“BEYOND A NEOCLASSICAL CONSUMER ANALYSIS IN FOOD CHOICES”

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Abstract

The concept of postmodern consumer plays a central role within the debate started in the early 80s concerning the economic, social and cultural transformation in developed countries in the years following the end of the Second World War; a change that was interpreted as evolving from a modern towards a postmodern society. According to this literature, postmodern conditions have a significant impact on the consumer, especially at the level of his/her psychological characteristics. Within this new framework the consumer is viewed as a subject who is more interested in the symbolic or cultural value of products and services rather than the value of their function and utility. At the same time, consumers are represented as active players within the market, where they exercise their freedom to move in search of signs symbols and experiences through which they can communicate their identity. The figure of the postmodern consumer is difficult to interpret within the framework of standard neoclassical theories on consumers. At the same time, it highlights the shortcomings of this theoretical approach in studying the behaviour of postmodern consumers. These shortcomings are likely to be more relevant when considering the consumers of food products, given the strong nexus between consumption and the well being of consumers, along with the symbolic and cultural value that food products encompass.

The main goal of this paper consists in providing an interdisciplinary overview of postmodern consumers of food products, through the analysis of scientific contributions, mainly in the areas of behavioural economics, sociology and psychology.

Introduction

Approaches to analyzing consumer behaviour have evolved significantly in the last half century, or within the theoretical framework of economic theory either as an autonomous scientific discipline; the latter has mainly developed with the contribution of psychological and sociological disciplines. The focus of criticism is primarily on the assumption that a consumer acts within the market as a rational decision maker (i.e. is perfectly informed and possesses analytical skills) with the sole objective of maximizing his/her own utility function given the budget constraints and prices of goods. In order to consider the highly complex characteristics of human behaviour, within the emerging new framework of analysis the traditional representation of consumer has been gradually replaced by a constellation of features from which the composite meaning of so-called "postmodern consumer" emerges, as typically occurs when one tries to define properties of complex systems. The related literature often refers to interdisciplinary contexts, including psychological and sociological components, that sometimes lead to apparently irrational behaviour, thus rendering a portrait of a consumer whose attitude towards consumption is shaped more as a way of communicating his/her personality and individual identity than as a method of satisfying physiological necessities.

The need for a new paradigm has also emerged as the consequence of the many socio-economic and technological changes that have characterized the advanced capitalistic countries after the Second World War. These have lead to the development of a new philosophical, cultural and political framework, commonly referred to with the term "postmodern" (Lyotard, 1979). Despite the lack of clarity of the concept of "postmodernity", it can be viewed as a useful framework to interpret and explain current consumer behaviour (Goulding, 2000, Fabris, 2008). In fact, the literature abounds with references to the
postmodern consumer, even if the concept is not always clear. Indeed, settling on a general definition of the postmodern consumer is quite difficult, given that it is characterised by several features that dynamically combine in different ways, giving rise to different typologies of modern consumer. The fast changes in the framework of reference and the extreme fluidity of the socio-economic context contribute to increasing the difficulties in finding a general and stable definition.

This paper references the above-mentioned literature, focusing on the questions regarding information and the rational behaviour of consumers as the main hypotheses on which standard neoclassical theories are based. It furthermore adds new insights emerging from different perspectives to the traditional approach to consumer choice. Finally, the implications of such analysis for food safety and quality policies are considered, together with a discussion on the further research needed to define more effective policies.

1. The consumer in the transition from modern to postmodern society

In the framework of social sciences, the study of consumer behaviour has always been an important issue, even if relatively different points of view exist about how much it influences the overall economic system (Wilkinson, 2001). For example, the neoclassical models, based on rigorous axiomatic principles, indicate the conditions concerning consumers’ rationality, preferences, information and choice freedom, under which each individual can maximize her own utility, according to the available alternatives, prices and budget constraints (Galbraith, 1952; Lancaster, 1966). In this theoretical setup, consumers’ choices influence the production system, leading to the principle of consumer sovereignty, on which doubts and criticisms have been expressed by several authors1.

Concerning the interpretations of consumer behaviour, psychology, neuroeconomics and behavioural economic studies have assumed increasing importance over the last thirty years, through deep and interdisciplinary studies of interactions between individuals and the environment. Related to the aforementioned is research on motivation, attitudes, habit formation, learning, and shifts in decision making (Maslow, 1943; Howard, Sheth, 1969; Rumiati, Mistri, Bonini, 2000).

Moreover, the different behaviours of consumers can be influenced by social factors, such as social class or reference social groups (Veblen, 1899; Duesenberry, 1949; Alberoni, 1964; Bourdieu, 1979; Fabris, 2003; Fabris, 2008) or by anthropological factors (Sassatelli, 2004). In summary, this is a topic characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, where influences from different kinds of literature become quite important in the analysis of the role of consumer that dominated after the decline of the modern point of view that prevailed at the end of the 18th century, i.e. following the French Revolution and the first Industrial Revolution.

A considerable portion of literature proposed different kinds of analyses, following diverse evolutionary paths that have lead to the so-called postmodern society2. The term indicates a

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1 For example, Keynes (1936) stresses that, when permanent disequilibrium exists between aggregate demand and supply, the consumer must adapt her behaviour to the quantitative and qualitative changes of production, that do not necessarily match her choices (Zamagni, 1984).

2 Some authors refer to the “liquid society” (Bauman, 2000; 2003), to “fluxes” (Semprini, 2003), or “post-industrial” (Touraine, 1969; De Masi, 1986), or “post-fordist” (Piore, Sabel, 1984) or – finally – to “the end of modernity” (Vattimo, 1985).

On an etymological ground, “postmodern” is a word without a single meaning. As stressed by Umberto Eco (1983, p. 37), “Unfortunately ‘post-modern’ is à tout faire term”. This may be due to the fact that it refers to something that “goes beyond”. In fact, the concept of postmodern refers to a concept that is not necessarily related to a chronological meaning, but more generally “a different way of thinking what is modern, which is neither opposite (anti-modern) nor exceeding it (ultra-modern)” (Chiurazzi, 2002, p. 3). As it does not mark any discontinuity between different historical periods, such a concept
cultural framework within which a transition is taking place from an industrial/Fordist economy towards an outsourced economy, characterized by a different production, distribution and consumption paradigm. The latter gives rise to a strong revision of the trade-off between supply and demand. An example is more flexible production systems leading to the coexistence of more differentiated goods, with a high rate of innovation in order to meet the fast changes in consumers’ tastes stemming from individuals who are rapidly changing their lifestyle. These are situations that can hardly be represented by static and deterministic models. The fast changes in the environment in which firms and consumers operate makes the situation even more complex. This can be witnessed in new emerging phenomena, among which are the globalization of goods and service markets, as well as the global circulation of goods, workers and capital, the spread of technological innovations, new communication systems, the intermingled structure of new economic geography, the development of emerging countries. Other new factors include the increasing competition among different production systems and areas, the adoption of new manufacturing methods (such as those based on flexibility and automation, lean production and just-in-time production, as well as outsourcing) and new forms of industrial organization (networks, strategic joint ventures, and virtual industrial structures).

These phenomena are associated and strictly inter-connected with fast social, demographic and cultural changes, and the creation of new kinds of jobs in multi-ethnic societies. Moreover, nowadays, in the presence of these new scenarios for firms and consumers, the financial and economic crisis represents a further source of uncertainty that generates new constraints related to the contraction in Gross National Product, unemployment and the decrease in personal income (Pianta, 2012).

2. The multidimensional profile of postmodern consumers

The anthropological profile of the postmodern individual has been outlined by several authors that stressed several features that may be useful to understand postmodern consumer behaviour, as summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typologies</th>
<th>Main Features</th>
<th>Leading author</th>
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<tr>
<td>… affected by the Peter Pan syndrome that, in the present affluent society, leads him/her to be oriented towards play and fun; this individual experiences his/her free time and consumption as the primary reason for his/her existence.</td>
<td>Morra, 1992</td>
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<td>… an individual who, while passing through the phase of (self) identity and self-identification (expressed through his/her consumption choices), leaves the beaten track followed by most modern individuals and adopts behavioural patterns distinguished by reactions to emotional stimuli. Also present is a stratum of ethical, cultural, and religious values. The aforesaid values lead him/her to construct new social and participative patterns within a context wherein uncertainty abounds.</td>
<td>Maffesoli, 1993</td>
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<td>… a “hyper-consummateur”, i.e. a turbulent and flexible person who is, however, also an attentive judge of the products available on the market. Otherwise, he/she is an alternative-style consumer who seeks to consume better by choosing superior-quality products, despite the fact that he/she remains in a state of hyper-consumism, favouring market segmentation policies.</td>
<td>Lipovetsky, 2007</td>
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is considered ambiguous, generally applied to situations characterized by new emerging phenomena, and is considered to be “a bit extravagant” (Amendola, 2003).
… an individual who is the sole master of his/her consumption destiny, i.e. a person who is autonomous, has high expectations, is very selective, disenchanted, responsible and interested in high quality products and services. This individual possesses a certain amount of contractual power vis à vis the supply system.

… a new protagonist in today’s society, this individual’s consumption is dictated both by his/her discerning choice of products and services possessing a high ethical profile, and – simultaneously – impulsive buying. The latter is aimed at satisfying desires more than needs.

… an individual who contributes to establishing the characteristics of the good or service supplied and to modify the life cycle of products; he/she is also able to transform commodities into personalized products, based on his/her individual requirements.

Following Fabris (2003, 2010) some different profiles of postmodern consumer have been described (Golino, 2012). Among these, the one denoted by Fabris as a “consum-autore”, similar to the “craft consumer” described by Campbell (2005), exhibits a propensity to participate in the production process, a tendency that is gradually becoming more widespread in developed societies. The roots of this trend can be found in the “anti-system” and “anti-alienation” components described by Fabris and Rullani, 2007, including a form of consumer opposition to marketing pressure. However, this explanation is becoming less relevant as it is replaced by a new form of consumption that is more similar to a creative act, even a form of art which arises from the inner life of individuals. This novel point of view implies that the goal of consumption is no longer the satisfaction of needs, as assumed by neoclassical models, but has become a tool to express the agent’s identity and personal life style (Hamouda, Gharbi, 2013). Moreover, these preferences, driven by personal wishes and life experiences, evolve over time through a learning process. In a framework characterized by the increasing availability of different alternatives offered by a rich differentiation in products, consumers become more and more active and independent, so that they cannot be seen as passive subjects as they were in the Fordist period (Chiurazzi, 2002).

From the numerous theoretical and empirical studies on the role of consumers in postmodern socio-economic systems, a complex and polyhedral portrait emerges, allowing us to detect some peculiar behavioural tendencies; consumers have fewer binding economic constraints and are more involved in emotional and cultural tendencies or selfish attitudes (oriented by personal taste or health needs). Alternatively, they may exhibit opposing characteristics, i.e. “ethical-altruistic” attitudes (oriented by social justice, sobriety, and the protection of natural resources). By adopting consumer freedom as an axiom, an important detail in the portrait of the postmodern consumer is the fact that consumption choices must reflect individual preferences much more than collective attitudes (Cozzi, 2007) and this may give rise to apparently contradictory behaviour. As a result heterogeneous bundles of characteristics are formed that include goods that may appear in association with quite different (even opposite) life styles (Bauman, 2007). The price of goods can be used as an indicator of quality, and the information asymmetries related with prices can be corrected by using the information that a consumer tries to obtain about the goods and the production processes in which they were developed.

Certainly, these features cannot be modelled on the basis of the neoclassical assumptions that consumers are endowed with perfect information and rationality, without any emotional or ethical components. In the neoclassical paradigm there is no space for questions concerning the efforts of consumers to compare similar goods 3, a topic which is quite relevant in the

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3 For example, Motterlini (2014) shows that the labels for energy savings recently introduced in Italy to sell new kinds of light bulbs, even if they include all relevant information, failed to reach their goal of orienting the consumers towards an ecological choice, because the classification of energy consumption shifted from the A-G scale to an A++-E scale. This implies that consumers could not make a proper comparison, as they continued to reason by using kWh/1000h. Much more effective is the result obtained in USA where the labels more simply indicate the cost (in dollars) of a light bulb used for three hours/day for one year.
postmodern economy. The latter is characterized by a rich information set that consumers can easily obtain through labels, websites, blogs, journals/magazines, word of mouth, etc. Moreover, the observed choices of postmodern consumers sometimes do not reveal their preferences, because they are not constant over time; indeed they may be conditioned by the way the alternatives are presented, as well as the way in which they obtain information. In other words, their choices may be shaped by some “irrational” elements (framing effects, intuitions, emotions, aspirations, short-term decisions, etc.) instead of rational arguments, absolute certainty and self-evident truths.

Interesting, points of view on the portrait of the postmodern consumer are expressed by behavioural economists, starting from the works of Daniel Kahneman (Nobel laureate in Economics in 2002). These scholars propose a huge amount of empirical data in order to prove that the neoclassical *homo oeconomicus* does not exist in real life. They prove that real consumers are far from being rational, as they are endowed with a limited capacity to process information and show bounded rationality that prevents them from making optimal choices. Real consumers make choices by following mental shortcuts (heuristics) instead of elaborated rational arguments, and this leads them to exhibit systematic deviations from the rational choices assumed by neoclassical models. An explanation of these discrepancies can be (at least partially) obtained by introducing psychological elements into the economic theory adopted.

3. Food consumption and food consumers in postmodern society

The arguments above may give rise to several theoretical and empirical implications for the analysis of the general behaviour of the postmodern consumer, in particular with respect to food products (Cicia *et al.*, 2004; Zanoli, Naspetti, 2004; Cicia *et al.*, 2012). In postmodern society food consumption is connected with several (sometimes contrasting and evolving) factors, involving production, processing, as well as ethical, social and environmental issues. The latter components also include aesthetic issues, health problems and more general questions related to the quality of life, up to recent questions concerning solidarity and social justice. Other important issues are new kinds of relationships with uncontaminated nature and environmentally friendly life styles, the revaluation of ancient traditions and rural/peasant cultures (Degli Esposti, 2004; Di Iacovo *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, during these recent years of economic recession, consumers’ behaviour has also been conditioned by a decrease in savings and consumption. In particular, food expenses, which are in second place in the household budget after home expenses, become more important in the case of decreasing income. However, the contraction in global consumption has not affected consumers’ attention towards quality issues in food consumption. For example, the research on Global Corporate Citizenship, performed by Nielsen at the beginning of 2014, reveals that Italian citizens are more and more aware of the importance of social responsibility, as a gradual increment has occurred in the number of consumers that prefer to buy goods produced by firms with Corporate Social Responsibility certification. Consequently the demand for food with certified quality presents a positive trend, especially for certified biological products, whose market share is constantly increasing, especially in the northern Italian regions characterized by higher household income. Meanwhile, the consumption levels of quality food farming and wines are basically stable.

After several years of growth, according to researched performed by ISMEA and GfK-Eurisko, in 2013, there was a generalized decrease in the consumption of ‘TV range’
vegetables and bread substitutes, whereas bread consumption increased. In general, several changes have been observed in the composition of food bundles, as well as the methods by which - and the places in which - they are purchased. These changes reflect strategies aimed at reducing expenses in purchasing food, while – at the same time - preserving a given quality level (with a particular attention paid to health issues). In other words, a mix of adaptive behaviours has been observed as a response of consumers to adverse economic conditions, in particular among some social classes (Cersosimo, 2011). At the same time food waste has been reduced, as well as food consumption outside of the home. At the same time, an increase in the purchase of food in Large-Scale Retail Trade stores has been observed, as well as Alternative Food Networks. The latter represents an interesting method of virtuous production and exchange characterized by a reduction in the number of intermediate steps between producer and consumer, i.e. reduced distance between the stages of supply and demand.

In summary, we can say that the extreme differentiation observed in terms of sales organisations, products offered, taste and trade-off between quality and budget constraints, as well as social and psychological influences, can be seen as typical examples of postmodern consumption. This example illustrates how postmodern consumers use their creativity to combine preferences and information. Thanks to the active role of consumers and their links with production processes with a high level of connectivity, some forms of governance of goods exchanges have been created, based on consumers’ participation, cohesion, transparency and confidence. These features imply several positive effects concerning environmental, economic and social issues. This is particularly important in order to encourage small scale firms and farms that share the goal of spreading consumption models that are more and more oriented towards the defence of health and the revitalization of rural areas (Renting et al., 2003; Venn et al., 2006; Hingley et al., 2010; Golino, 2012; Marino, Cicatiello, 2012; Viganò et al., 2012; Bazzani, Canavari, 2013).

A point worth highlighting concerns the fact that emerging consumers’ behaviours can no longer be attributed to a “representative consumer”. Instead, heterogeneous and subjective behaviours (sometimes contrasting or even contradictory) must be considered, especially for food consumption; these are related to different personal motivations, preferences and habits denoted by the term “food politheism” (Censis, Coldiretti, 2010).

4. Does information influence consumer choice of food products?

The analysis conducted in the previous sections highlights the fact that neoclassical theoretical models are characterized by an anthropology that, in the end, does not adequately represent the behaviour of postmodern consumers. Behavioural economists stress that this statement is confirmed by the partial failure of the policies that should influence the choices of rational subjects, namely: price variations and, above all, the addition of new pieces of information.

For example, in the dichotomy between healthy and junk food one should expect that by raising the price of junk food a fall in its demand would occur. Bonnet et al. (2008) show that the price elasticity of these products is particularly low, and Kuchler et al. (2005) found that, by increasing the price of fries by 20%, the weight of consumers will only be reduced by one kilogram per year. Kinsey and Bowland (1999) demonstrate that a reduction in the price of fruits and vegetables could even lead to an increase in the consumption of fat food. Furthermore, from an experiment conducted in a supermarket by Dickson and Sawyer (1990) results showed that more than half of the consumers interviewed could not correctly remember the price of the item they had just put into their shopping cart a few seconds before, confirming that this variable is not always the main factor influencing consumption.
So one may think that consumers attribute more importance to quality, to the detriment of price, and if this were so, gaining access to more information should improve the consumption experience. Instead, there exists some research (among which Asp, 1999; Nestle, 2003) showing that even those consumers that declare to be more interested to the nutritional content of food, actually change little in their habits when they gain new information. In a study conducted on low-income consumers in NYC in 2009, Elbel et al. (2009) highlight that, after the introduction of labels informing consumers of the amount of calories associated with each food in a supermarket, consumption did not change significantly. This is so even if most of the people interviewed declared that they had carefully analysed those labels.

The question becomes even more complicated by considering two phenomena that have important repercussions on food consumption, because they can give rise to cognitive problems that prevent the consumer from making choices consistent with his/her goals (and that do not cause him/her to regret those choices in the future) because of incoherent behaviour: we are talking about self-control problems and the influence of context.

Concerning the first phenomenon, robust experimental findings exist on the excessive attention that many people dedicate to the present with respect to the future, making them susceptible to self-control problems. In an experiment performed in 1998, Read and Van Leeuwen asked several subjects to express their preference between eating fruit and chocolate in one week, and 74% of the people interviewed opted for eating fruit. By proposing the same two alternatives for immediate consumption, 70% of the people interviewed opted for chocolate. Human beings are often and easily tempted, and the modern age offers many temptations. This lack of self-control could explain, for instance, why - in spite of consumers’ declared interest in virtuous food consumption - the facts do not follow their intentions. In other words, consumers’ problem might not (only) be a problem of information, but the inability to behave in a consistent way. In that case, the solution does not reside in increasing the information on food labels.

This is confirmed by a study of Scharff (2009), from which it emerges that obese people know better than others the nutritional content of food, even if they are not able to carry out their intentions, in spite of the 40 billion dollars invested in dietetic programs (Klein, 2005). Concerning the influence of context, it is possible to notice that people often do not have objective preferences and their tastes are shaped during the purchasing experience; they are influenced by the framing that should not influence a rational, neoclassical consumer. As an example, the way food is situated on the shelves and the relative location of goods (visual marketing) or their packaging may be fundamental in driving some purchasing behaviour. Even more, by considering the same amount of food, but different plate sizes the amount of food eaten may vary, both in restaurants (Wansink, 2004) and outside of them for the poorest quality food (Wansink, Payne, 2007).

A well-known result concerns consumers’ preference for compromise solutions (Simonson, Tversky, 1992), which is the reason that - if in a cafeteria - someone will prefer a piece of fruit to a slice of pie. However, by introducing an even more caloric third option (such as a mascarpone cheese dessert) the same person may choose the slice of pie, given that now it has become a compromise choice among the available alternatives. This is just a simple useful example to emphasize the possible distortive effects of an increase in the available options that, according to the standard approach, should not worsen the condition of consumers.

Furthermore connected with cafeterias (places where researchers can easily perform

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4 _See for instance the works of Loewenstein and Elster (1992) and Loewenstein et al. (2003)._
experiments), Prelec and Loewenstein (1998) show that the form of payment used (cash or credit card) influences the kind of consumption that takes place. Even the way in which the food is combined to form a meal may have unpredictable effects, as proved by a recent experiment performed by Chernev (2011). In this experiment some fast food clients were asked to estimate the amount of calories of the meal in a picture. The combination hamburger + salad was typically considered to contain fewer calories than the hamburger alone by a very high share of people interviewed, as if the total calories of a meal could be a weighted average of the calories of the single components. Finally, consumers, are not always able to correctly decode and/or filter the abundance of signals, data and news they can gather, showing cognitive limitations that can hardly be overcome by using the old-fashioned communicative tools (signals/brands). While long-term preferences (such as those relating to healthy foods and environmentally virtuous behaviour) are quite robust, short-term ones are highly influenced by contingencies and by the context and the environment where in which decisions must be taken. So, in everyday decisions, such as those concerning what to eat each day, the emotional part of the brain, which is subject to a large set of behavioural biases, often dominates the rational one.

5. Some methodological issues and policy implications as concluding remarks

The complexity in defining postmodern consumers through the models proposed by the neoclassic theory does not necessarily imply the impossibility of foreseeing his/her behaviour and reaction to a policy. From the point of view of the theoretical models designed for dealing with consumers’ decision-making process, including decisions on food consumption, it is possible to basically distinguish between two deeply different approaches. The first consists in trying to exploit the regularity and predictability of cognitive biases to model a more descriptive representative consumer. Pioneers of this approach are the founding fathers of behavioral economics, Kahneman and Tversky, who developed the Prospect Theory (Kahneman, Tversky, 1979; Tversky, Kahneman, 1992). This theory proposed to substitute the Expected Utility Theory, widely used in dealing with risky decisions made by rational decision makers and repeatedly violated in the experiments. Through the Prospect Theory it is possible to take as a reference a consumer whose evaluations are not absolute but relative, that is, influenced by the general context inside which choices must be made (Koszegi, Rabin, 2006, 2009; Heidhues, Koszegi, 2014). Another example is the hyperbolic discount function; replacing the classical exponential discount function with this permits researchers to model the behaviour of consumers suffering from self-control problems, who make dynamically incoherent choices. The purpose of these theoretical works is, on one hand, to explain patterns of consumption identified in the real world and inconsistent with the perfect rationality hypothesis. On the other hand they serve to verify if and under which conditions a boundedly rational consumer can learn, and therefore evolve towards optimal (i.e. maximizing) behaviour. A second stream of research addresses the statement that, once the Pandora's box of rationality has been opened, the hypothesis of a representative agent must be replaced by the existence of a heterogeneity of agents endowed with different degrees of rationality and interacting in the markets (Kirman, 1992; LeBaron, 2006). In its most complete form, this kind of modelling, defined agent-based, permits us, through an extensive application of numerical methods, to discover the emerging properties of the system. By the latter we mean those characteristics that are not visible by analysing the single consumers, but are the result of the aggregation of heterogeneous interacting agents. These considerations have several normative consequences. From these studies it emerges
that the standard policies used to incentivize a certain kind of consumption (or act as a disincentive against another kind), like raising or cutting taxes or the addition of informational content to labels, may fail or obtain only partial results because the people subjected to these measures actually adopt more complicated behaviour with respect to that implied by neoclassical theories.

The cognitive biases of consumers must be taken into further consideration, devoting more attention to the aspects that are typically neglected. For instance, instead of increasing signals or the informative content of labels, it would be more useful to take care of the way in which information is supplied. Moreover, public authorities may intervene to correct the outcome of an asymmetric information game between those responsible for marketing, who are perfectly familiar with the cognitive biases of consumers, while the latter are not.

Researchers such as Thaler and Sunstein (2003, 2009) and O'Donoghue and Rabin (2003) introduced a political philosophy characterized by soft paternalism (or libertarian paternalism) designed to help consumers take choices that are in their best interest, without any coercion, when their cognitive limits prevent them from adopting coherent behaviour. Such measures have proved to be effective in promoting sound environmental behaviour or in establishing virtuous social norms that limit the phenomenon of tax evasion; they could also be applied to the domain of food consumption. To provide an example, it would be possible to impose particular ways of payment in public places in order to limit excessive consumption of fat food, without forcing people to do that by removing this food from the menus. It would also be possible to promote the use of small plates in restaurants or to nudge supermarkets (perhaps through some economic incentives) to shelve the food in a way that eases virtuous choices.

The debate which has been developing since the beginning of the 1980s concerning the diverse challenges connected with the evolution of modern society towards a postmodern one has modified the way in which consumer behaviour is represented by diverse disciplines. In particular, a close examination of the literature reveals a general state of dissatisfaction towards the ability of models deriving from neoclassical economic theory. These models are considered to be unable to interpret a reality in which the linearity and continuity of human behaviour is replaced by an unforeseeable and discontinuous reality, the tendency of the market to find a point of equilibrium, and by unstable and ever-changing conditions. Moreover the deterministic and static vision of the world is substituted by the awareness that reality is – on the contrary – chaotic, turbulent and complex.

Indeed, the economic-based guidelines of such models do not permit us to highlight the behaviour of a subject (i.e. consumers) who is less and less a simple *homo oeconomicus*; he/she is more and more an individual characterized by preferences, cognitive abilities and decision-making processes that are expressions of a specific lifestyle. In a postmodern society the latter factors play an ever more important role in determining consumption decisions, including the consumption of food products.

The above-mentioned considerations present several implications concerning the economic analysis of consumers of food products, as well as the definition of quality and food safety

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5 To this purpose, the interested reader may look at the results obtained by the Behavioral Insights Team in the UK on the following websites: www.gov.uk/government or www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk.

6 For instance, the Consumer International and the World Obesity Federation have proposed to stipulate a Global Agreement against junk food, based on the 2003 Agreement against Tobacco and legally binding for the countries that ratified it, in order to obtain more rigid measures against the food industry that promotes such food. Among the measures suggested measures are: the removal of artificial fat from food and beverages; the adoption of a tax scheme discouraging junk food consumption; the application of shock labels in the packaging (like those used for Tobacco); the removal of sweets, pieces of candy and snacks exhibitors; and the regulation of advertising.
policies.
This is also true in relation to the definition of paths for potential future research. To be specific, in studying the postmodern consumer it could be particularly useful to adopt an interdisciplinary approach through the use of conceptual and methodological instruments proposed by behavioural studies. This could serve to produce a model depicting individuals’ actions characterised by relative evaluations, i.e. those dependent on the surrounding environment of reference. Also present would be problems with self-control and making incoherent choices over time, as well as explaining consumption patterns that are incompatible with the perfect rationality hypothesis, so as to verify which paths could lead consumers to adopt optimal behaviour patterns.
The above would – for example – permit the deepening of knowledge concerning the structure of dual sets of preference, i.e. those lasting short periods due to influence by or domination of emotional reasons with other more stable ones lasting longer periods. Alternatively, to develop analyses of market segmentation based not only on economic, social and demographic variables but also on consumption behaviour coherent with differing lifestyles or combinations thereof.
A model of this type could supply useful information for policy objectives as well. In consumer information policies, for example, it would be important to consider the form of communication, not just the contents of it, paying particular attention to aspects that the neoclassical approach considers marginal. The latter would be relative to the context in which purchasing choices are made so as to avoid the failure that has characterised many health-based campaigns. It could also serve to correct eating habits that have a strong negative impact in terms of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

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