquillize families, driving them to be "carefree" in increasing their consumption. This, as well as even further increasing the process of stratification in course, can only negatively influence the inclination towards spending, with an impact on the perception of the future and the dangers that it can harbour no longer being covered by the attentive hand of welfare, in particular regarding pensions and health.

The surveys we will be discussing in the following paragraphs were carried out, on an annual basis, in the five years between 2009 and 2013, through a questionnaire using the CAWI method (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) by the research company SWG S.p.A. of Trieste (Italy).

The data were collected from individuals selected from a panel of about 60,000 people managed by the research company and, for this reason the sample is of a non-probabilistic type compared to the resident population in Italy. Each sample of interviewees, from 2010, also includes panel members with respect to the previous surveys. The periods when the data were collected and the sample numerosities are as follows: (1) December 2009 = 2,022 cases; (2) November 2010 = 2,007 cases (3) November 2011 = 2,008; (4) December 2012 = 2,109 cases; (5) December 2013 = 2,010 cases. The samples of the surveys were built up by quotas and are made up of individuals resident in Italy aged at least 25. The sample quotas were identified from parameters of sex, class of age (25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, at least 65) and macro-region of residence (North-west, North-east, Centre, South, Islands) relative to the resident population in Italy on 1st January of the year in which

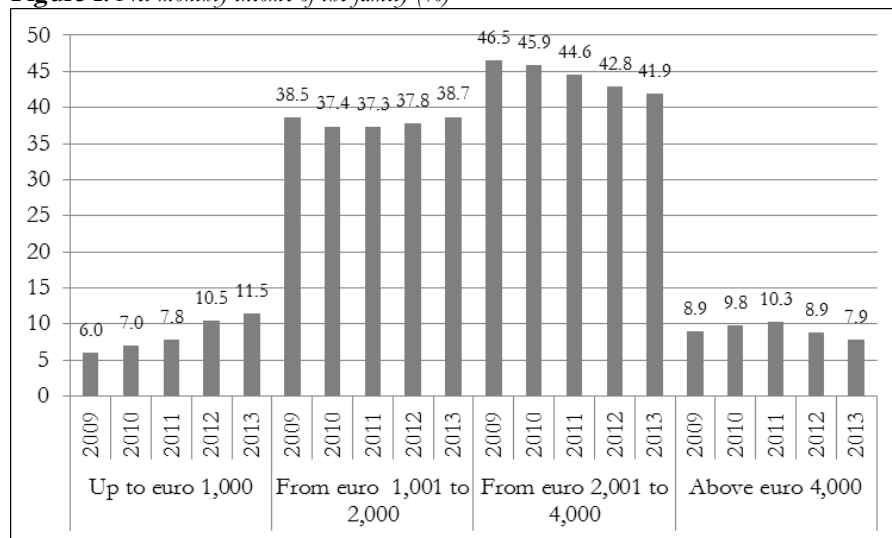
the survey was held. If needed, ex post weighting of the sample was carried out by the research company. The surveys allowed collecting data from the same questions in each of the five years, in this way making up a wealth of information that can be extremely useful for making temporal comparisons.

2. The scenario emerging from the surveys carried out by the Observatory on the consumption of families

2.1. The impact of the crisis

Let us now try and highlight some aspects of the crisis and its impact, over time, from the data relative to the level of income of the interviewees, followed by their perception of their families' economic situation. In figure 1², we present the data relative to the levels of net family monthly income.

Figure 1. Net monthly income of the family (%)



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 1,680; 2010 = 1,673; 2011 = 1,703; 2012 = 1,782; 2013 = 1,717.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

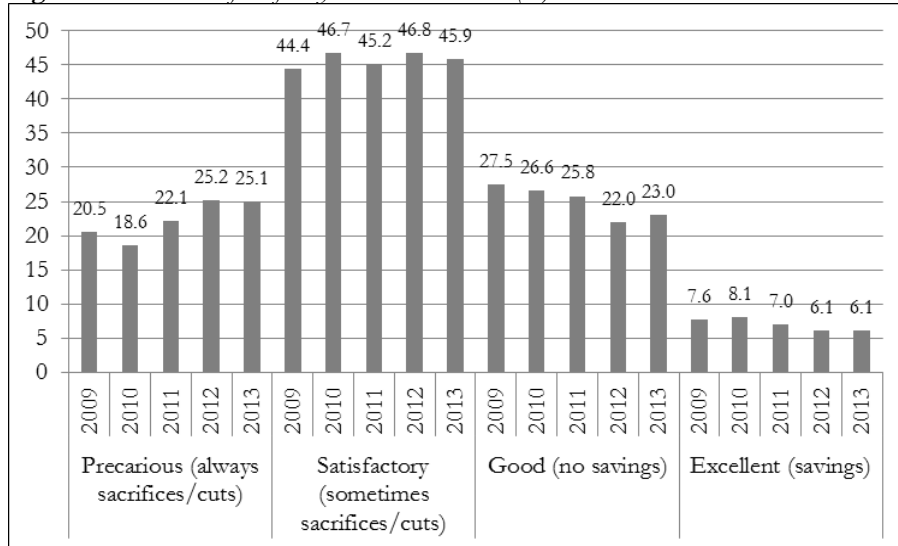
² Due to rounding offs, the sum of any complementary percentage values shown in the following figures may be slightly different from 100.0.

In particular, the data we are observing concern the impact of some ranges of revenue with respect to the samples of the subjects interviewed in the five years covered by the research.

As can be seen, the interviewees show a fairly clear phenomenon of impoverishment and this state of affairs is shown in particular by the growing incidence of the share of respondents who live in families where the net monthly income reaches at the most euro 1,000 and, to some extent, also by the reduced incidence of subjects who live in families with a medium-high income (from euro 2,001 to 4,000 per month). It should also be noted how the share of those who place their family in the highest range of income (more than euro 4,000) does not undergo any substantial decrease. In all probability, we are in the face of empirical evidence that shows a phenomenon of impoverishment of the middle class. If we go – see figure 2 – from the evaluation of the economic impact that we can attribute to the crisis to that of the more psychological matrix, we can show how from 2009 to 2013 the incidence of those who consider the economic situation of their family precarious has grown. Precarious meant, through the collection of data, i.e. providing a precise stimulus with the interviewees' answers, that the family resources are not sufficient and always require sacrifices to be made or costs to be cut. The incidence of those who consider that the economic condition of their family is satisfactory has remained similar and the most important, but the incidence of those who consider that the economic condition of their family is good – i.e. of those who live in families whose resources can meet all their needs and they complain only of being unable to save money – has decreased. Over the years, the incidence of those who consider the economic condition of their families as excellent – i.e. of those who live in family contexts where it is possible to put aside savings – has remained essentially the same.

Semantically close to the indicator presented above is that, again the object of recording data over the five years of surveys, on the perception of the monthly family income as sufficient or insufficient to cover the monthly expenses.

Figure 2. Evaluation of the family's economic situation (%)



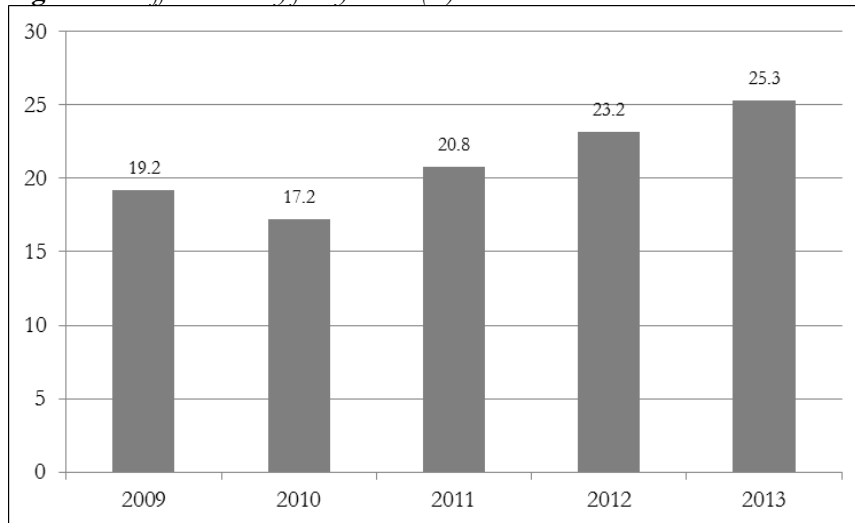
Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who consider their monthly income insufficient, in the five years in which the survey took place. The passage from 19.2% in 2009 to 25.3% in 2013 is rather important and shows, as far as it can be observed through data, that the conditions of malaise with respect to the perception of the standard of living is becoming progressively deep rooted.

Figure 4 shows the data relative to the incidence of those who have asked for economic aid in the past year. As can be seen, this value has not fundamentally changed over the years and still stands at around one-fifth of the respondents. What appears to have changed, on the other hand, is the incidence of the different addressees of the requests for aid. The interviewees who asked for economic aid in the past year were then asked who they turned to, offering the following alternatives and allowing them to make up to five choices: banks; financial companies; relatives or friends; private individuals at usury rates; other.

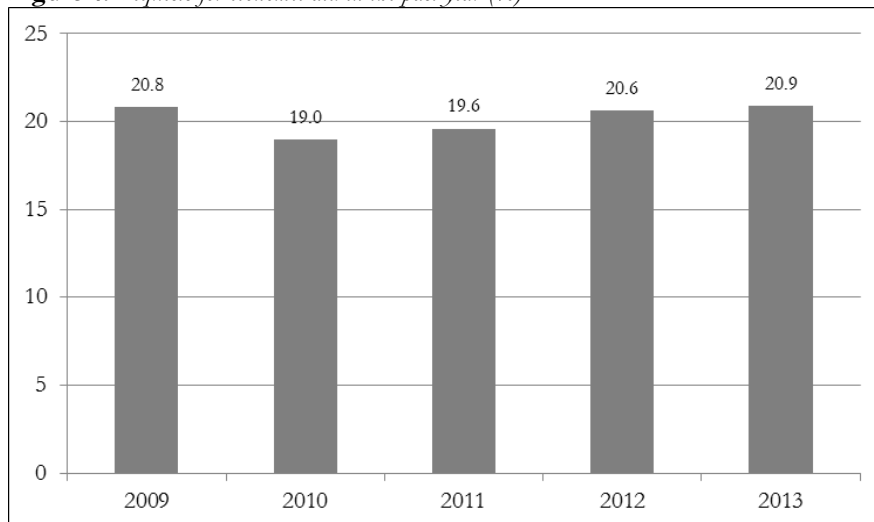
Figure 3. *Insufficient monthly family income (%)*



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

Figure 4. *Requests for economic aid in the past year (%)*

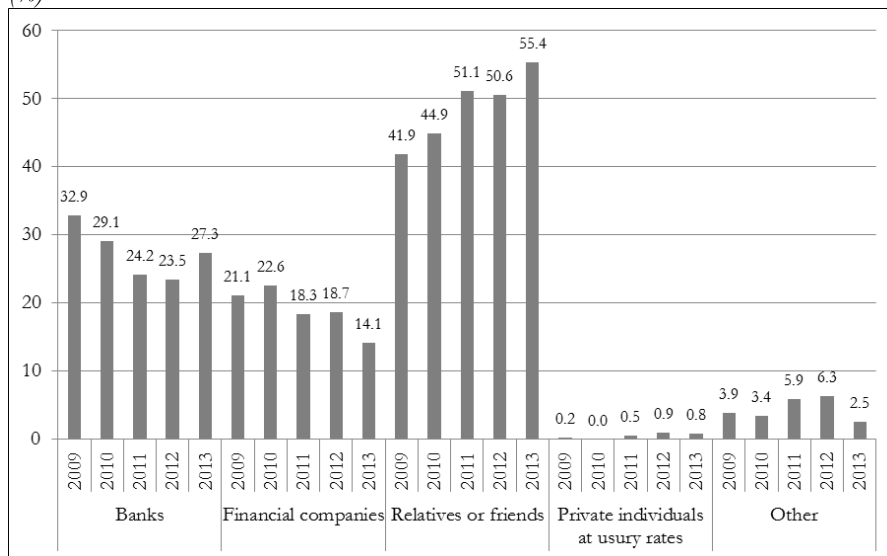


Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the cases, in percentage, in relation to the answers relative to the first choice, which appears particularly important with respect to the following four, both, as is natural, from the semantic point of view and from that relative to the amount of cases with valid values, which decreases remarkably from the second choice.

Figure 5. *Who did you ask for economic aid in the past year? (first choice) (%)*



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 421; 2010 = 381; 2011 = 393; 2012 = 434; 2013 = 420.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

By observing the data in the figure, it can be seen how, in the five-year period, the percentage of those who turned, as their first choice, to banks decreased (although there is a rise during 2013: -5.6% if we compare with 2009 and 2013) and, to an even greater extent, to financial companies (from 2009 to 2013: -7.0%, i.e. a reduction of about one-third of the incidence), whilst the percentage of those who had recourse to networks of family or friends, i.e. to their community relations, grows very consistently (from 2009 to 2013: +13.5%). On the one hand, therefore, we see, with respect to the overall data, a process of impoverishment of families and, on the other, although confronted with an overall stability regarding the number of those who had recourse to economic aid, a greater pressure of the networks of family and friends. We are probably in the presence of a circularity which

certainly cannot, in the perspective, guarantee a generalized improvement in living conditions with respect to meeting needs. We will now turn our attention to the subject of meeting needs, as far as can be identified through the analysis of consumption behaviour, understood as orientation to expenditure.

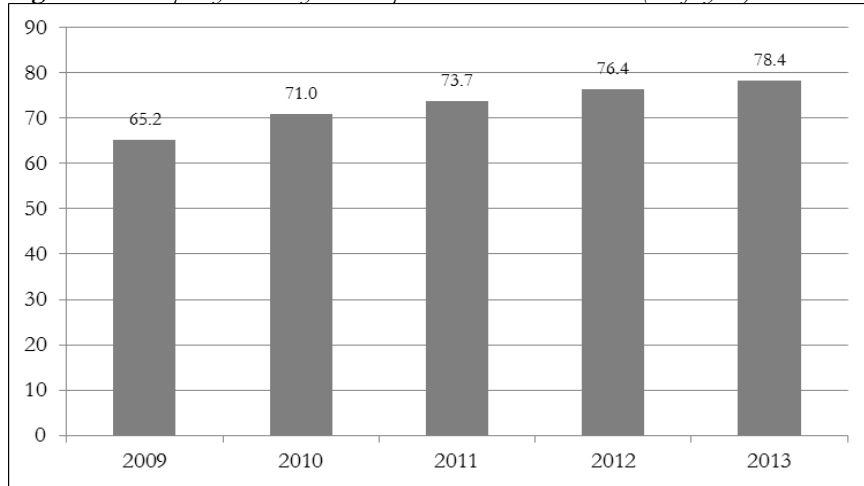
2.2. The crisis and spending

With the aim of outlining some of the connections that can be identified through the surveys of the OSCF between the crisis and orientation of spending, we will deal in particular with the relationship that they have with goods. The first rather important piece of information that we intend to give concerns the subject of online shopping. In view of the essential stability, in the five years considered, of the importance recognized for the characteristics of stores for daily purchases: a good quality/price ratio, quality of products etc., we have to put the very important growth by OSCF interviewees in the use of the Internet for shopping. Figure 6 shows the data on this specific aspect of the relationship between consumers and goods. As shown fairly clearly, in times of economic crisis, the appeal of the Internet does not decrease, but increases each year, with the difference between the value recorded in 2013 and that recorded in 2009 equal to +13.2%. The specificity of these surveys, carried out online, may have generated a figure that is slightly overestimated, even though the difference between the two values is not influenced by this particularity of our data collection system.

Figure 7 shows some data on the reduction of expenditure for a number of categories of commodities. In particular, the interviewees were asked if in the past year their family had had to reduce expenditure for: food; clothing and footwear; home furnishing (furniture, objects, etc.); medicines and products for personal care and toiletries; technological products (household electric appliances, mobile phones, etc.).

As can be observed, a growth in the incidence of the families who have reduced expenditure in the past year in relation to the five years period can be registered with regard to each of the categories of commodities taken into consideration. The lowest values are recorded in correspondence to expenditure on medicines and products for personal care and toiletries and food, whilst the highest are recorded on expenditure for home furnishing, followed immediately by that of the two remaining categories, i.e. clothing and footwear and technological products.

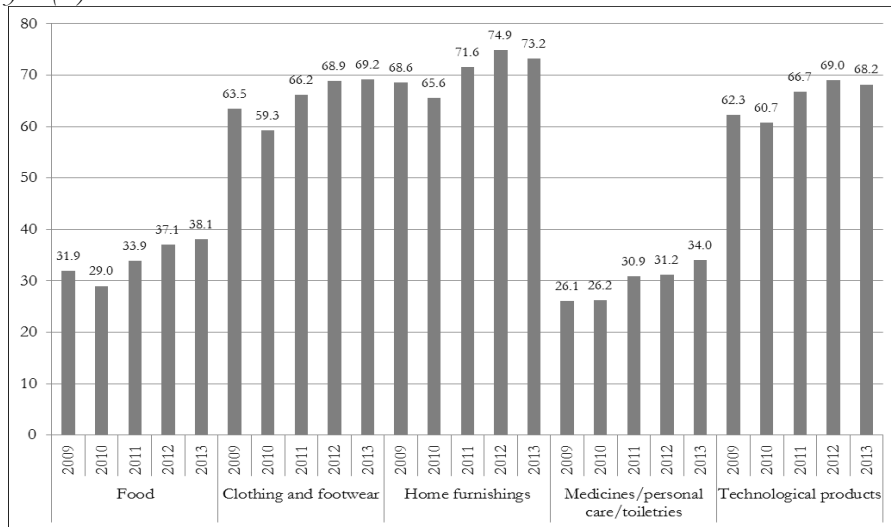
Figure 6. *In the past year have you made purchases over the Internet? (% of “yes”)*



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

Figure 7. *Families who have reduced expenditure, for different sectors of commodities, in the past year (%)*



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

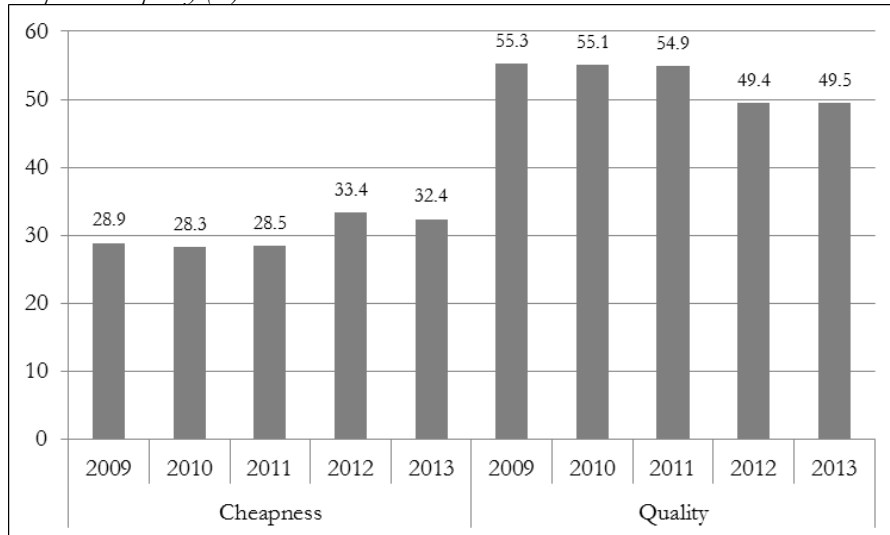
However, it has to be emphasized that the most consistent growth in the incidence of families who have reduced expenditure is recorded with respect to medicines and products for personal care and toiletries (+7.9%) and food (+6.2%), showing the capacity of the economic crisis to impact styles of consumption for those staple goods that show higher levels of resistance and impermeability to phenomena of the erosion of spending.

At this stage, we also have to question which characteristics of the products individuals give the greatest attention to and the relationship they establish with brands, in an attempt to understand which level of the structure of individual purchasing preferences has been reached by the erosive phenomenon, of which we have just shown some empirical evidence. With the data shown in figure 8, we can try, in the first place, to understand the situation recorded from 2009 to 2013 in relation to the product characteristics to which greatest attention is generally given, when deciding to make a purchase. The interviewees were asked to choose between: the cheapness; the brand; the quality; the origin; practical, easy to consume/use; the ethical aspect (the producing company respects the environment and workers' rights); other. For convenience, in consideration of the very high number of indications received, we can isolate from the other answers those of cheapness and quality and concentrate our analysis on them. There is a slight growth – over the five-year period – in attention to cheapness (+3.5%) and a more consistent decrease in the attention to the quality of the product (-5.8%)

The data collected through the indicator commented on above, which do not appear to testify in favour of a really consistent restructuring of the priorities identified by consumers, do not in essence indicate any shift with respect to the percentage of those who mention the brand as the characteristic of priority attention in the choice of a product: 3.3% indicate the brand in 2009, 4.8% in 2010 and in 2011, 4.0% in 2012 and 5.0 in 2013³.

³ Here are the percentage frequencies relative to the other ways, which we have considered quantitatively residual and excluded, for practical reasons in representation, from figure 8: - origin: 2009 = 4.8%, 2010 = 3.7%, 2011 = 4.6%, 2012 = 5.1%, 2013 = 4.7%; - practical, easy to consume/use: 2009 = 4.3%, 2010 = 5.4%, 2011 = 5.2%, 2012 = 5.5%, 2013 = 5.6%; - ethical aspect (the producing company respects the environment and workers' rights): 2009 = 2.5%, 2010 = 2.5%, 2011 = 1.8%, 2012 = 2.1%, 2013 = 2.1%; - other: 2009 = 0.8%, 2010 = 0.3%, 2011 = 0.1%, 2012 = 0.6%, 2013 = 0.6%.

Figure 8. *What are you attentive to, above all, in choosing a product: data relative only to cheapness and quality (%)*

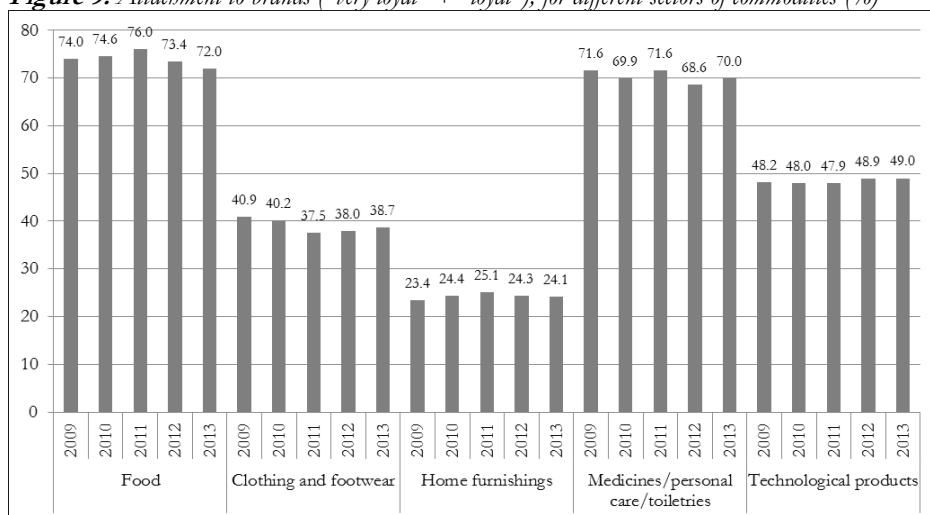


Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

The solidity emerging from these data for attachment to a brand is also confirmed by the specific data on brand loyalty. The interviewees were asked, for each of the five sectors of commodities taken into consideration earlier, if, with respect to the brands of the products they personally purchase, they consider themselves to be: very loyal, loyal, not very loyal, not loyal at all, not interested in the brands/not purchasers of branded products. If the percentages of those who feel very loyal and loyal are summed, the percentage frequencies presented in figure 9 and relative to the period 2009-2013 are obtained. Ultimately, as the analysis of the data shows fairly clearly, the brands in each sector have maintained consumer loyalty in the five-year period considered, although with fairly different levels of success. It is also worthwhile observing that the sectors of food and medicines and products for personal care and toiletries, which recorded, for each year, the lowest impact of families who have reduced their spending and, at the same time, a more important level of growth of the same impact from 2009 to 2013, are also the sectors in which the brands have been, at a constant rate, the object of substantial loyalty by consumers.

Figure 9. Attachment to brands (“very loyal” + “loyal”), for different sectors of commodities (%)



Note: number of cases with valid values: 2009 = 2,022; 2010 = 2,007; 2011 = 2,008; 2012 = 2,109; 2013 = 2,010.

Source: OSCF data 2009-2013.

Although in the face of evident signs left on consumption by the continuing economic crisis, the brands maintain a high symbolic impact and, however, their strength as indicators of status tends to appear as more rooted in the fundamental aspects, the essential contents, of consumption strategies. Affluence emerges – and is shown through the brands – mainly through its more material and primary dimension.

3. The changes in the purchasing strategies and consumption profiles of Italian families

From the point of view of the various sectors of commodities, the cuts made by Italian families, for those families that have had to make them, have naturally been distributed differently between the various commodities present on the market. As we have seen earlier some areas of spending have been considerably reduced, such as that of durable goods such as furniture or, although to a lesser extent, clothing and footwear, whilst in other cases reduction was not as strong, and except for a share that is about 30% of Italian families, who have had to firmly reduce both the quality and the quantity of their purchases (data from surveys of the Observatory on the

consumption of families in Verona), it is perhaps more correct to speak of a rationalization of the criteria of choice, in the attempt, as we said at the beginning, to protect their previous lifestyle as far as possible, even only symbolically.

Therefore, beyond the reduction in the volume of purchases of Italian families, and beyond its different incidence in the various sectors of commodities, our Observatory decided to concentrate also, or even above all, on the purchasing strategies followed by our families and how these have gradually changed in time. In doing so, we have chosen the strategy of constructing aggregates of behaviours of choice and characteristics of slowing down the choices that could represent behaviour profiles capable of significantly characterizing groups of families according to their “consumption behaviour”. This choice is in line with the tradition of studying consumption through the concept of lifestyle, following the idea that consumption behaviour tends to merge with the overall orientation and with a sort of overall life project, giving rise to different lifestyles not necessarily hinged into the system of class or merely economic differences (Crompton 1995; Featherstone 1990; Ragone 1985; Shields 1994; Shulman and Mosak 1988; Secondulfo 1995).

The types of behaviour that have converged in these profiles, which we could call buying styles in tribute to the theory of lifestyles, are essentially of two types: on the one hand the strategies of choosing the goods, for example comparing prices, or looking for the lowest price of all; on the other the important characteristics of the points of sale, such as the breadth of choice between various products, the politeness of the sales personnel, nearness to home. As will be seen, in the profiles extracted through the multivariate data analysis, elements of choice and orientation have been included which go from the supremacy of the lower price end to the evaluation of the environment and atmosphere where the purchase is made. We have been able to see that the different characteristics to which families give importance in their purchasing strategies are in line with the social stratification of the families, according to a continuum which goes from the need to reduce expenditure even to the detriment of the quality and quantity of goods purchases, to the attention to the “intangible” characteristics of the point of sale, such as politeness and trust, which come from a pre-massification model of purchase. We have summarized under three labels the characteristics that have been aggregated, giving rise to three profiles of consumption behaviour: the clients, the wise and the ants, according to the tradition of psychographic surveys (Calvi 1977; 1980; Fabris and Mortara 1986; Meroni and Veccia 1982).

We have called “clients” those families who have an income that allows them to still pay attention to those characteristics of trust, service and

politeness which represented what every shop that wanted loyal and affluent clients had to have. Attention to the relationship of trust with the shopkeeper, but also politeness, identify those families as the current nucleus of that bourgeois and affluent middle-class that has driven the development of consumption in past years.

Attention to the quality of the goods, in this consumption style, is almost completely absorbed in the idea of trust of the shopkeeper, with this trust naturally based on the need, for the shopkeeper to be a guarantee for a demanding but wealthy clientele in the attempt to attract their loyalty. Decisive, from our point of view, is the fact that in this group there remain criteria of choice that are not solely linked to the goods sold but to a broader, we could say “intangible”, relationship with the point of sale as a whole. It is something that brings this orientation close to the one that had the shop as a point of arrival, more than the supermarket or shopping centre, hence the idea of calling them clients.

The vast majority of consumers, who do not fall into this first group, is divided essentially into two sub-groups: those families who have had to concentrate above all on reducing expenditure and those who, on the other hand, have been able to invest in the rationalization of their expenditure, succeeding in maintaining a certain level of consumption.

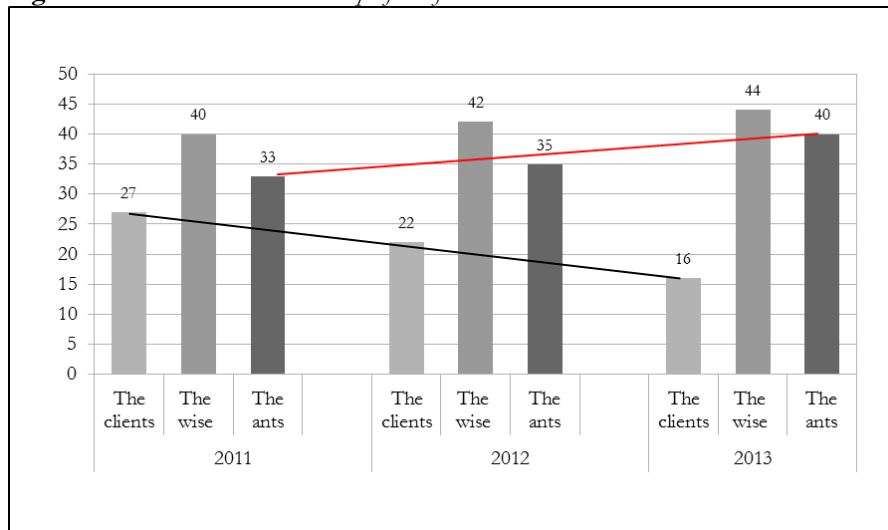
We have called the latter “the wise”, represented by those families who can nevertheless still count on a certain income to orient towards consumption and therefore have invested more on rationalizing their expenditure. This purchasing style is strongly oriented towards a competent choice and better quality within a certain price which, with respect to the point of sale, obviously appreciates the variety of choice offered. This consumer is attentive and informed and it is difficult to gain their loyalty as they do not hesitate changing point of sale if deemed useful. This is a purchasing style which puts the accent on the transformation of consumers, from a passive role, based above all on the competence acquired both by comparing the goods, their quality, their performance and their price, and by drawing on the increasingly numerous sources of comparative tests, offered no longer only by consumer associations but also by the press and television or the Internet.

These consumers are awkward: they have not yet been completely digested by the mass distribution system, but they are also consumers who have been forced to spend an increasingly large share of their time and attention to find their way around the jungle of information, goods and services, in the attempt to optimize their income and needs.

We have called the former “the ants”, precisely to place the accent on the primary need of these families to reduce consumption. These are families who have given up brands and the most expensive goods, they have had to give up

quality and also reduce the quantity of goods purchased, who defend themselves by comparing prices but also hunting down special offers and promotions, they are the families who have been put in the most difficult situation by the economic crisis.

Figure 10. *Trend relative to the three profiles of consumers*



Source: OSCF data 2011-2013.

The progressive erosion of the group of “the clients” immediately leaps into view; there are increasingly more families who gradually have to abandon habits linked to the trust and services of social recognition of the traditional point of sale to take action in the first person in seeking optimization of a reduced income to defend their usual lifestyle. From trust to the relationship with the shopkeeper and with points of sale which, inter alia, continue to offer the client that social recognition typical of bourgeois shops and which has disappeared with the advent of mass retail, we have to move towards the latter, exchanging greater social anonymity for a greater variety of choice and with greater possibilities of saving on the price. This change obviously takes place by degrees and by different sectors of commodities, in the first place, in various aspects related to food, and made up for by the continuation of purchases linked to the “client” model, keeping the purchase of some goods for the stores of class and keeping a certain loyalty to the brand, which are behaviours common, although obviously in a different way depending on income, also with the “wise” in general. In time, the number of the “wise”

increases, although not very much; we could also easily indicate this behavioural profile as the dominant purchasing behaviour at this time. It is a very large group in which certainly very different mixes of behaviour of social recognition and rationalization for saving coexist, from the families for whom a small rationalization of purchases is required to be able to essentially maintain their lifestyle, to the families who are on the verge of a necessary and great reduction not only of the quality but also of the quantity of goods purchased. But also, the group of families most in difficulty due to the economic crisis, the “ants”, is enlarging in a worrying way, going in three years from about 30% to 40% of Italian families. This is a huge slice which puts aside once and for all the consumption model of the past, and also that consumer society which has been tried to be kept alive up until now. When 40% of families have as the sole criterion the price and have to reduce the quantity and quality of purchases, we can no longer speak of a consumer society with the meaning that this term had in the past, but of a stratified society, which once would have been called “of classes” where the social pyramid, after the levelling off which since the sixties had accompanied the expansion of the middle class and with it consumer society, rises once again and is segmented and where the terms “rich” and “poor” once again have not only a relative meaning but also an absolute one.

With the increase in the gap in terms of wealth and lifestyle, for example, the reciprocal isolation of the different social classes could increase and be consolidated, becoming separate spheres of society, with little communication between them. This is a process which could also have a negative reflection on the value, for example of the social capital and on trust in society or on political participation and commitment, which could lose meaning, especially for the classes with more difficult living conditions. The increase in recourse to lotteries, of which we have often spoken in the Observatory reports, (available at the site www.consumi-osservatorio.it), is a precise reflection of this lack of confidence in the future and in social, political and professional commitment. The negative context, of loss, in which all this takes place, will probably make the consequences of the change more acute, which, very probably will not only be economic but also cultural and political. From this point of view, a slowdown of the economic crisis and a recovery of growth will also only produce results in the long term and, in any case, the effervescence of consumption and the egalitarianism of the past will take a long time to return, if they ever do. The economic crisis gives us a society that is now different, with values and habits of consumption that are not consolidated, and any recovery of consumption can only take place according to models and on goods that are very different from those of the past.

This is also shown for example by the strong growth shown by the “sharing economy”, the result of a radical change in the style of consumption, from possession to access and sharing, which began perhaps out of need and has gradually become a habit of rationalizing spending, all thanks to the increasing familiarity of consumers with the Internet, which is the support and tool of much of this new logic of consumption and relationship with goods (Pickett and Wilkinson 2009).

4. Conclusions

Concluding this brief analysis of the reaction of Italian families to the economic crisis, we can ask ourselves, in synthesis, about the society and consumers the crisis is bequeathing to us, and the significant characteristics through which the economic crisis has affected the behaviour and perceptions of consumers and the “new” consumer that any economic recovery will have to confront.

In the first place there will be a poorer consumer and poorer in that range of society, the middle-class, which until now had been the motor of the expansion of the consumer society behind us. It will be a society where differences have been widened and consolidated, in which social stratification and the system of social differences has broadened its range, marking out borders which are increasingly impermeable to social mobility and where a significant part of the population is in a state of substantial and stable impoverishment.

Individuals react to this state of affairs by over-soliciting, with respect to the past, the primary networks, which appear to be the last buffers of protection. In actual fact, the situation currently recorded for purchases cannot, at a more general level of analysis, be disconnected from the presence of relations of support and the characteristics that qualify them⁴. Lastly: “using” networks – or, better, the support of networks – to consume does not only mean probably consuming less, but it can mean consuming differently, changing, for example, the concept of “useful”, attributing a different symbolic meaning to goods, which necessarily are included in the fabric of rules, meanings and dependences of the network. If it is true that, in times of crisis, it is necessary to study in even greater depth the transformations emerging in the behaviour and choices of consumption of individuals (Touraine 2010; Secondulfo 2012; 2013), it is also necessary to understand to what extent the modification of the quality – in terms of content and

⁴ On this subject, see Warde and Tamboulon (2002).

morphology – of the relations of support activated in response to the crisis, are capable of influences, meanings and results, on the practices of consumption, which go beyond the simple response to the reduction of resources available. By activating the networks in support of economic difficulties, social, symbolic and behavioural consequences are activated in reality which go beyond simple economic integration. It is therefore necessary to transit from a purely theoretical level of study to a methodological one – and this is one of our future projects of research – for the in-depth study of the connections between networks and consumption.

The data we have analysed show a fundamental inertia in consumer behaviour with respect to consumption practices for which a high value of identity can be recognized and this phenomenon makes it even more urgent, to our way of seeing, to have recourse to a “network analysis” of consumption, which can no longer be considered as a mere and only individual act, more or less rational.

From the individual point of view, new consumers are attentive to prices, compares quality and the points of sale, uses the Internet more and more to optimize their choices and income, try to defend their past lifestyle especially saving the idea of “quality” both in their search and in remaining loyal to some brands which, in their perception, guarantee this characteristic and allow them to keep a symbolic link with their previous lifestyle. He is a cautious and pessimistic consumer, who hoards the income he can save thanks to the reorganization of their consumer behaviour in view of times which they hope will be better but which they imagine will be worse.

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