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The influence of family socialization on consumer choices of young people. A case study of female university students

*Geraldina Roberti**

Abstract: Various studies have highlighted the influence of family models on the consumer behaviour of young people, identifying their consumption choices as reflecting the values and symbolic systems transmitted to them by their parents. Departing from this premise, a research project was undertaken on a specific target group, that of female University of L'Aquila students living away from home. The aim of the project was to assess the influence of family consumption patterns on the consumer behaviour of these young people once they had left their parents' home. To this end, a qualitative research methodology was adopted: 5 focus groups comprising University of L'Aquila students living away from home were set up, with a total of 46 students participating overall. Subsequently, the more significant issues emerged were examined in greater depth through 15 semi-structured interviews of selected focus group participants. Regarding in particular convenience goods (food/household items), main findings highlight the rise of consumption patterns that *consolidate* those that students learned in their families and, in a specific way, the patterns transmitted by their mothers. Student interviewees reported exercising great care – as is done by their mothers – to select the type of sales outlet (shop, supermarket or discount store) strictly according to the specific type of product/brand they need to buy. Their aim is to optimise the price/quality trade-off in accordance with their family values and lifestyle.

Keywords: consumption, young people, socialization, maternal model

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Introduction

The importance of the realm of consumption for the identity and socializing dynamics of young people has grown progressively over recent years. Increasingly, it appears that consumer practices are mediating the personal expression of individuals, enabling them to communicate to the outside world the subcultures they belong to and their personal value system. Because individuals, in making their selections of products and brands, use a variety of criteria that take account not only of the characteristics of a product/service and its price/quality tradeoff, but also of its symbolic and/or social significance, it is becoming ever more important for researchers to understand the mechanisms underlying consumption patterns, as well as the influence of these patterns on society in general.

In common with other arenas of socialization, in the processes of learning the significance of a product, too, multiple agents can play a determining role. Foremost among these agents are family, school and peer group – each of which is capable of fostering a specific form of consumer behaviour. Consumer socialization is a *cultural process* which – as Ward argued in one of the most thorough studies on the topic – allows the young to “[...] acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2). In this way, young people learn attitudes toward prices, knowledge about product features, social and economic motivations for consumption, consumer roles and preferences among alternative brands and goods.

The research reported in the following pages was conceptualized and undertaken within a framework inspired to this approach. In addition, our interest was further stimulated by the consideration that, among multiple changes brought about by the worsening of the Italian economic crisis, there have also been shifts in consumption patterns, with social actors compelled to modify their consumption behavior by reducing quantities consumed and *re-structuring* their consumption in unprecedented ways. Ultimately, our main objective was to explore in greater depth the mechanisms governing the consumer practices of university students, with particular reference to strategies of choice/purchase of convenience goods (food/household items)¹.

¹According to Kotler & Keller’s definition (2012), convenience goods are “consumer goods that are purchased frequently, immediately, and with minimal effort” (p. 325). Shopping

We considered the present study as exploratory only, due to the small size of the sample used. Nevertheless, our objective was to assess the influence of family consumption style – with specific focus on that of the mother – on the consumer behaviour of a sample group of female university students *once they had left their parents' home*², investigating the influence on such behaviour of the consumer socialization processes experienced in their homes.

The decision to focus on convenience goods resulted from a series of considerations: first, previous research had observed intergenerational influence's impact for convenience goods stronger than for shopping goods (see, e. g., Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002; Mittal & Royne, 2010); the researchers conjectured this may be due to the fact that knowledge of parental choices can be used as a *time-saving heuristic* in decision making processes, especially when the products are not complex or involving (Heckler, Childers, & Arunachalam, 1989). As we know, convenience goods “are less socially visible [...] whereas shopping good choices are seen as more reflective of the shopper” (Heckler et al., 1989, p. 282). To all intents, shopping goods seem more capable of expressing a person's individual style or identity (whereas food and cleaning products are almost totally impersonal and utilitarian). Secondly, maternal influence seems to be particularly strong for household products, a highly competitive setting in which goods are frequently purchased and have a relatively long life cycle. Therefore, by analyzing the consumer choices of the students in the sample our aim was to assess the degree of *permanence* of their parental consumption patterns, as well as whether or not they were applying purchase strategies adopted in the family and linked to the worsening of the global economic crisis.

goods, instead, “are goods that consumer compare on the basis of suitability, quality, price, and style” (Kotler & Keller, 2012, p. 333).

² As will be described in detail shortly, our study focused on a sample of female undergraduate students enrolled at University of L'Aquila who had decided to live *off campus*, alone or with friends.

Theoretical background

As already emphasized, family plays a major role in the consumer socialization processes, emerging as the primary agency capable of transmitting values and consumption models to young people. The parents, especially during childhood years, represent the main consumer skills teachers for their offspring (Keller & Ruus, 2014), transmitting consumption habits and lifestyles to them in ways that are both intentional and unintentional.

Indeed, as numerous studies have demonstrated (among others, Grossbart, Carlson, & Walsh, 1991; Schoenbachler, Ayers, & Gordon, 1995), consumer socialization by the family can occur through a variety of mechanisms: on one hand, parents represent an *implicit* role model that children can refer to, thereby learning to evaluate different consumption choices; on the other hand, parents have the possibility of expressing *direct and conscious* indications, in order to explicitly share their values and consumption practices with their children³. As Carruth & Skinner (2001) have also shown, role-modeling is an important factor in teaching consumer behaviour, as it allows children to learn from their parents' buying experiences. Moreover, adults may consciously guide their children's choice of products and brands, seeking thereby to influence their concrete preferences and purchasing habits.

Actually, the available data indicate that consumer socialization may ground on even more subtle social learning processes (see Bandura, 1977), rather than on purposive and systematic parental training⁴: this would imply that, in effect, young consumers learn skills through a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental factors⁵, converting their consumption practices' into a complex social activity through which a

³ On this topic, as Ward, Wackman, & Wartella (1977) point out, parents may: (1) act as models, (2) directly interact with their children in a variety of consumption related contexts, or (3) provide children with independent opportunities for purchasing. Learning thus occurs through modeling (observation), direct communication and experience, respectively.

⁴ For a reconstruction of the different analytical approaches to consumer socialization see Roedder, Didow, & Calder (1978). As Hayta (2008) commented, it is interesting to note that the majority of academic studies that have focused on a broader spectrum of determinants of children's consumer behavior were conducted in the 1970s.

⁵ For a comprehensive perspective on the consumer development process, see McNeal (2007).

boy/girl learns many things far beyond consumption itself (Marshall, 2010).

Such considerations done, the practice of *co-shopping* with parents takes on deeper significance, as an experience through which children can acquire consumer knowledge and skills, observing and then imitating the behaviour of the adults (who thus function as role models). For their part, parents may conceive *co-shopping* as an informal educational opportunity or as an occasion to teach specific consumer skills about brands or products.

As we shall see below, the research reported in this paper provides a further deepening of this aspect, with *co-shopping* (in particular with the mother) emerging as an important opportunity for social learning. At the same time, such activities also have the effect of reinforcing family ties, especially between mothers and daughters, who often experience moments spent shopping as a *bonding time*. In this sense, shopping rituals give the opportunity to prolong shared experiences and spend time together (Minahan & Huddleston, 2013).

As mentioned above, alongside the family other educational agencies, too, play an essential role in the process of consumer socialization. These include school, peer group and, of course, mass media. While parents prove fundamental in the initial stages of socialization of their children, subsequently peer group and media assume greater importance. Peer group, in particular, appears to be the dominant agent in the adolescent's consumer socialization, having stronger influence than family on teenagers' consumption behaviour involving socially relevant products (see Schoenbachler et al., 1995; Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003). In fact, as observed by numerous researchers, not all the processes of consumer socialization take place during childhood; rather, it continues to develop throughout adolescence, modifying, at times drastically, those consumption patterns acquired during childhood. As Ironico (2010) points out, it is precisely during adolescence that young people become fully aware of the symbolic and social significance of consumption,⁶ adopting

⁶ As Moschis, Moore, & Stanley (1984) had already noted, pre-adults' "[...] preferences and loyalties for brands [...] are likely to be maintained and translated into purchases later in life. This observation appears to be consistent with the more general belief that the attitudes and behavior patterns established during late adolescence can be carried over into adulthood and become a way of life" (p. 412).

consumer practices that oscillate between the pole of independence from their parents and the pole of ties with the various traditional agencies.

As for the role of the media, instead, many studies (see, for example, Lachance et al., 2003; Jin & Lutz, 2013; Ewing, 2013) attest to the ability of mass media, and especially television, to affect expressive aspects, such as developing social and materialistic motivations to consume or desire for products and preferences for brands. Mass media can also offer to young people consumer models and life styles, although in a subtle and non-purposive way. At the same time, new media, too, are becoming increasingly important for consumer decisions, to such an extent that the development of online communities has reshaped consumers' information-seeking and sharing behavior (Yang, Mai, & Ben-Ur, 2012).

In any case, it appears clear that consumer choices of sons/daughters, once they have become adults, continue to be influenced by the consumer socialization initiated during childhood and, therefore, by the decisive role played by the parents in such processes. This is the reason why much consumer research has been focused upon those transmission mechanisms that can be subsumed within the rubric of Intergenerational Influence (IGI) and that play a fundamental role in the processes of learning of consumer skills by young people (see, among others, Moschis, 1987; Moore et al., 2002; Mittal & Royne, 2010). IGI can take a wide variety of forms, from the sharing of a specific brand to much broader systems of belief about the functioning of the marketplace. Actually, we can define IGI as the influence of one family generation on another, in terms of learning attitudes, brand loyalty, values, and behaviors relevant to one's functioning as consumer⁷. In contrast to the mechanisms of consumer socialization, which involve multiple social actors from outside the family (e.g. media and peer group), Intergenerational Influence takes place solely among members of the same family; moreover, whereas IGI begins to operate right from early childhood, consumer socialization can only develop in later years, once an offspring has acquired the resources for independent decision making (Shah & Mittal, 1997).

Nevertheless, numerous studies have demonstrated that preferences for specific brands acquired during childhood exert a significant influence on

⁷ According to Mittal & Royne (2010), IGI can involve “[...] (1) consumption preferences of products, brands, and stores; (2) consumer skills (how to choose, compare, evaluate, etc.); (3) marketplace attitudes (views on prices, advertisements, salespersons, etc.)” (p. 240).

subsequent consumer choices (see e.g., Guest, 1964; Olsen, 1993) and that more than half of the brands used in childhood and adolescence continue to be used by adult consumers (Hsieh, Chiu, & Lin, 2006), confirming the lifetime dimension of brand loyalty and the durability of brand bonds over time⁸.

Research methods

Our study drew on qualitative empirical evidence and research methods designed to gain insights into the specific factors influencing our sample group students' shopping experiences, and to assess the influence of family consumption patterns on the consumer behaviour of these young people living *off-campus*.

In the first stage of our study, we chose to use the technique of the focus group⁹; then subsequently the more significant issues that emerged were examined in greater depth through semi-structured interviews of selected focus group participants¹⁰. Focus groups allowed us to explore, through moderated discussions, how our sample of students conceived of and experienced consumption practices. We also considered they would enable us to gain a better understanding of social and economic factors driving consumption, as well as the role of specific consumer socialization agents. Interview questions were concentrated on themes that emerged during the focus group stage, and were aimed at examining in greater depth the role of mothers in respect of consumer training and the strategies adopted by the young people in the sample to choose among different products and brands. Regarding selection of subjects for the study, as was also done in previous research (see Moore et al., 2002; Haytko & Baker, 2004; Minahan & Huddleston, 2008), we focused solely on females, and selected a sample of female university students living away from their parents' home. It is well documented in the consumer research field that young adult females have a more significant impact on markets than young adult males do, especially

⁸ On these issues, see also, for example, the interesting considerations made by Fournier & Yao (1997).

⁹ On the use of focus groups in the social sciences see, among others, Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson (2001); Cardano (2011).

¹⁰ For a comparison of various research methods see Cairns, Johnston, & MacKendrick (2013).

in respect of convenience goods. Furthermore, these young adults are a particularly interesting population in the study of consumption practices because of their forthcoming/recent transition from dependent to independent financial status (Moore-Shay & Berchmans, 1996). Because today it is still mothers who tend overwhelmingly to assume the role of shopping agent or gatekeeper for the whole family – conceiving good practice in doing the shopping as part of their duties as mothers in the nurturing of the family (Minahan & Huddleston, 2008) – we thought it useful to focus, as an integral part of the study, on the maternal influence on the consumer behaviour of the young women in the sample: in fact, many mothers and daughters go shopping together out of habit, as a household routine¹¹.

We recruited students from an introductory sociology course at the University of L'Aquila, with the proviso that they should be living on their own (or with friends) *off-campus* and shop for groceries on a regular basis; approximately 85% of the interviewees were aged between 20 and 21 years.

We conducted 5 focus groups, made up of a total of 46 students. A discussion list containing relevant topics guided the focus, although, in line with North & Poggio (2001), the moderator was free to explore issues and comments raised by members of the group. This research method enabled us to gather information about shopping habits, consumption style and the role of consumer socialization agents¹². All focus group participants were asked to complete a short, anonymous, survey to record basic socio-demographic information (Cairns et al., 2013). Then, we analyzed the results in an aggregate way.

In the second stage of our research, we chose three participants from each focus, obtaining 15 face-to-face interviews overall. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes. Interviewees were promised complete

¹¹ Following Moore et al. (2002), this choice was based on research “[...] indicating that adolescents and mothers influence one another’s purchases more than adolescents and fathers do, that maternal influence is particularly strong for household products, and that women tend to exhibit stronger brand involvements than men” (p. 19). On this topic see also Kameruddin & Mokhlis (2003).

¹² As Bryman (2001) observed, focus group allows the researcher to develop an understanding of why people feel the way they do, and offers the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and jointly construct meanings around it.

confidentiality, so that they felt able to express themselves freely. Life-history information, especially concerning mother-daughter relationships, brand preferences and specific consumption practices were gathered during this stage of our research.

The entire research – both focus groups and interviews – was conducted at the University of L’Aquila, partly because of its central location in the town, but also because it was considered that the familiar surroundings would help students feel at ease.

All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded digitally with informants’ permission and then transcribed. Subsequently researchers coded and classified the transcripts in order to identify the main themes characterizing the collected narratives. This procedure involved reiterative reading of the transcribed material in order to classify it systematically and then to analyze different conceptual categories (see de Lillo, 2010; Corbetta, 2003).

In the next section we will provide a broad overview of the issues emerging from the data, using illustrative quotations to highlight our findings.

Main Findings

Focus groups and interviews yielded a rich set of findings into the nature and characteristics of the consumer socialization of the students in the sample, enabling us to deepen the analysis of their more overarching beliefs about the marketplace and consequent shopping strategies.

The main findings to emerge concern firstly the students’ ability to devise precise strategies for differentiating among categories of products – clearly identifying the type of sales outlet (supermarket or discount store) from which to buy items for each product category; closely linked to this was the finding that students were adopting more sober and responsible consumption behavior; finally, the central role of students’ mothers in their daughters’ consumer socialization was confirmed.

In this section we isolate several distinct themes that characterize the collected narratives.

Consuming responsibly

The most immediately evident feature to emerge from the study was linked to the changed living conditions of the students; starting university had meant leaving their parents' home and, as a consequence, taking on social roles and responsibilities they had never previously experienced. This change had had a huge effect on their consumption practices, inasmuch as they had found themselves forced to rethink their own lifestyle, reducing purchases, or at least modifying some of previous purchase habits. These changes emerge clearly from the words of Barbara¹³, one of the focus participants:

I have noticed that living on my own I save much more. Before, when I was at home with my parents, I was always saying 'mum I need this, let's go and buy that ...' Now I try to buy everything [that I need] with the money they give me each week, and to save some, so that I can use it the next week. I'm more careful about saving now that I'm living on my own, compared to before, when I had mum who gave me money (Barbara, 20 years, F2)¹⁴.

In a similar vein, many participants describing their new lifestyle reported cutting back on their spending on outdoor activities, such as going out in the evening with friends; for example, two of the interviewees say:

Since I have been here [in L'Aquila], I have never once been out. It does not occur to me to go out and eat a pizza. At home, instead, I go out every Saturday, or every Friday: there is the pizza, the cinema, so I spend (Francesca, 21 years, F1).

When I'm here [in L'Aquila] I can't spend like I do when I'm down at my parents' place. Down there I do not mind if even 30 euros go in an evening, it does not bother me. When I'm here, instead, yes maybe I go out... but I don't spend anything (Carla, 21 years, F1).

As Moore et al. (2002) pointed out, the move away from home can bring about considerable changes in daily living: in fact, for many of the

¹³ The names of all students participating in the research have been changed, in order to respect their privacy.

¹⁴ F=Focus group; I=Interview.

young females they studied, the need to manage money dictated shifts in choice criteria and products purchase.

In this sense, the redefinition of one's consumer behaviour seems to be the consequence of assuming the responsibilities of adult life; from the accounts of the majority of our interviewees, in fact, there emerges a greater awareness of personal status, which then becomes translated into the adoption of a more sober and prudent consumption style.

As well known in the consumer research field, family is the socialization agent that has the greatest impact on the *functional* aspects of consumption¹⁵: parents are *instrumental* in teaching young people basic rational/economic aspects of consumption, insomuch as, while *co-shopping*, mothers often aim to highlight characteristics of products and brands, and discuss differences in price-quality relation (Grossbart et al., 1991), a sort of *consultation on purchases* that mothers seem to exercise even *at a distance*, as Valeria, one of the interviewees, recounts:

Mum always keeps an eye on what's on special offer, the advertising leaflets get delivered to the house all the time ... So when I'm doing the shopping here I phone mum and ask her whether she reckons something's worth it, because to me it seems it costs a lot ... If mum says 'look, that costs too much', then I don't buy it. I'm careful about everything (Valeria, 20 years, 11).

In general, moving away from their parent's home has led the students to adopt a more considered and conscious approach to their consumption practices, thus evidencing the ability of consumer behaviour to express in a concrete way the value system to which an individual subscribes at different stages in her/his life (Roberti, 2011).

Since I moved here and started living with other girls my way of life and consumption has changed. When you're living in a house on your own and electricity, water and gas bills start arriving, you realize that you must try to reduce all the rest to the minimum, because anyway you're already a burden on your parents. Now I pay more attention [to spending]. When you're living with other girls you question each other and say, for example, 'don't

¹⁵ As already pointed out by Churchill & Moschis (1979) some decades ago, offspring learn from parents the 'goal oriented' or rational aspects of consumption, whereas peer and mass media influences are more related to social and materialistic motivations for consumption.

let's turn it on [the heating], let's just put an extra sweater on instead' (Lorenza, 21 years, I2).

At [my parents'] home I didn't use to save, if I needed something there was mum: 'mum I need that, I need that other thing ...' and she used to get me whatever I wanted. Living on my own I realized from the very first day that it was another world: now I am careful, I prefer to shop back home in my village, rather than go to the Conad's¹⁶ here where it costs more. Here I have also taken out the Carrefour's¹⁷ shoppers card because products cost less. It is a completely different life, but I am happy, because it gives you lots of independence and responsibility (Emma, 20 years, I3).

In this way, the ability of consumption to communicate an individual's priorities to the outside world, to express her/his identity, does emerge. For this reason, as Diane Crane (1992) has suggested, in postmodern society the definition of Self is increasingly based upon the construction of one's personal lifestyle and upon the adoption of specific patterns of consumption; the objects themselves, the products purchased – and/or those rejected, Mary Douglas (1996) would add – have become transformed into *identity markers* (Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011), into elements capable of signaling social actors' position in the world, and/or their value orientation¹⁸.

Consumption and strategies of diversification: a possible reaction to the economic crisis

One of the most interesting findings of the present research concerns the consumer strategies employed by the interviewees (especially in relation to convenience goods). Throughout all focus groups and interviews, we were astounded by the great amount of time and resources students devoted to choosing and buying goods and products. Nearly all students reported exercising great care – just as their mothers do – to select the type of sales outlet (shop, supermarket or discount store) strictly according to the specific type of product/brand they need to buy. Many participants described complicated shopping routines that involved researching

¹⁶ Italian supermarket chain.

¹⁷ Supermarket chain.

¹⁸ On the role of objects (and of the material culture) as a stable and visible part of a culture, see, for example, Secondulfo (2012).

food/household items advertised as on special offer in supermarkets or their publicity leaflets, then visiting lots of locations – grocery stores, markets, discount stores and so on – and carefully investigating advertised specials. Thanks to the consumer socialization effected by the family too, our interviewees appeared to be quite expert consumers, capable of choosing competently between the various options on offer in the marketplace: as regards going grocery shopping, many students' statements indicated that they scrupulously followed their mother's example, associating each of the different products to be purchased to a specific category of sales outlet (supermarket, grocery shop, or discount store):

For certain products I choose the discount store, but for others, such as fresh stuff (like fruit and vegetables), no. Once mum went to buy them at Lidl's¹⁹, but she told me 'never again, I prefer to go to a supermarket we know, and that we were happy with ... We'll pay 50 cents more, but at least we'll be eating something we like'. Meat at Eurospin's²⁰, for example, I really like, but for other products I never go to the discount store. The discount store's pasta is not the same as that you get at the supermarket, so I don't buy it there. But for toilet rolls, and that sort of stuff, the discount store's ok. Instead things to eat are a completely different matter, but as things for the house... To be honest I do not care whether I buy them at Tigre's²¹, or Conad's²², or Eurospin's²³ (Francesca, 21 years, I4).

To this end, Fabris (2010) spoke of a sort of *commuting* between the various types of sales outlet, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common and that indicates the high levels of competence and awareness consumers have attained today; in fact, their choice criteria are moving in the direction of a growing personalization of consumer behaviour, giving priority, from product to product, either to the economic aspect, or to the quality of the product. As pointed out above, the influence of the mother seems to be decisive *also with regard to the choice of store*: in fact, when an offspring's attitude about a consumption occasion, or a store, is formed within the context of daily family life, it can exhibit characteristics that will

¹⁹ Discount store chain.

²⁰ Discount store chain.

²¹ Italian supermarket chain.

²² Italian supermarket chain.

²³ Discount store chain.

sustain it across time²⁴. So, in this case study, too, forms of Intergenerational Influence (IGI) emerge from the sample group that have a significant impact on the consumer behaviour of our young consumers; students' statements indicate that they adopt consumption patterns that *consolidate* those that they learned in their families, and in particular the pattern transmitted by the maternal model.

My mother buys almost everything from Eurospin's²⁵, except meat, because we don't know where it comes from, and so for that she goes to the supermarket (Conad's or Crai's)²⁶. She knows exactly where she's got to go for each thing and she tells me 'go there to get certain products, go there for others, go down there because it costs less. Maybe you have to make two trips, but you save' (Nicoletta, 21 years, F2).

Again regarding strategies for selecting stores, another two girls express similar reasoning:

You don't go to the discount store for everything, you just buy the most general stuff for the house there. For certain products, like food, we're a bit more careful, in particular as to the quality of the product, not so much as to the brand. Anyway, we never go to the discount store or supermarket to buy vegetables and meat (Paola, 20 years, F3).

For meat we always go to the same butcher's, for fish there's a fishmonger you can trust, and for everything else we almost always go to Conad's²⁷ (Anna, 22 years, I5).

Students also exhibit a similar approach when explaining their attitudes towards brands available in the marketplace; in their experience of consumption, in fact, for certain types of good (usually those purchased from the discount store) it is not essential to use a particular brand, whereas

²⁴ As highlighted by Shah & Mittal (1997), "[...] IGI can involve the within-family intergenerational transfer of knowledge with regard to a range of consumer behaviors such as information search, brand, product and *store selection* [italics ours], use of evaluative criteria, and receptivity to marketing mix variables" (p. 55).

²⁵ Discount store chain.

²⁶ Italian supermarket chains.

²⁷ Italian supermarket chain.

for others it is best to choose a well-known brand that can guarantee greater quality and reliability:

There are, anyway, lots of things that I get from Eurospin's²⁸, lot of frozen stuff that is good all the same. But there are particular products, such as pasta ... At home we only use Barilla, washing up liquid is Svelto and nothing else. There are some products where you only buy the brand that's on special offer, and some things, a few brands, which stay fixed (Stefania, 21 years, F3).

Lucia, one of the most active students from the viewpoint of differentiation between consumer strategies, introduced into her interview a further consideration, which enables us to widen the reasoning that is being developed in this paper:

In my case we're talking about a real selective shopping, in the sense that, whatever, some products get bought from the discount store, and others don't. Before it was not like this, it is now that you pay more attention [to costs] (Lucia, 20 years, I6).

This quotation, together with those which follow below, recall our attention to the impact that the recent economic and financial difficulties have had on the consumer choices of individuals. As Faganel (2011) notes, during crisis and recession consumers' behaviours differ and people seem to lean toward a more conscious spending attitude²⁹. At the same time, consumers' values, needs and perceptions are constantly changing, moving from the individualistic to the community and *family driven approach*. In line with this, the sample studied here also exhibited a more reflective and responsible attitude, both reducing consumption of certain items and reorienting towards brands of less renown³⁰.

²⁸ Discount store chain.

²⁹ On these issues see also Alonso, Fernandez Rodriguez, & Ibañez Rojo (2013).

³⁰ According to a report issued by the "Centro studi *Unimpresa*", in Italy during the first quarter of 2014 purchases of low cost products increased by 60% and discount stores showed an increase in sales of almost 5%. Retrieved April 2014 from <http://www.unimpresa.it/crisi-unimpresa-nel-2014-5-famiglie-su-7-al-discount-per-risparmi-are/9181>.

My relationship with the discount store has changed over recent years, in the sense that before I never used to go there. In the past few years instead, I've been getting more unessential things, like cakes, biscuits, chocolates, and crisps at the discount store ... whereas I'm more careful about pasta, meat, cheese, and buy them only at the supermarket (Claudia, 19 years, I12).

As regards pasta, for example, I don't buy Barilla brand, I get Conad's³¹ own brand at 30 cents, whereas Barilla costs 80. I don't buy water, I drink that from the tap. Coca cola I'm trying to eliminate. I get milk, eggs, basic products, instead of buying snacks or unessential things like chocolates or sweets. ... First I get the fundamental things, then, if my budget allows it, I buy other stuff (Elisabetta, 20 years, F4).

The same awareness emerges from the account of another student, who reconstructs in a very precise way the changes in her family's consumption style as a consequence of the sharpening of the economic crisis:

In my family home, over the last five years, our eating habits have changed ... Up until five years ago mum always used to buy branded products, like those of Mulino Bianco. Then, over the years, she's bought ever less of them, until she ended up buying only unbranded products. So, today, if I find Mulino Bianco on special offer I get it, but then I get the unbranded product for everything else (Benedetta, 21 years, F2).

Again in this case the maternal model appears to be fundamental, as it is the mother who is still the main agent involved in her children's consumer socialization: nearly all students in our study say, in fact, that they acquired their main consumer routines thanks to the example set by their mothers, learning at the same time how to choose competently between products and brands³², all of which are aspects of the social learning process which will be examined in more depth in the next section.

³¹ Italian supermarket chain.

³² Regarding this, Palan & Wilkes (1997) noted that the teaching of consumer skills on the part of parents included instruction related to the price-value relationship, branded products versus generic products, budgeting, product quality and money-saving skills.

The role of mothers in consumer socialization

As we have already emphasized, numerous researchers have studied the mechanisms involved in the consumer socialization of young people, investigating specifically the role played by parents in such process. According to Kuhlmann (1983), for instance, not only parents do seem to have a predominant influence on the consumer learning of their children, but they have also the opportunity to filter, moderate, and change influence exercised upon offspring by other agents.³³ However, the data show that regarding many aspects of children's consumer socialization, father-child interactions may not play as important a role as mother-child interactions (Kim, Lee, & Tomiuk, 2009), so much so that researchers have pointed to a clear *gender effect* within the consumer socialization process.

Indeed, the persistence of a traditional model of management of household purchasing practices, in which there is a marked differentiation between the consumer behaviour of parents, emerges clearly from the accounts of many interviewees:

My father has never gone shopping on his own. If he goes with my mother, on Sunday or Saturday afternoon, he pushes the trolley, my mother puts the things in it, and then he pays. He does not do anything except paying (Daniela, 20 years, I7).

My father and mother are at odds when it comes to shopping, because my mother always tries to save, whereas my father, on the few occasions when he goes shopping, just is not aware. I learnt everything from my mother (Lorenza, 21 years, F3).

My mother's the one who's more careful. In fact, she never sends my father to do the shopping on his own, because if he sees something he likes, he just takes it and buys it straight off. As to me, I behave just as my mother does (Nicoletta, 21 years, I8).

As these students demonstrate, mothers and daughters seem to share the same consumption pattern and the same attention to economizing, in contrast to fathers who appear, instead, much more spendthrift. In general, mothers transfer norms and information to children (Sharma, 2011),

³³ As Gavish, Shoham, & Ruvio (2008) remark, in the social learning process experienced parents serve as a primary source of information for their offspring.

helping them to develop the proper skills to become prudent and capable consumers (Lachance & Choquette-Bernier, 2004). Moreover, daughters consider their moms *competent shoppers*, acknowledging that they play a very important role in educating them about responsible spending habits.

For this reason, too, in the management of daily domestic affairs the job of consumer skills' teacher seems almost implicitly part of the maternal role³⁴, leading a significant number of women to consider the task of sharing an ethical, healthy approach to consumption intrinsic to the duties of motherhood (see Tardy, 2000; Mortara, 2013).

In practice, the students in the sample identify with their mothers not only in respect of their tendency towards saving, but also in their adoption of specific shopping strategies³⁵ (among which, brand loyalty, convenience orientation and positive quality-price relationship), especially as regards the purchase of convenience goods.

I'm heavily influenced by my mum. When she does the shopping she makes a list and then she even does the accounts each month; in this way she keeps track, she adjusts things, sees what's got to be given up on and what we can continue buying. Now I do the same, too (Cristina, 19 years, F5).

I see a lot of myself in mum, in the sense that I try to take after her a fair bit. For instance, she cooks cakes/biscuits at home and now I do the same. From the economic point of view I think I'm fairly careful, because my mum is, too. She did not explicitly teach me [how to manage money], but I have picked it up from her (Alessia, 19 years, F5).

I am exactly like mum, made from the same mould. She is careful about saving, about everything. If you go shopping with dad, it is completely different, because dad starts buying one piece of rubbish after another, he spends all the money. Both me and my sister we're made from the same mould as mum (Stefania, 21 years, F3).

³⁴ In analyzing the activity of co-shopping shared by mothers and daughters, Minahan & Huddleston (2008) claim: "this role is so entrenched in our culture that shopping is institutionalized as 'women's work', as part of the nurturing of the family. Mothers accept the responsibility for transferring their knowledge of shopping to their daughters" (p. 1).

³⁵ Referring to the results of research carried out on mother-daughter dyads, Moore-Shay & Lutz (1988) reported that these subjects shared in some measure economic management skills, buying styles, as well specific brand and product preferences.

As Carruth & Skinner (2001) say, often mothers' influence on children's consumer behaviour is *situation- and product-specific*, in the sense that it manifests itself most evidently in the concrete occasions of actual purchases, as emerges from the accounts of another two interviewees:

My mother accustomed us to the fact that she does not like the detergents from the discount stores, from Eurospin's³⁶, because they do not wash well. So it's only logical that if I need a fabric softener, or detergent for washing clothes, I go straight to Acqua e Sapone³⁷, there's no way I'd get them from the discount store (Carla, 21 years, I9).

My mother sets her sights on the special offers a lot. She's got time to look around because she doesn't work, so anyway she always knows the prices of products. Because of this, when I go to the supermarket I also always keep an eye out for what's on special offer (Daniela, 20 years, I7).

In line with the considerations on Intergenerational Influence which we referred to earlier (see, e. g., Moore-Shay & Lutz, 1988; Mittal & Royne, 2010), for our interviewees, too, the learning of specific consumer skills came about primarily thanks to *co-shopping*, through careful observation of their mothers' behaviour³⁸; day by day, participating in household shopping activities, these girls internalized the maternal model, to the point that they *replicated*, in certain respects, mothers' consumer style³⁹:

I've been influenced by mum: the very fact of going shopping together, with her saying 'this thing we can buy, this other thing, no [has been useful to me]...' I carry her example around with me everywhere (Caterina, 19 years, F4).

³⁶ Discount store chain.

³⁷ Italian store chain.

³⁸ Thanks to this kind of observational learning, the child learns by the experience of others, imitating those behaviours that seem to her or him the most functional (see Hayta, 2008).

³⁹ Carruth & Skinner (2001) focused precisely on this aspect, underlining that mothers act as role models rather than lecturing their children; results of their study suggest that role-modeling was an important factor in teaching consumption behavior.

[To learn] it was enough just to watch mum, she never told me anything explicitly. It was automatic: we'd go out, she'd buy something and watching her I learnt how to go about it (Daniela, 20 years, F1).

My main role model was my mum, it was always with her that I went to do the shopping. It was her who always helped me to choose lots of products, even if I have to admit that she's a capable saver, while I'm not (Emma, 20 years, F5).

Another element of great interest to emerge from the interviews can be classified under the concept of *reverse socialization* (or *reciprocal socialization*), which researchers define as a "[...] process by which children may influence their parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to consumption" (Ward, 1974, p. 12). Especially as they become more adult, daughters serve as *trendsetters* for their mothers (Gavish et al., 2008), inverting the direction of the IGI influence flow⁴⁰. We can speak, in this sense, of a sort of *reciprocal coaching*, inasmuch as mothers and daughters inform one another about purchases and shopping habits. As one interviewee stated:

I look at all Acqua e Sapone's⁴¹ publicity leaflets, online, too, and put a cross next to the best offers and then tell [my mother] 'look there's this product on special offer'. In this way we can save (Alberta, 20 years, I10).

Indeed, in the face of the growing economic difficulties, the reflections of the students once again underline the necessity of limiting certain expenditures, even though, perhaps unexpectedly, in some cases they seek to put a brake on their mothers' spending. In a few mother-daughter dyads, in fact, a role reversal occurs, with, at some unspecified time, the child becoming the teacher (Minahan & Huddleston, 2013):

Mum, wherever she goes, she buys. It was me who had to educate her about the need to save. Still now I get angry when she goes to the shop close to home, where she's been going for ages and knows everybody, despite the fact that their prices are really high. She goes there because she needs to

⁴⁰ In the most general sense, there is evidence that the phenomenon of *reverse socialization* occurs most frequently in respect of the purchase or use of products incorporating new technologies or innovations.

⁴¹ Italian store chain.

chat to the shopkeeper, to the assistant who sells the bread ... (Elena, 21 years, F2).

Sometimes I realize that I have to educate mum about how to do the shopping because she's a bit too easy-going. She allows herself to get caught up and it has to be me to tell her 'mum you've spent too much'. I can't understand why she doesn't want to save (Simonetta, 20 years, F2).

The effects of the economic crisis on grocery shopping habits is also evident regarding another aspect of consumer behaviour that emerges from the present research; in contrast to the past findings of Moore-Shay & Lutz (1988), according to which mothers, in order to save, were more likely than their daughters to write out shopping lists, redeem grocery coupons and read ads before shopping, our findings revealed a substantial uniformity in mother-daughter purchase practices, especially in respect of the use of specific strategies aimed at reducing expenditure:

When we do the shopping here [in L'Aquila], before going in we pick up the promotional leaflets and look through them so as to decide what we need. If a certain product is on special offer, we can get it, but not otherwise (Daniela, 20 years, F1).

I pay a lot of attention to the publicity leaflets, because branded products might be on offer at a cheaper price. In that case what might change is the quantity, in the sense that if it's on offer I won't buy just one bottle, but two (Luciana, 20 years, F2).

With the other girls in the house we look a lot at the special offers in the Acqua e Sapone's⁴² leaflets, especially for products that we can share. I pay much more attention now than I used to do. Before maybe I did shopping with mum and I didn't pay much attention, it didn't interest me ... Now, instead, it interests me, too much, even (Barbara, 20 years, I11).

From this viewpoint, nearly all participants in our study declared that they were aware of the difficulties their families were experiencing in keeping to the monthly budget and felt guilty about the costs to their parents of their living away from home.

⁴² Italian store chain.

Whereas before, when my mother spoke about the domestic finances, about my father's salary, I didn't pay attention, now the reality of my dad's salary and his work has become heavy ... My mother does all the sums to be able to get to the end of the month, so I'm more aware and I tell myself I just can't keep going to her asking for more money (Alberta, 20 years, F2).

Now maybe I'll think twice [before asking my parents for something] because living here on my own means that I'm already a burden on them. I say to myself, if I ask for other things, too, I'll become an even bigger burden, because of the fact that my family's having financial difficulties (Marta, 20 years, F4).

It seems quite evident that the processes of consumer socialization have enabled the interviewees to develop a very aware and rational approach to consumption, upon which the worsening of the economic crisis has also had a significant impact. In line with this, the approach which the students have adopted is that of more sober and responsible consumption practices (Rebughini & Sassatelli, 2008). In doing so, they exhibit a prioritizing of a biographical orientation, which, as Roberta Paltrinieri (2012) noted, liberates personal self-fulfillment from the constant growth in consumption on the part of both individuals and society in general.

The transformation of the process of building brand loyalty

The final aspect upon which we wish to focus concerns the building of brand loyalty; according to Moschis et al. (1984) it consists of a stated preference for the same brand in two time periods that consolidates the consumer-brand relationship. Moschis (1981) found that parent-child interactions have a long-term effect on development of brand preferences: in fact, as we know, IGI extend into the realm of brand and product class choices, in particular concerning the purchase of convenience goods (Moore-Shay & Lutz, 1988).

Brands continue to be a meaningful part of contemporary consumer experience, even though the persisting economic crisis has forced consumers on many occasions to give up their preferred brands in favour of cheaper ones. In fact, financial difficulties have had a huge impact on the processes of building brand loyalty (a relationship that in the past was strong and potentially enduring over time), fostering the spread of the practice of *brand switching*, or, in other words, of consumer behaviour that is somewhat flexible and oriented towards the search for the cheapest

product. In recent years, in fact, consumers have tended to abandon any sense of awe in the face of particular brands, choosing freely among the most advantageous offers on the market.

As Fabris (2010) has also underlined, the postmodern consumer has developed a strong *price sensitivity* which leads her/him to evaluate, rationally and competently, what each product is able to offer in relation to its selling price⁴³. We are faced with a subject who shows increasing caution over spending, pays close attention to prices and exhibits a sort of *disenchantment* with the power of the brands; with little hesitation the new consumers try out the various alternatives available on the market, demonstrating in practice a renewed orientation towards saving. In line with this, the promotional campaigns mounted in various sales outlets, based on special offers or advertising coupons, seem capable of guiding consumers' interest towards specific products/brands, depriving many companies of the certainty of the loyalty of their customers.

For our students, too, it was often precisely the cheap price – regardless of the brand – that was the fundamental requisite capable of determining whether or not a product was purchased:

I always seek out the cheapest supermarket ... I compare the prices in the various supermarkets because there are differences. I don't bother about the brand of the products, I always buy what's on special offer (Cristiana, 21 years, F3).

Before I used to be able to afford particular brands, now I realize that, living away from home, with the rent, the bills, and other expenses, I can no longer afford the stuff that are dear, or spending on extras. You save in this way, too (Elisabetta, 20 years, F4).

A similar phenomenon has a highly significant impact on the commercial strategies of companies, given that they are having to operate in a market that is becoming ever more fragmented and volatile. In the words of Romana, one of the students in the sample:

⁴³ Bauman (2007) highlighted the progressive transformation of consumers into unstable, nomadic subjects, who alternate products and brands in the attempt to define a lifestyle that is consistent with their identity and values.

It works like this: my mother looks at which brand is on special offer and buys only that (Romana, 20 years, F3).

Instead, even today the so-called *lovemarks* still make a difference. These are brands which are capable of entering into the private, symbolic world of the consumer and reflecting her/his emotions, going beyond all rational or economic calculation as to utility (Roberts, 2006). The *lovemarks* call into play the affective aspects of consumer behavior, stimulating within the consumer that empathy and that kind of *engagement* that pushes loyalty beyond reason⁴⁴.

I am careful about shopping, I get the unbranded products, The only thing I don't get unbranded is Nutella (Emma, 20 years, F5).

There are some products you can't save on, like pasta. You never buy pasta from the discount store: either it's Barilla or it's De Cecco, nothing else will do (Lucia, 20 years, F2).

In the morning I usually drink a hot cup of tea and with my tea I like only Gocciolate biscuits [Pavesi]. When I run out of Gocciolate, even here in l'Aquila, I still always buy only Gocciolate (Alessandra, 20 years, F1).

Conclusions and future research directions

This paper provides an empirical contribution to the study of consumer socialization by examining the consumption habits of a sample of female university students living away from their parents' home, together with the maternal influence on these habits. We are aware that this research is only to be considered as an exploratory study, due to the small sample size and the lack of truly random sample selection procedures. Nevertheless, we hope it will offer useful guidelines for future study of young people's consumer experience in depth.

The main findings confirm the family, and in particular the mother, as the fundamental consumer socialization agent: almost every one of the students in our sample reported learning consumer skills from their mother, who emerges as the primary household shopping agent.

⁴⁴ On the concept of *brand engagement* see also Spratt, Czellar, & Spangenberg (2009).

Nevertheless, since the consumer behaviour of young people is also influenced by other socialization agents, further study is called for in order to identify more precisely the specific role of each of these agents, especially in relation to the various phases of a young person's life and to today's prevailing economic situation.

Replication and extension across targets differing as regards age, sex and socio-economic status could provide information that is fundamental to our understanding of changes in consumption habits. Indeed, especially in periods of severe economic crisis, we believe impossible to ignore the influence of family socio-economic capital on social actors' consumption choices⁴⁵. In this sense, even if today the socio-economic class an individual consumer belongs to is of less importance than it was in the past, it would appear that Bourdieu's analyses (1979) have once again become relevant, not so much in terms of the social base of *aesthetic judgement*, as in terms of the influence of economic and cultural capital on specific consumption practices.

Moreover, longitudinal study could provide insights into the stability of the maternal model over time and allow researchers to collect data at major life stages⁴⁶. In addition, areas for further research could include cross-cultural studies of mother and daughters' shopping practices (Minahan & Huddleston, 2013; Yang, Kim, Laroche & Lee, 2014).

Finally, and to conclude, in Italy very little attempt has been made to date to integrate consumer education into the school curriculum, despite the fact that school can play a fundamental role as consumer socialization agent. In our opinion, some formal consumer education is essential, in order that knowledgeable, aware and efficient consumption behaviour among children and adolescents can arise (Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003). This approach would enable young people to become familiar with their responsibilities as consumers. In effect, consumer socialization represents an additional tool available to the educational agencies for promoting the

⁴⁵ In the present study it was not possible to establish whether any correlation existed between the consumption practices' narrative of the participating students and their socio-economic status. This was because the questionnaires containing their socio-demographic information (compiled by each student at the end of every focus group session) were strictly anonymous. As a consequence, obviously, we were unable to obtain disaggregated data.

⁴⁶ This was also the gist of observations made by Monica Santoro (2008), for example, who examined the role of intergenerational communication within family consumption practices. On this subject see also Leonini & Sassatelli (2008).

development of a generation of young people who are more competent and conscientious (with regard not only to their consumer choices, but to shared values too, such as concern for the environment, for community/collective resources and for social solidarity)⁴⁷. In our opinion, in fact, consumption could transform itself into a *new educational dimension*, within which the educational agencies have the opportunity to counterbalance more individualistic tendencies in contemporary society with a renewed attention to themes of public and social interest. We can say, in a nutshell, that today providing correct socialization of young consumers is a challenge that adults absolutely cannot afford to ignore.

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⁴⁷ On this topic, see Roberti (2013).

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