

Flour Rise in Italian Lockdown and Consumption

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The lockdown imposed on Italian citizens in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for unprecedented scenarios regarding consumption activities. While it may be predictable that there was an increase in purchasing through digital channels—even of basic consumer goods—some product categories are of particular interest considering the general situation: the unprecedented context of forced domestic confinement and the psychological state of the population confronted with a situation that was as unexpected as it was new and disarming.

flour

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communication

lockdown

1. Introduction

The lockdown imposed on Italian citizens in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for unprecedented scenarios regarding consumption activities. While it may be predictable that there was an increase in purchasing through digital channels—even of basic consumer goods—some product categories are of particular interest considering the general situation: the unprecedented context of forced domestic confinement and the psychological state of the population confronted with a situation that was as unexpected as it was new and disarming.

In fact, while the whole sector of retail activities considered non-core had to close or was in great difficulty, the large-scale retail sector saw a substantial increase in some commodity categories, including flour (as reported by some consumption observers), which had an increase in demand in the lockdown period of up to 150% for some companies and an average value of +80% in consumption according to Coldiretti (the Italian Association of Independent Growers). Moreover, analysing online search volumes, the terms “farina” (flour) and “ricetta” (recipe) tripled the trend of standard searches within Google’s search engine in the period between March 2020 and the end of domestic lockdown in June 2020.

2. Italian Lockdown and Consumption

In the span of ten years, the time spent online globally by people has more than doubled (from less than three hours to more than six per day) ^[1]. It is easy to see how Italians poured onto the web in search of information during lockdown with a vertical use of social networks ^[2]. In 2020, more than 50 million users used the Internet in Italy; of these, 41 million were active users of various social network platforms (they are about 67.9% of the Italian population) ^[3]. Facebook and Instagram remain the most used social networks, used by 80.4% and 67% of Italians between the ages of 16 and 64.

In 2020, e-commerce in the country marked a +23.8% increase compared to 2019; this was a trans-generational process not exclusive to younger age groups ^[1]. However, in this scenario, social networks do not play a leading role as tools to search for information on a brand ^[1]. The lockdown altered the representation of consumption acts and their mediated narration. As pointed out by Bichi, Introini and Pasqualini ^[4] in an in-depth study on the use of social networks among youth in Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, the link between information consumption and communicative and participative practices has maintained a hybrid relationship, creating new forms of states of connection ^[4] that have expressed the feelings experienced by the population during the lockdown months.

The younger Italian public was divided between information-seeking and new forms of sociability ^[5], while the more adult public ^[6] showed a spasmodic need to search for information online. The restrictions on sociability triggered, in many cases, negative emotional responses, resulting in feelings of loneliness, frustration, helplessness and fear of the future ^[7]. While the generated situation had purely negative impacts through increasing psychological and physical disturbances ^[8], adaptive processes also emerged, which allowed individuals to respond in practical terms to the newly imposed routine, such as the new conceptualisation of work and leisure within the domestic perimeter ^[9].

Whereas the systematic use of social networks as an information and expressive tool leads to higher levels of distress, as shown by previous studies ^{[6][9][10]}, they also have contributed to the reduction in the same among connected audiences ^[4] and are one of the main tools for disseminating information ^[11]. Apart from physical isolation, the lockdown raised awareness of how relationships today can be equated with connections through digital technologies ^[12].

Despite the illusion of breaking down distances of space and time through technology, digital experiences are not yet able to supplant in individuals the need for the real ^[13]. This, however, does not exclude the impact that the virtual could have on reality and the expressive practices and behaviours conveyed through online tools ^[14]. The constant connectivity ^[12] to which Italians were subjected to during lockdown has involved re-inventing and hybridising everyday life, mixing formality with informality. Moreover, from a private point of view, those who used to live off their image and popularity found themselves outside their stage of reference, finding that they were re-inventing an expressive space within the home.

The lockdown context also saw a change in the perception of time: While space contracted, time expanded thanks to constant connection, transforming people's days into "always on" contexts, resting individual lives on the possibility of always being connected to one another. The discontinuity between the phases of the day and people's roles disappeared, as observed by Colonna ^[12]. This was also favoured by exhausting media marathons spread across various channels from TV to the different live functions through social media, where anyone can turn into a streamer. It is not a coincidence that among the platforms that have undergone a surge in access, there are Twitch and Tik Tok ^[15].

Therefore, social networks became the resonance chamber of the feelings, fears and expectations of Italians, forced for the first time in the post-modern history of the country to submit to strict rules of compliance. Over time, these feelings have gone from cautious optimism to a state of intolerance. Suffice to say that the staple Facebook hashtag of the pandemic, #andratuttobene (#allwillbewell), has seen much of its content on Facebook and the related interactions peak between 3 and 24 March, only to drastically decrease from the end of April. The same happened on Instagram [\[16\]](#).

The sale of unpackaged artisan bread in the first half of 2020 saw a 11.2% drop in volume and value. While the large-scale retail trade (which, with a market share of 70%, was the leading sales channel) suffered a drastic decrease in sales of finished products of up to 20%, the sale of wheat flour saw an increase of 64% in volume and 84% in value. Paradoxically, this growth in the B2C channel did not offset the slump in demand in the HO.RE.CA. channel. Demand for flour producers from foreign markets plummeted, and the impact of the lockdown resulted not in a decrease in flour production by mills and processors but in a contraction of demand for bakery products (i.e., not only bread, but also pizzeria, restaurant and pastry shop products) [\[17\]](#).

Within a constant trend of a continuous contraction of wheat selling prices per tonne, the months affected by the lockdown showed increases but then resumed the negative trend starting in May and June 2020, coinciding with the reopening of businesses; flours followed the same trend as the raw material. During the lockdown, bulk bread purchases declined at large-scale retail outlets while they increased at neighbourhood shops, a sign of the impact of changing consumer buying habits.

In the large-scale retail sector, the decline in demand for finished bakery products such as bread and cakes has been counterbalanced by a considerable increase in the purchase of soft wheat flour, the value of which, although high, constitutes an insignificant share of the large-scale retail sector's turnover (1.9%). The significant fact that emerges from this phenomenon of changing consumption habits is a progressive push towards home baking. However, this is a singular phenomenon, not discernible in other countries that have faced the same Italian path of forced closures such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany, in part probably due to different eating habits and in part to cultural differences.

In Italy, bread and flour derivatives are one of the cornerstones of the country's diet, culture and gastronomic tradition. Wheat and its derivatives have always constituted the basis of the diet, especially for the poorer segments of the population, and even after the industrialisation of food production, the centrality of this raw material in the Italian production sector has been maintained [\[18\]](#). With the beginning of the post-war period, when Italians were again able to access products derived from flour [\[19\]](#), this product has been featured in the baskets of Italian consumers throughout the 20th century [\[18\]](#), entering fully into the identity of Italian culture: bread, pizza and pasta are considered staple foods for Italians and still represent a common ground of encounter even outside of Italy [\[20\]](#).

The advertising of flour and its related products has created a series of associations over time that refer to concepts of creation, life, conviviality, family, and friendship; the representations of the consumption of these

products are the opposite of what was experienced during the lockdown (namely union, meeting, community, exchange). In terms of associations, one of the most iconic is the pasta that Totò voraciously eats with his family in the famous 1954 film *Miseria e nobiltà (Poverty and Nobility)* and the clip in which, as a poor man, he makes the natural gesture of putting spaghetti in his pocket because 'you never know' what might happen, suggesting an understanding of flour derivatives as metaphorical safe-haven assets, thanks to their simplicity and rich nutritional properties.

From this point of view, in addition to considering flour-derived goods as a frugal product yet of high value due to its energy content, over time, many advertising associations have linked flour and its derivatives as the emblem of the family product as it can be produced with few means directly at home. The concept of family was then used extensively from the 1980s onwards by the advertiser Gavino Sanna for a very famous pasta brand, which essentially linked the concept of flour and its derivatives to the very representation of the Italian family ^[21].

In tradition, flour and baking processes have been inextricably linked to the concept and representation of family. This cliché is ideally represented in a scenario that is characterised by domestic settings. Polesana ^[22] notes how in the pre-COVID collective imagination, the home is also the protagonist of narratives of bloody episodes and therefore cannot be conceptualised as a totally safe place. On the other hand, during the lockdown period, the home was represented as a place of complete safety with respect to the new enemy, drawing on classic advertising imagery that could be summarised in the claim "home sweet home"; hence, the home, in an idealised narrative, returns to being conceptualised as a non-hostile place, abandoning the focus on the outside environment ^[23].

Whilst the media recurrently uses the metaphor of a war against the virus during the lockdown, alternating the polarities of inside and outside the home, fixing the status of heroes for those who have to face the perils of the outside world, the concept of conflict has also been brought inside the home: fighting against forced isolation and the lack of social contacts not mediated by technology ^[22]. Therefore, the home returns to be the one idealised through classical advertising, linked precisely to the narratives made famous and iconic by companies whose raw material is flour, drawing heavily on a concept of the stereotypical ideal family: a place of well-being, balance and security; in other words, where one can be happy, even in the most difficult moments.

Given the contingency of the situation experienced, where the entire country lived in a delicate balance between information, technical-scientific evaluations and decrees of the Prime Minister (i.e., political decisions), companies adopted real-time marketing policies through their brands as a strategy to deal with an unprecedented and unstable consumer market, continually re-tuning and adapting to the sentiment of the whole nation, not just of a specific cluster of consumers. However, if the advertising and media representation of the moment has been available for all to see, it is interesting to delve into the issue of what flour, understood as a safe-haven asset, could potentially have represented at such a difficult time for Italy.

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