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The role of culinary programs in the emergency of “distinct” consumers

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Abstract

Growing literature on the relevance of text and artifacts such as media and magazine has revealed the role of culinary programs and celebrity chefs in stimulating changing in patterns of consumption. It has been noticed that the active work of chefs through TV program, their importance in addressing global consumer culture and in disseminating attractive models for consumption behavior has developed in recent years. The paper underlines the role played from both media and celebrity chefs in influencing consumer behavior and transition in food habits. More precisely, by putting forward an empirical test, we try to emphasize the effectiveness of TV culinary programs in determining Veblen's processes of emulation and Bordieu's "distinct" food attitudes. In particular, by referring to Bordieu's concept of *distinction*, we investigate on processes of modification and transition in food habits. The results confirm relevant differences between consumers watching culinary programs and other consumers in performing different purchasing and consumer aptitudes.

Keywords: culinary programs, distinction, food habits

Introduction

The paper is concerned with the role of celebrity chef and culinary programs in modifying purchasing and consumer behaviors. The article aims to test the influence of culinary programs in the emergence of distinct consumers. More precisely, the effectiveness of TV culinary programs in determining Veblen's processes of emulation and Bourdieu's "distinct" food attitudes are the objects of our paper. Therefore, our analysis, instead of considering the two perspectives as opposite, integrates the contribution from the institutional school of Veblen (1899) and the sociological analysis of Bourdieu (1984). In particular, referring to Veblen's concept of emulation and to Bourdieu's idea of *distinction*, we investigate on processes of modification and transition in food habits. Finally, by making reference to Baudrillard's (1998) analysis, we study the influence of media on consumers' behavior. Growing literature on the relevance of text and artifacts such as media and magazine has revealed the role of culinary programs and celebrity chefs in stimulating changing in patterns of consumption. Literature has underlined the active work of chefs through Tv programs in addressing global consumer culture and in disseminating attractive models for consumption behavior. In this paper we will try to empirically test this trend. Therefore, after a brief theoretical background, the article provides an empirical test on the influence of culinary programs and celebrity chefs on purchasing behavior of a random sample of consumers.

Theoretical background

According to Arnould (2010), consumer culture is influenced by various actors. Among them, a relevant role has been taking by cultural intermediaries, like movie and television stars,

celebrity chefs, politicians, etc. This position fits in the institutional framework of consumer's analysis which investigates on institutional selection by taking into account the relevance of social variables. Large part of literature has underlined the importance of social variables in influencing consumer's perception, attitudes and purchasing behavior. In this context, different theoretical perspectives are considered, referring to both institutional and sociological approaches to consumption. While the former looks into Veblen's processes of emulation the latter provides for two sociological approaches that refers to Bourdieu's (1979) concept of *distinction* and to Baudrillard's (1968; 1970) "neo-differentiationist" analysis concerning the role of media in influencing groups of consumers.

Starting from institutional theory, according to Veblen (1899), "*institutions are prevalent habits of thought with respect to particular relations and particular functions of the individual and of the community*". Hodgson, one of the most influential institutional economists, pointed out the idea of institutions as "*durable systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions*" (Hodgson, 2004, p. 424). According to the Veblenian view, he developed an evolutionary concept of human agency (Hodgson, 2007a), where institutions are efficient factors of selection (Parada, 2001). The mechanism through which institutions influence human behavior is well explained by Hodgson through the concept of *reconstitutive downward effect*¹. He does not support the hypothesis that social forces can modify human and physical activity at individual level. He believes that there are not magic forces that alter human behavior: *What have to be examined, I argued, are the social and psychological mechanisms and constraints leading to such changes of preference, disposition or mentality* (Hodgson, 2004). Institutional theories have influenced the analysis of consumer behavior: Veblen's contribution to the theories of consumption can be synthetized in the "biting" concept of conspicuous consumption, a process of keeping up with the Joneses on behalf of consumers of lower social classes. As a matter of fact, due to "trickle down" effects each social class tries to emulate consumption of upper classes (Trigg, 20001).

In this paper we do not focus on the satirical aspects of Veblen's contribution (Tilman, 2004), but on a key concept that the Author emphasizes in order to describe social processes of consumption: emulation². According to Campbell (1995), *Conspicuous consumption is that conduct which arises out of the motive of emulation, which is assimilated by Veblen as a pervading trait the human nature*. The majority of literature with regard to Veblen concern

¹ The original Hodgson's quotation is *reconstitutive downward causation*; however, term causation has been recently replaced by effect; see Author's website: <http://www.geoffrey-hodgson.info/downward-causation.htm>.

² Emulation is considered as the primary result of ownership (Guimaraes *et al.*, 2010)

about the relevance of emulation to describe conspicuous consumption: *The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation....The possession of wealth confers honor; it is an invidious distinction* (Weber, 2014; p.20-21). On the other side, by following Trigg (2001), Veblenian perspective could not be limited just to luxury goods, but it may be extended and generalized. Through the concept of habits, the French sociologist Bourdieu builds a bridge with the Veblenian tradition through institutional selection of consumption habits. Agency and structures are strictly linked in the analysis of both authors, and consolidate the institutional perspective of individual behavior, well explained through the notion of *downward causation* (Hodgson, 2004). Consequently, the contribution of Bourdieu offers an interesting development of the theories of conspicuous consumption (Trigg, 2001). Key concepts of Bourdieu's analysis are habitus and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984a): habitus can be defined as a set of disposal, a framework of action which creates the conditions for distinguishing the human behavior, through the creation of social status. More precisely, the *sociological habitus is described as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions* (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82) influencing the generation and the organization of practices and representations (Trigg, 2001). Moreover, habitus is the main tool to create social differentiation and status (Brubaker, 1993), through processes of social distinction. Unlike Veblen's conspicuous consumption, where ostentation is the "rule of thumb" of the upper social classes, in Bourdieu's analysis distinction is not necessarily a goal, but it is the process through which differentiation towards other segments of the society takes place either voluntarily or not (Bourdieu, 1984b). Differentiation may originate from (cultural) practices, as it will be shown ahead in testing the influence of the media on the consumer behavior (Allen, Anderson, 1994).

In our opinion, the Bourdieu's idea of distinction compares the French sociological approach to the institutional one. More precisely, the institutional selection could be a part of the distinction process through the concept of emergent properties (Hodgson, 2004; 1998). As a matter of fact "novel properties may emerge when entities interact, properties that are not possessed by the entities taken in isolation" (Hodgson, 2007b, p.220). Therefore, processes of distinction can be the result of a mechanism of Darwinian institutional selection, whose consequences are emergent new institutions.

According to Baudrillard's (1968) neo-differentiation perspective, distinction processes are mediated through the control of the media. Along with the Veblenian tradition of conspicuous consumption, Baudrillard (1998) underlines the sign-value of a consumption activity (Firat et al., 2013). Key drivers of this consumer society are mass-media that shape consumers' attitudes (Baudrillard, 1968). As a matter of fact, the French sociologist asserts that we do not

consume commodities but meanings and the media is creator of meanings (Baudrillard, 1998). Food can be considered as a relevant means to mark distinction between different social groups of consumers. On the basis of these theoretical perspectives, our paper aims to analyze the importance of celebrity chefs in the emergence of “distinguished” groups of consumers. In particular, the purpose of the article is to test the difference in term of consumer behavior between two groups of individuals, divided up referring to the habits to watch culinary TV programs conducted by celebrity chefs. Apparently, celebrity chefs have added up to an evolution in the patterns of eating and drinking habits in numerous parts of the world. Hence, the empirical analyses have focused on the importance of TV programs and celebrity chefs in activating imitation (Henderson, 2011). Nevertheless, quantitative analyses have been also carried out, in order to verify the emergency of a distinction process. Therefore, our paper tries to fill this gap in literature, through testing differences in consumer behavior between two groups of consumers clustered according to the habits in watching culinary TV programs conducted by celebrity chefs.

Materials and methods

Many empirical analyses have focused on the importance of TV programs and celebrity chefs in activating imitation, in sustaining food domain. However, only a few quantitative analyses have been carried out, in order to verify the emergency of a “distinction” process in the aforementioned sense. The purpose of our analysis is to point out possible different behaviour between those who follow TV programme and website on food and recipes and those who are not keen on that topic respect their attitude and believe in purchasing food products.

The dataset counts 866 observations obtained in 2013 by conducting a survey through CAWI methods. 652 questionnaires (75,3%) are considered for the empirical analysis. The questionnaire is structured around three pillars: the first one includes general question on socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents. The second concerns their habits in either watching Tv culinary programs or buying specialized magazines, or attending training culinary course. The third investigates on probable changes in purchasing and consumer behaviour as a consequence of the culinary programs. The respondents come from all over Italy. In particular, the country was divided in five different geographical subdivisions such as Nord-West, Nord-Eastern, Centre, South and Islands that excluding islands, registered a quite equilibrate distribution in number of participants.

A multivariate analysis has been conducted in order to:

- inspecting eventual correspondences between the variables extracted from the questionnaire (multiple correspondence analysis);
- classifying groups of homogeneous consumers on the basis of their propensity of watching Tv culinary programs (cluster analysis).

The active variables used for the analysis are classified as follows:

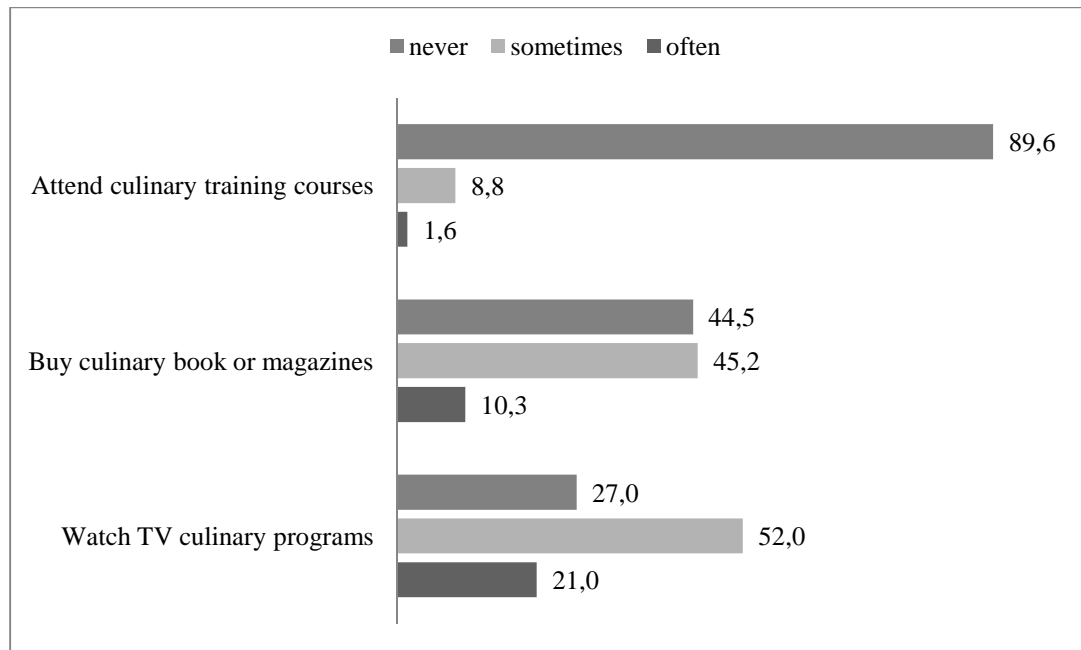
Variables	Categories of variables
Time spent on cooking	3
Eating at the restaurant	3
Purchase of convenience food	3
Attention toward quality	3
Attention toward price	3
Eating in high category restaurants	3
Purchase of products with geographical indications	3
Testing the origin of the products	3
Visiting the areas of production	3
Purchase of organic products	3
Higher knowledge about the characteristics of the products	3
Watching Tv culinary program	4
Purchase of culinary books/magazines	4
Participation to culinary training courses	4
Higher knowledge about the quality of products as a consequence of culinary programs/magazine/courses	3
Higher knowledge about typical products as a consequence of culinary programs/magazine/courses	3
Higher attendance of restaurants as a consequence of culinary programs/magazine/courses	3
Higher attendance of restaurants as a consequence of culinary programs/magazine/courses	3
Effects of culinary programs/magazine/courses	3
Family composition	6
Rate of instruction	7
Profession	7
Family income	7
Sex and age	9

Results

Descriptive analysis

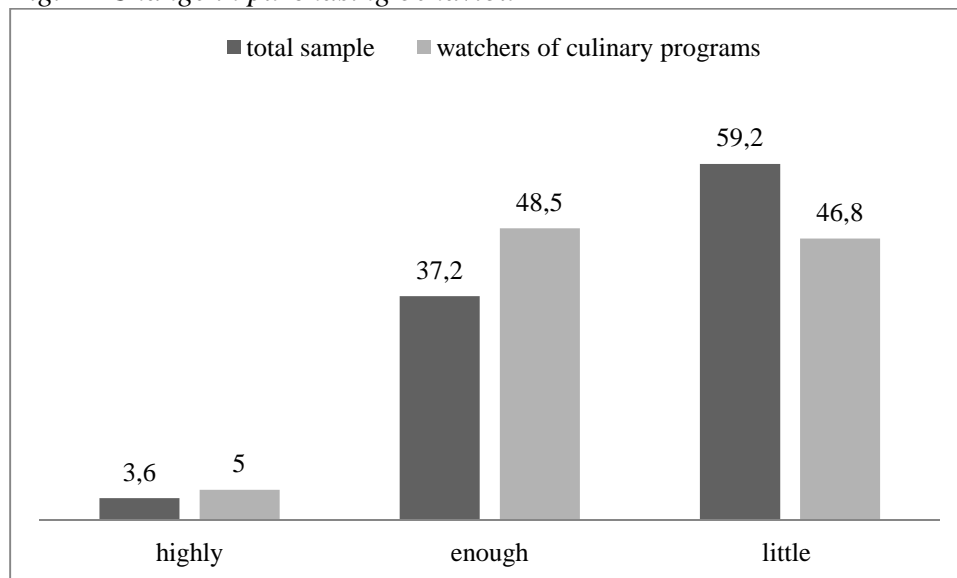
Figure 1 illustrates the distribution (%) of purchasing responsible in relation to culinary programs, cooking books or magazines and culinary training course. The first impression is that many people attend culinary programs and modify their consumer and purchasing behaviour. The results, in fact, show that 21% of the purchasing responsible often watches Tv culinary programs and another 52% sometimes is interested in watching them. A discrete attention is devoted to specialised magazines, while few interviewees declare interest in culinary training course.

Fig.1 – Aptitude toward culinary programs



At this point, it could be of interest looking into how watching Tv culinary programs affect purchasing behaviour. Figure 2 points out how differences emerge between the watchers of Tv programs and the others. More than a half of the sample declares to be influenced and to have modified purchasing behaviour as a consequence of the culinary program.

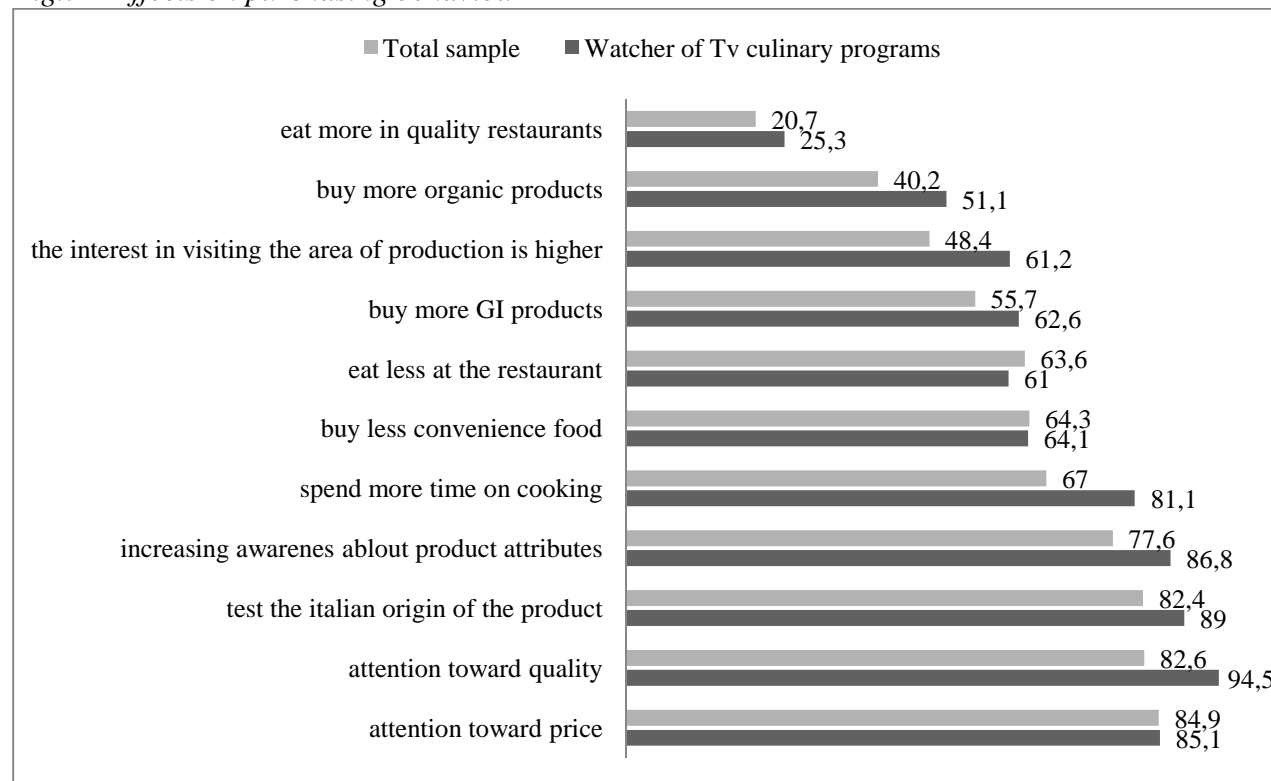
Fig.2 – Change in purchasing behaviour



A confirmation of this trend on purchasing and consumer behaviour is observed from figure 3 which evidences differences between watchers of Tv culinary program and the total sample. If no differences emerge concerning the high attention towards price (main driver of purchasing change), is possible to observe high gaps in relation to quality aspects, on the propensity to

visit area of origin of the products and on the purchase of products with geographical indications or organic products.. Furthermore,, the watchers of culinary programs spend more time on cooking.

Fig.3 – Effects on purchasing behaviour



Multivariate analysis

The following analysis aims to aggregate homogeneous groups of consumers on the basis of their attitude towards celebrity chefs and culinary programs (books, magazines). To this purpose, multiple correspondence and

Multiple correspondence analyses has permitted to extract 4 clearly identifiable factors, which absorb 20.25% of the total variance. The factors have been defined as follows:

1. first factor (7.78% of the total variance) represents eventual impacts stemming from culinary Tv programs/books/magazine/training courses. On one hand, it emerged positive effects in terms of higher propensity toward either purchase quality products, visiting areas of production, etc., on the other hand, no effect occurs;
2. second factor (4.89%) concerns socio-demographical characteristics, by comparing elderly people, located in the mature-old phase (retired or worker) of life cycle and younger one;

3. third factor (3.88%) is related to purchasing behaviour: higher propensity to visit areas of production and, in general, higher attention toward quality, no attention toward area of production and quality in general are the observations
4. the fourth factor (3.70%) enlightens the propensity (high/low) to go out to restaurants as the consequence of culinary programs/book/training courses.

On the basis of the previous correspondence analysis, the respondents were aggregated in homogeneous groups, through a cluster analysis. Three clusters have been extracted, which present clear characteristics that differentiate people watching culinary programs (or buy magazines or attend training course) from the other consumers. Table 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of the sample among the three clusters.

Tab.1 – Distribution of respondents in the three clusters

	n.	%
cluster 1	251	38,5
cluster 2	45	6,9
cluster 3	356	54,6
	652	100,0

Cluster I – The first cluster involves 38,5% of the total sample and is characterised by the complete absence of influence of the culinary programs/magazines/courses on purchasing behaviour. The consumers of this group live in families with children, are in their young-mature phase of life cycle and belong to average-high family income. Moreover, these individuals neither watch Tv culinary program nor buy specialized books or magazines, and have not attended culinary training courses. The cluster is typified by the complete absence toward the key-variables, such as quality orientation, attention toward the origin of the products. Therefore, this cluster identifies consumers being **indifferent to Tv culinary programs or quality variables**.

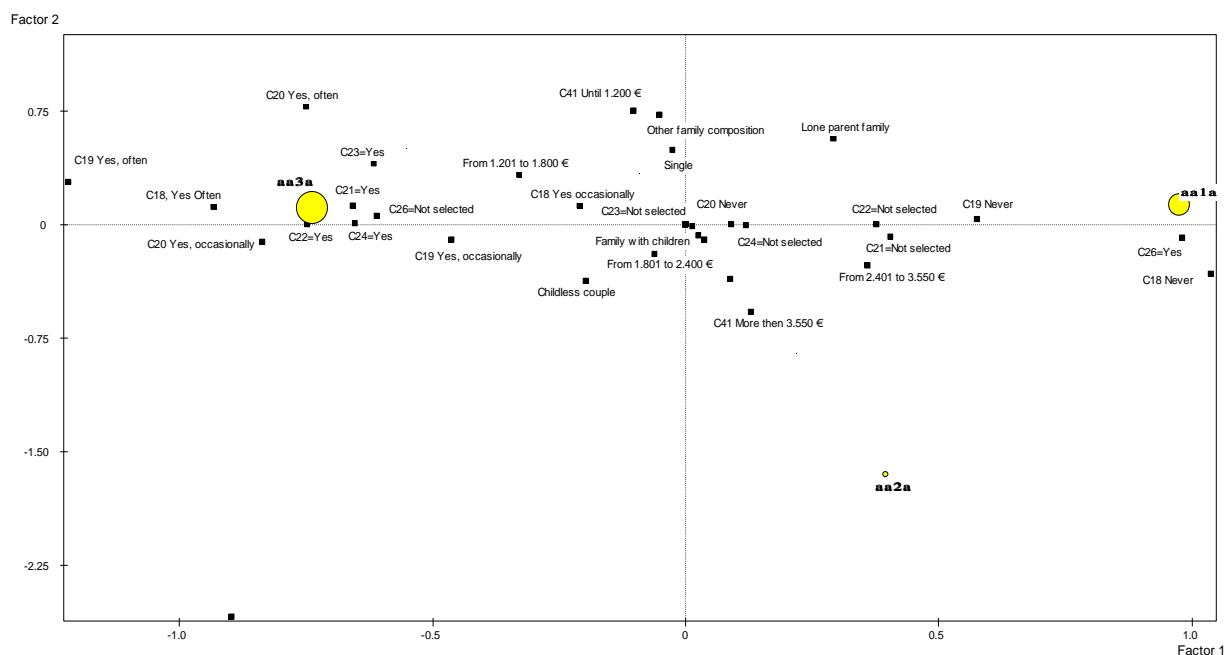
Cluster 2 – The second cluster includes only 45 (7%) retired consumers, whose families are made up of elderly couples without children and high income. They neither watch culinary programs nor buy magazines. However, because their privileged economic conditions they pay attention on quality of food (with the exclusion of organic products) and choose high category restaurants. Hence, the group of consumers can be labelled as **indifferent toward culinary programs or magazines, but quality oriented**.

Cluster 3 – The third cluster is the most important since it includes more than half of respondents (54,6%). A positive attitude in watching Tv culinary programs, buying specialized

magazines, books and, sometimes, attending training culinary courses are the key features to describe this group. The impact of culinary program is quite evident: these consumers declare an upgrading of knowledge concerning food quality and product characteristics and show high propensity to visit the areas of production of the consumed products. In addition, origin of products is a key-variable of their purchasing behaviour; thus, they buy more products signed with a geographical indication (protected designation of origin, protected geographical indication). Moreover, as a consequence of the culinary programs, they spend more time cooking and eating in high category restaurants, even though they declare an average income. More than half of consumers present high level of instruction. According to the observed behaviour, we define this group as **culinary programs followers with high propensity toward quality**.

The following figure presents each cluster on the basis of the first two factorial coordinates, in order to get further information about possible distinction processes. Moreover, some variables have been added to test the possible connection with the three extracted clusters.

Fig.3 – Positioning of the clusters and other variables in relation to the factorial coordinates



Legenda:

- C18 = watch Tv culinary programs
- C19 = buy culinary books/magazines
- C20 = participation to culinary training courses
- C22 = higher knowledge of typical products
- C23 = eating out at the restaurants more frequently
- C24 = higher propensity to buy quality products
- C26 = no effects from culinary programs/books/magazines/training courses

C41= family income

aa1a, aa2a, aa3a are the extracted clusters

As shown from the graph, it emerges a clear distinction among consumers. There is a strong association between the consumers of the third cluster and the first factors explaining the influence of the culinary programs/books/magazines and culinary courses. These consumers are characterised by an evident change in purchasing and consumer behaviour. A second important element of analysis stems from the fact that the previous distinction processes are neither linked neither to economic variables nor to cultural capital.

Discussion and preliminary conclusions

This paper meant to investigate on Veblenian emulation in food behavior and on Bourdieu's processes of distinction on behalf of consumers. These should stem from the attempt to emulate culinary Tv programs, books or magazines aiming at influencing their purchasing behavior, then confirming the Baudrillard's perspective. The empirical test has validated this trend, by supporting the goodness of our theoretical choice. More precisely, the emulation of the celebrity chefs through Tv programs, books, magazines, courses supports the Veblenian perspective., This perspective is not confirmed in its strict version but in the sense that the attempt to emulate celebrity chefs engenders a process of institutional selection through which higher attention toward quality, origin of food and ingredients of the products emerge. Therefore, by following Trigg's analysis (2001) the application of Veblen's analysis of conspicuous consumption is not limited to just luxury goods but it could be extended to all purchased goods. In this process, Baudrillard underlines the influence of media in shaping consumers' aptitudes and in inducing novel properties (Hodgson, 2007b). These new properties foster processes of distinction in the sense clearly expressed by Bourdieu. Our analysis has showed Bourdieu's processes of distinction in terms of homogeneous groups of consumers with specific characteristics: culinary Tv programs, books or magazine engendered different habitus; they have stimulated certain predispositions, such as higher attention toward origin products, quality products, to visit areas of production. Moreover, according to the contribution of the French sociologist the role of cultural capital seems relevant in performing distinction but differently from Bourdieu, economic capital does not influence these aptitudes. Another interesting element of reflection comes from the high share of consumers influenced by the celebrity chefs that represent the highest percentage (more than half of consumers

belonging to the third cluster). This demonstrates how celebrity chefs could be defined as expanding empires (Henderson, 2011).

Therefore, even though this paper has to be considered as a first attempt to empirically analyze the impact of culinary programs/books/magazines, and it needs further empirical tests, our opinion is that their influence seems relevant and may modify knowledge and aptitude toward quality perception and purchasing behavior.

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