

Article

Italian Lockdown and Consumption: The Rise of Flour during Forced Domestic Isolation from a Digital Perspective

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Abstract: This article analyses the first Italian lockdown in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of a digital scenario, trying to find assumptions from social media to understand the amazing increase in flour consumption that occurred, up to an average value of +80%. The focus of this article is on the most common social platforms of the country, Meta's Facebook and Instagram, and the analysis took place around the keyword "flour". The aim was to find some answers looking at the media consumption of content related to the topic, looking at the first 100 most engaging posts on Facebook pages, Facebook public groups and Instagram profiles. What emerged is that after an initial dominion of professional content creation in the second month of the three months of domestic reclusion, user-generated content augmented on Facebook, while on Instagram, the most-followed profile was the one of a domestic cooking star. What seemed to emerge is that cooking at home and completing simple recipes based on flour could have been a sort of protection practice against the instability and terrific times due to the pandemic in the Italian cultural field.

Keywords: flour; consumption; digital; social media; communication; lockdown; Italy



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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.

This paper investigates, through data and content analysis activities, potential emerging trends on Facebook and Instagram and maps the main media consumption of the Italian audience in order to search for implications and keys to a consumption phenomenon contextualised within an unprecedented and particularly difficult situation to face and accept, such as the lockdown imposed in March, April and May 2020.

Through the study of user behaviour within social networks, the root of the scenario of buying a senseless volume of flour was elucidated through examining Italians' media consumption on the platforms of Facebook and Instagram and through searching for

possible cultural values linked to the practice of flour use. From the analysis conducted, media representations embodied by specific influencers and digital formats related to the world of cooking emerged along with public figures who have entered the observed digital communication strand, taking part in the great collective narrative that has seen an entire country involved and glued to digital screens in search of a means to resist and re-signify the domestic isolation to which Italy had been subjected.

2. Background: Literature Review, Flour 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.

3. Materials and Methods

Due to some research that has shown a link between consumer behaviour and exposure to certain content within the environment of social networking platforms [24], it is shown that the role of the digital context can determine the level of user engagement, which may depend both on the quality of the media files and the degree of trust they convey, including on the basis of who generates them. In that way, belonging to an online community or group seems to reinforce this mechanism of influence, leading to a greater impact on the formation of attitudes and subsequent consumption choices and practices [25].

Also, the context of virtual ambience seems to influence the consumer’s choices, since their use of the Internet should be considered not neutral but a way to express themselves in terms of identity and self-concepts in specific online territories [26,27]. These multiple selves are not isolated but in discussion with other ones [28], with an impact on behaviours due to competition, learning processes and shared knowledge [29,30]. These processes are led by phenomena such as online word-of-mouth and content made by users (UGC or user-generated content) that create major opportunities for interaction and influence habits and purchase intentions [31].

In that sense, adopting a paradigm akin to that of Joy and Li [32], borrowed from Miller [33], consumption can be theorised as a distributed vision of cultural meanings [34]; this implies that even forms of collective narratives shared online can have an impact on purchasing choices. The theme of the influence of social media on consumer behaviour takes shape through digital word-of-mouth, disseminating content online that could generate an impact on individual choices [35]; this interchange allows users not only to be influenced

but also to influence through the forms of communication that are generated around content [36].

Considering a behavioural economics perspective such as the one introduced by Kahneman and Thaler [37], which also includes heuristics in purchasing processes overcoming a rigid rationalist approach [38], a contemporary paradigm cannot ignore that in processes of complexity reduction, digitalization also has an impact, especially in relational and communication exchange contexts such as social networks [39]. The use of social media does not only seem to shape the enjoyment of certain content on the basis of user interactions but appears as a vehicle of influence for consumption choices [40].

Starting from these theories and assumptions, the present study uses a descriptive approach, creating categories from the data based on interactions in social media platforms, giving relevance to context and environment. The research focuses on the media consumption of Italians in a time period between 1 March 2020 and 31 May 2020, in order to assess both a pre-opening phase at the start of the lockdown (8 March 2020) and a post-opening phase (18 May 2020), to specifically isolate media consumption around the keyword “farina” (“flour”).

The process that led to the development of the research’s stages was born in response to a need for a greater understanding of the motivations behind the increase in domestic consumption of flour during the months of enforced home isolation. It is a descriptive type of research, which contemplates a mixed-methods approach through combining quantitative methods for the extraction of data with a subsequent qualitative investigation, according to a sensibility close to digital ethnography, seeking to understand and reconstruct aspects of media consumption from the observed cases at the expense of using pre-determined categories.

The data were collected through the Facebook-owned Crowdtangle platform, which enables the aggregation of information contained within various social network platforms through collecting and enabling the visualisation of content produced by pages and groups in the case of Facebook, and profiles in the case of Instagram, as well as allowing the researcher to download the information gathered in text format. User-generated content and user-related information on Facebook have been increasingly restricted over time, and as of 2018 no data has been accessible via APIs through external tools following the Cambridge Analytica scandal [41].

The practice of crawling through spider-bots, bypassing Facebook’s API access blocks, although it can circumvent the restrictions, is not advisable as it is debatable from a technical and legal point of view. The most widely used tool to crawl Facebook before the accessibility restrictions was Netvizz, curated by Dutch researcher Bernhard Rieder, which made it possible to extract data from three sections of the platform: personal networks, networks of likes around content or pages, and groups. Gradually, access was reduced and stabilised until the last accessible availability for 2018, namely networks of likes on a page (analysis of the network of pages linked to a page through users’ likes), page posts (analysis of users’ activity on content), analysis of activity on images in a page’s stream, analysis of searches with the internal platform function and statistics on links posted within Facebook.

Isolating the posts around the keyword “farina”, all content from the period under review was exported and ranked in order according to engagement rate (the sum of likes, comments and shares). Three categories of content were considered on the basis of their origin: from Facebook pages, from public Facebook groups and from Instagram profiles. A quantitative analysis was then carried out on the numbers generated by the posts, arbitrarily setting the limit of the most-engaged content at 100, and a qualitative investigation of their textual and visual aspects.

Given the difficulties of accessing data directly related to users, both for privacy reasons and for the limitation of anonymised data previously available through APIs, and in order to search for motivations to understand the Italian population’s behaviour towards the purchase of large quantities of flour during the lockdown, an attempt was made to reconstruct media consumption within the country’s most popular social networks to

understand not only what users viewed, but also with what content they interacted the most, showing a response to stimuli in terms of engagement.

The choice of which social networks to analyse (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) was not accidental. In fact, they were the two most popular platforms in Italy at the beginning of 2020, with a penetration of 80% and 64%, respectively, in the connected population aged between 16 and 64 (Source: 2020 We Are Social report [3]). Thus, they essentially monopolised user's connected time, which is mostly devoted to accessing and consuming content on social networking platforms.

4. Results: Research and Numbers of the Phenomenon

Before tackling the analysis of what happened in social media fields within the platforms, the research started with a preliminary analysis of web traffic by means of online searches on the subject, in order to validate the actual presence of an anomaly worthy of further investigation. This analysis focused on Google, as shown in Figure 1, given that it has a market share of over 95% in Italy (Statcounter data). The analysis of the data collected through the Google Trends data visualisation tool, shows an increase in searches for the keyword "farina" in the food product category. Vertiginous growth occurred precisely in the period of the Italian lockdown of 2020, with an increase compared to the same period of 2019 estimated at an average of 260.4%, and, calculated month-to-month, March 2020 marked a +310% increase; April, a +334.8% increase; and May, a +136.4% increase.

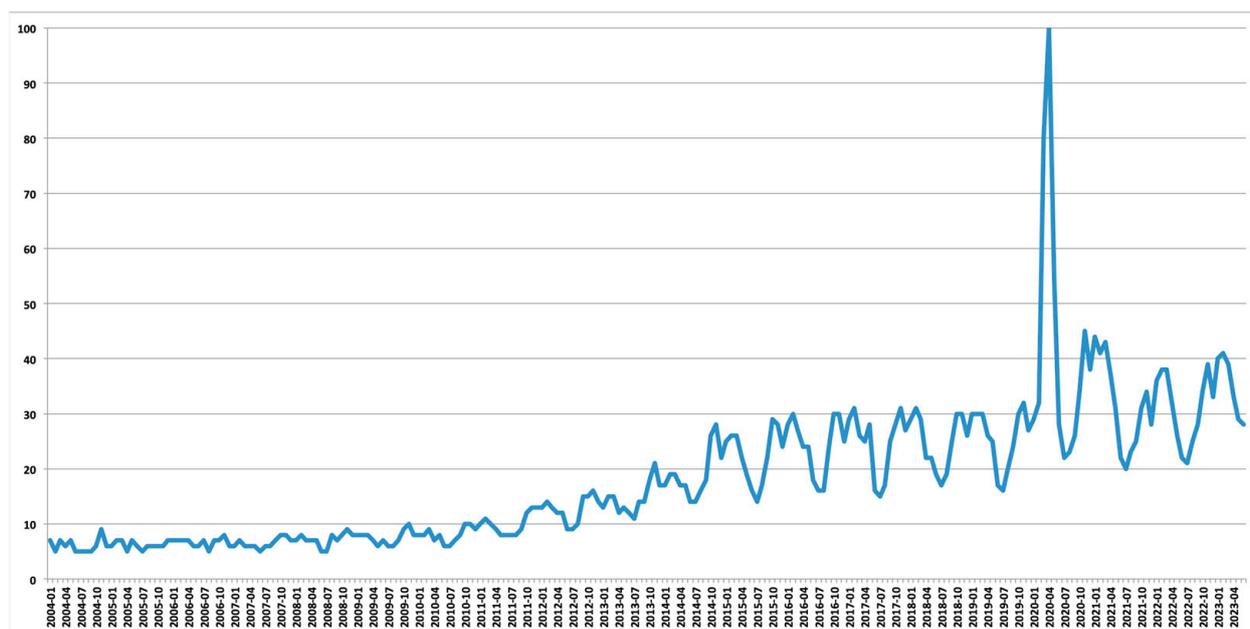


Figure 1. Search trends within Google (0–100, where 100 is the highest level reported by Google since 2004).

From the same data, a downward trend can be observed in May (i.e., since the start of the recovery or so-called 'phase II', with the re-openings as a return to near-normality for the country). Analysing the same period over the following two years where COVID still led to new restrictions, it is clear that the first lockdown in Italy represented a unique moment for this research trend. Therefore, it is clear that the phenomenon at the level of web searches was concentrated in the specific months of isolation. Looking at Figure 2, the geographical spread of the searches appears to be very interesting, with the exception of Sicily, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Trentino Alto Adige, which are at the far ends of the spectrum; the other regions have a volume of searches that are, on average, fairly similar, indicating a phenomenon of national scope rather than a localised one.

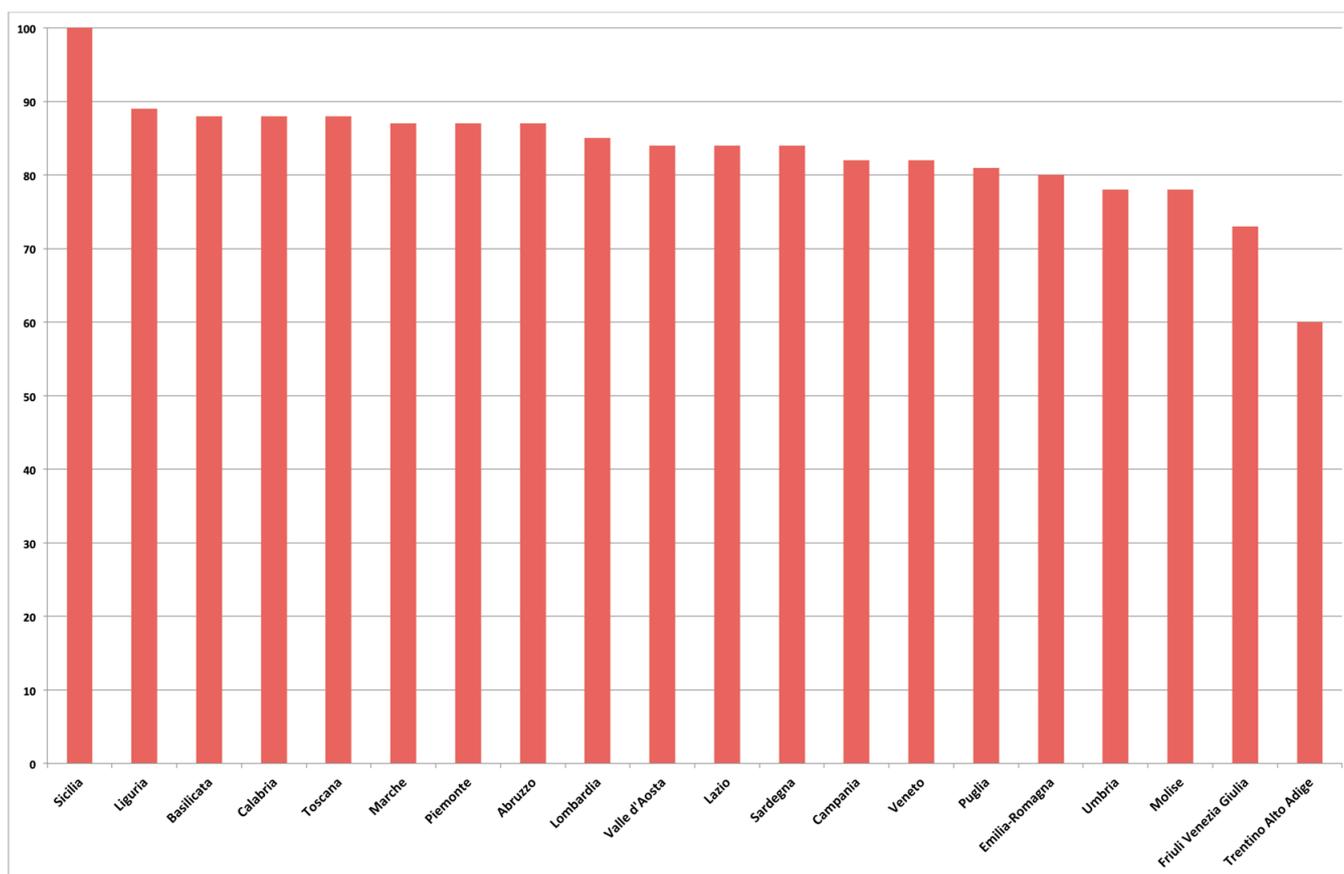


Figure 2. Spread of searches within Google by region in Italy (0–100, where 100 is the highest level reported by Google since 2004).

The most searched words were within the field of recipes that use flour, with the following among those that underwent a surge of over 5000%: “pane fatto in casa con farina 00” (homemade bread with 00 flour), “ricetta pane fatto in casa” (homemade bread recipe), “farina debole” (weak flour), “dolci con farina di semola” (cakes with semolina), “quanto lievito madre per un kg di farina” (how much sourdough per kilo of flour), “che farina usare per la pizza” (what flour to use for pizza). In addition to these keywords, there were considerable increases for “quanto pesa un panetto di lievito” (how much does a block of yeast weigh) (+4950%), “quanto lievito madre per un chilo di farina” (how much sourdough per kilo of flour) (+3800%), “cornetti” (croissants) (+1400%), “farina di forza quali sono” (what are flour strengths) (+1350%), “cornetti fatti in casa” (homemade croissants) (+1250%), “pane fatto in casa” (homemade bread) (+1100%), “pizza con farina 00” (pizza with 00 flour) (+1050%), “farine online” (online flours) (+750%).

After having found peculiar behaviour when it comes to direct user searches, the research turned to analysing the production and consumption of content related to the keyword “farina” (flour) within Facebook and Instagram. Between 1 March and 31 May 2019, the keyword under consideration had produced 11,398 public posts on Facebook that generated 2,620,450 interactions. Considering the same period in 2020, there were 18,872 public posts (+65.6%) with 7,082,305 interactions (+170.3%). Therefore, what was interesting, in addition to the increase in the amount of content produced, was the engagement generated, which had a decidedly sharp increase. Looking at the following two years in relation to 2020, we have, for 2021, 16,999 posts (−10.27%) with 5,539,618 interactions (−21.08%) and, for 2022, 16,909 posts (−10.40%) with 7,253,757 interactions (+2.42%). Over time, therefore, content production decreased while engagement only slightly increased in 2022.

Continuing the analysis on Facebook, the first 100 posts have been isolated out of the 18,872 collected in order to understand which ones performed best according to an

engagement ranking. This ranking, visible in Table 1, did not exclusively consider the most viewed posts, but also the content on which users were most active in terms of likes, comments and shares (this is due to Facebook concealing some of the metrics relating to the reach of the post under examination). The pages that obtained the highest rates of interactions were mainly about cooking, but also about chefs and public figures, from the media to politics to institutions, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. Summary of content with the highest level of engagement in public pages.

Page	N. Post	Eng. Total	Eng. Average
Cookist	26	617,072	23,734
Chef Hirohiko Shoda	11	256,003	23,273
Alessandro Servidio	3	214,436	71,479
Fatto in casa da Benedetta	4	181,699	45,425
Gianni Morandi	3	136,312	45,437
Tutti a tavola	1	89,505	89,505
Pasticceria Poppella	2	82,932	41,466
Gli Artisti del Pane di Gianluigi de Vito	1	73,181	73,181
Alessandra Spisni	2	68,135	34,068
Pescheria Di Napoli	2	64,372	32,186
Ilario Vinciguerra Restaurant	1	54,380	54,380
Damiano Carrara	1	52,911	52,911
Salvatore Lioniello	2	46,415	23,208
Cucina Botanica	2	41,738	20,869
Mollica's	2	41,226	20,613
Le ricette della nonna *-*	3	38,483	12,828
Gino Sorbillo Artista Pizza Napoletana	1	35,775	35,775
Natalia Cattelani	2	35,588	17,794
Luisanna Messeri	1	35,078	35,078
Croce Rossa Italiana–Italian Red Cross	1	34,355	34,355
Virginia Raggi	2	27,866	13,933
Chalet Ciro	1	26,330	26,330
Blog Giallo Zafferano	2	25,837	12,919
Mario Calabresi	1	24,961	24,961
SempliceMente	1	24,782	24,782
RTL 102.5	1	24,532	24,532
Radio DeeJay	1	22,553	22,553
Ètv	1	17,013	17,013
Erica Liverani	1	15,998	15,998
Dott. Franco Berrino	1	13,967	13,967
La Città della Pizza	1	13,942	13,942
Il razzismo non ci piace	1	13,892	13,892
la cucina di vane	1	13,311	13,311
Rossella Pane&Cioccolato	1	12,979	12,979
FICO	1	12,943	12,943
Puntato, L'App degli Operatori di Polizia	1	12,774	12,774
Questo lo riciclo, ti Piace L'Idea?	1	12,626	12,626
Il mio Saper Fare di Marisa	1	12,318	12,318
Righetto	1	11,961	11,961
Simone Rugiati	1	10,937	10,937
Napoli Fanpage.it	1	10,000	10,000
Fanpage.it	1	9508	9508
Zuegg	1	9422	9422
Inventaricette, in cucina con Maria	1	9213	9213
Nancy Coppola	1	9157	9157
Rebecca De Pasquale	1	8937	8937

From a content standpoint, the prevailing format was not, as one might think, that of live broadcasting as shown in Table 2. Even if a large part of the content producers were confined in their house, they preferred inserting videos within the platforms, according

to a logic more oriented towards offering catalogue-like multimedia content in the style of streaming platforms (such as Netflix), rather than favouring direct involvement and interaction.

Table 2. Summary of published content by type.

Type	Total
Link	17
Live Video Complete	3
Native Video	52
Photo	27
Status	1

Looking at Table 3, it is also interesting to note the incidence with which this content was published and that had the largest number of hypothetical user interactions. In fact, most of the content was published in the first month of isolation (March); then, the numbers declined in April, and finally dropped in May, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 3. Summary of published content by type of incidence of content publication.

Month of Creation	Total
March	50
April	36
May	14

Continuing the investigation within Facebook, it was deemed useful to verify the presence of the keyword “farina” also at the level of posts produced within public groups. This was done in order to check whether, in addition to the interaction around content produced by pages, the phenomenon also occurred in environments that aggregate content produced by individual users, according to a horizontal and much less vertical hierarchy. Comparing data from the same period in 2019, i.e., 26,693 posts with a total engagement of 964,267 interactions, the 2020 lockdown period exhibited a growth of 245.3% in posts produced with 92,172 and a growth of 331.9% in interactions with 4,164,673.

As reported in Table 4, it is really interesting to observe the evolution of content published in these spaces during the following two years, regarding the fact that these groups are the ones in which common users could publish and add information in a more easy and direct way. In 2021, there were 92,891 posts with a total engagement of 4,298,321 interactions, respectively: +0.78% and +3.20% from 2020, but in 2022, there were 46,848 posts (−49.17%) with 2,653,061 interactions (−36.29%). It seems that as the threat of the virus diminishes, the function of sharing flour-based recipes loses its symbolic value.

In terms of type of content posted in 2020, the groups, as shown in Table 5, differed from the professionalism of page management and were characterised by a dominant presence of photographic content compared to content requiring more sophisticated editing, such as videos.

Regarding content production incidence, reported in Table 6, it is interesting to note the peak in April, at the expense of the activity observed for pages, which was highest in March and then decreased, realigning with the first month of observation.

Table 4. Summary of content with the highest level of engagement by public groups.

Public Groups	N. Post	Eng. TOT	Eng. Average
Supermamme con il Bimby	11	98,063	8915
Le ricette dei 10eppero dolci fatti in casa	6	78,184	13,031
GialloZafferano	14	50,134	3581
Dolci ricette	14	42,664	3047
#uniticontrolvirus	6	26,792	4465
Amanti del cibo Siciliano (Sicil-EAT)	9	25,414	2824
cucinaremale	6	21,547	3591
Io compro siciliano	2	21,209	10,645
RICETTE	5	12,981	2596
Cucina Lucana	1	9909	9909
Fatto in casa per voi da Benedetta	3	8868	2956
Ricette facili e alla portata di tutti!	2	8567	4284
#mistagguaca e cuxinnu !!!!!	1	7261	7261
ANCHE QUESTA E' TARANTO	2	6396	3198
I buoni biscotti fatti in casa	1	6027	6027
Sicilia incanto del mediterraneo.	1	6016	6016
LE VERE RICETTE SICILIANE TRADIZIONALI (ORIGINALI E MODIFICATE)	2	5258	2629
Dolci Amicizie di Enza Capra	2	4300	2150
Piatti tipici teramani e fantasia	1	3469	3469
COLTIVARE L'ORTO	1	3437	3437
QUELLI DI PERETOLA	1	2464	2464
RICETTE DI SARDEGNA	1	2457	2457
Restiamo a distanza-Community	1	2272	2272
Ricette abruzzesi per tutti I gusti	1	2219	2219
Sicilia il Meglio	1	1973	1973
Aglione, Olio e Pepperoncino.	1	1971	1971
Recensione Prodotti LIDL	1	1895	1895

Table 5. Summary of content with the highest level of engagement by public groups.

Type	Total
Link	3
Native Video	1
Photo	91
Status	5

Table 6. Summary of content with the highest level of engagement by public groups.

Month of Creation	Total
March	24
April	51
May	25

Turning to the analysis of the data collected within Instagram, between 1 March and 31 May 2019 the keyword “farina” (flour) appeared in 2298 posts, with a total of 7,749,148 interactions. Considering the same period in 2020 with the lockdown in progress, the posts in which the keyword is present are 6202 with 17,657,577 interactions, marking an increase of 169.8% in content production and of 127.8% in user engagement, expressed in the form of actions on the content.

It is very interesting to observe how this tendency to indulge in content related to the use of flour in cooking has not waned over time but, on the contrary, has continued to develop. In 2021, there were 6401 posts (+3.20%) with 12,785,905 interactions (−27.58%) and in 2022, 7452 posts (+20.15%) with an engagement of 10,151,147 (−42.51%). As the

production of content increases, paradoxically, the rate of interactions decreases, as if they were of less interest in relation to 2020.

Continuing the analysis of 2020, the first 100 posts out of 6202, reported in Table 7, were isolated in order to investigate the peculiar characteristics of the content with the highest performance in terms of user activation. In this case, too, as for Facebook, the content that obtained a greater response in terms of engagement—and not merely of viewing—through likes, comments and shares was considered. In this case, the Instagram profiles that obtained the highest number of interactions were mainly associated with influencers as well as non-vertical profiles on cooking, with the engagement monopolised by a single account that alone catalysed more than four million interactions.

Table 7. Summary of content with the highest level of engagement by public groups.

Account	N.Post	Eng. TOT	Eng. Avg.
Benedetta Rossi	85	4,145,866	48,775
Giallozafferano	5	188,630	37,726
BEATRICE VALLI	1	117,065	117,065
Gli Autogol	1	97,008	97,008
Ghetto Trash	1	95,049	95,049
Fabio Volo	1	51,773	51,773
DANNY LAZZARIN	1	49,687	49,687
Nilufar	1	47,088	47,088
WILL	1	43,390	43,309
Al.ta Cucina	1	37,304	37,304
Laura Torrisi	1	33,776	33,776
Scuola da BOMBER®	1	33,172	33,172

In terms of content, looking at Table 8, the predominant type in more than half of the observed set of cases falls into the category IGTV, or Instagram Television, which is a video format that exceeds the standard set for the platform, which is 60 s. This is followed by the standard Instagram video type, carousels (several images in a single post) and single images.

Table 8. Summary of published content by type.

Type	Total
Album	14
IGTV	55
Photo	8
Video	23

Focusing on incidence, unlike Facebook, Instagram maintained a fairly even distribution of content throughout the three months of lockdown as shown in Table 9, which is clearly determined by the consistency of the account with the highest number of publications, a sign of a specific trend in building a continuous media diet for users.

Table 9. Summary of published content by type.

Post Created Date	Total
March	35
April	30
May	33

5. Discussion: Qualitative in-Depth Analysis

In a pandemic context in which social and cognitive structures were subverted, social media constituted one of the channels for the search for new balances, as some research

has shown [11,42,43], in an oscillation between reliable and unreliable content, which users had to navigate. Influencers, in this sense, have played a preponderant role, but users have also produced bottom-up messages aligned to their own communities or have grouped together in temporary groups to increase the sense of bonding and well-being in sharing. Although these links have been more manifest at the level of disinformation, they have also had an impact on reality in less deviant and obvious cases.

What emerges from most of the scientific literature produced since 2020 on the analysis of social network platforms is linked to feelings of profound instability and the search for finding balance in everyday life [44]. In this sense, the case under examination in the Italian context may represent an interesting example on a cultural level, considering how also in neighbouring countries such as Germany and Spain, the media consumption of content within social network platforms has increased, e.g., for female users among Germans [45] and focusing on chatting and sharing content and experiences for Spaniards [46].

Therefore, during this period, social media developed a high capacity in strengthening online groups [47], and influencers, even those not related to health, demonstrated significant power during the acute phase of COVID-19 in the dissemination of information through their fanbase [48]. At a time when anxiety, as highlighted by some studies [49], was one of the dominant feelings, Italian online activity is particularly interesting, since even in this context, content production emerged as a useful practice to overcome the moment of profound difficulty and indeterminacy with positive values [50].

It can be assumed that influencers somehow drove the phenomenon as reported by other studies [42–51], especially in the first month of restrictions. Focusing on what was observed around the keyword “flour”, the analysis of the type of content produced on Facebook pages with the most user interactions shows that said pages specialise in recipes or are dedicated to chefs and cooking personalities, with but a few exceptions. In the case of pages dedicated to cooking, the one with the highest volume of interactions was Cookist, which produced the most content and had the highest rate of cumulative interactions, followed by the page dedicated to the Japanese chef Hirohiko Shoda. The analysis also highlighted several pages related to the world of cooking run by chefs and cooking personalities such as Alessandro Servidio, Alessandra Spisni, Damiano Carrara, Salvatore Lionello, Fatto in casa da Benedetta.

Also interesting are the results of posts from profiles not related to cooking, but which include the keyword “farina” (flour) as a safe-haven asset. An example is the posts published by Gianni Morandi (famous Italian singer) showing his daily routine of preparing lunch (although admitting not to having prepared the flour products from scratch), by Virginia Raggi (the mayor of Rome in 2020) talking about food parcels or by the Italian Red Cross and the Police updating on the distribution of basic necessities, which included flour.

As far as public groups on Facebook are concerned, the pattern identified by Carelli and Vittadini [51] seems to be recurring. According to the research, homebound users connected to the Internet become producers of communication and representations from below, following specific stylistic features, according to a trend whereby platforms are increasingly information and entertainment products rather than interpersonal communication tools. This is also true in the case of the home production of flour-based products.

The keyword “farina” (flour), along with “ricetta” (recipe), thus fuels narratives from below to alleviate the stress of forced confinement, which follow the macro trend of hashtags such as #iocucinoacasa (#Icookathome), present in 2757 posts between pages and public groups with a total of 759,449 interactions on Facebook and 839 posts with 827,662 interactions on Instagram, as well as #iolofaccioacasa (#Imakeitathome), present in 251 posts with 113,081 interactions on Facebook and 731 posts with 4,365,632 interactions on Instagram. This happens in parallel with motivational hashtags such as the omnipresent #andratut-tobene (#allwillbewell), which appeared in 128,906 posts with 9,785,730 interactions on Facebook and 18,939 posts with 28,788,828 interactions on Instagram, and #celafaremo (#wewillmakeit), present in 17,210 posts with 4,634,455 interactions on Facebook and 7885 posts with 12,487,987 interactions on Instagram. The former set of hashtags, combined

with the latter, created a mythological narrative that blended Italian pride, domestic security and external danger thanks to the connective power of technology [51].

On Instagram, the set of posts that attracted the most interactions is singular and is essentially dominated by the content produced by the account of cooking star Benedetta Rossi (“In cucina con Benedetta”). This profile is devoted to the creation of recipes that are easy to replicate and ideal to make at home. The content that generated the absolute greatest engagement was produced by Beatrice Valli, influencer and former participant in the Mediaset network programme *Uomini e donne*. Valli, through a video in which she kneads pizza with her two children, using flour as the “glue of the family”, demonstrates her resilience against the privations of lockdown through the activity of cooking as a family.

6. Conclusions

This paper shows the cultural monopoly held by influencers, who have catalysed the attention and interactions of users within platforms around the theme of flour, potentially influencing not only the consumption of the commodity but also how it is used. From this point of view, the impact of Benedetta Rossi within Instagram is emblematic: out of the 100 posts with the highest rate of user interaction around the theme of flour, 85 come from her profile.

Observing the propagation of content, the ones produced by influencers diminished over time, while that created by regular users, shared in horizontal environments such as Facebook’s public groups, increased in the month of April, as if to demonstrate a movement that, after a learning phase mediated by influencers, sees users as protagonists in a second phase, where they put themselves directly to the test through sharing their results with peers.

May put an end to the euphoria for flour and home cooking, probably due to the glimpse of a return to normality and freedom after months of deprivation that have no comparison in the West, except for the period of the Second World War. Online searches, as well as the production of content, waned, and even the hashtags that had driven the resilience of the previous months gradually fell into disuse. Observing the same periods for 2021 and 2022, the “hype” around flour in terms of engagement and user-generated content seems to disappear.

The analysis carried out in the present study, although far from being complete and representative of such a vast and complex consumption phenomenon, presents aspects similar to those found by other scholars who have observed how the Internet has helped to shorten the distances imposed by the lockdown at the level of sociality [22]. The media have not been neutral in this process but have mediated experiences [52], limiting potential spontaneity through driving the spread of trends through the reach guaranteed by audiences directly linked to influencers and the sharing network guaranteed by their followers.

It could be hypothesised that the role of influencers linked to the world of cooking may have prompted the rush to consumption, but at the same time, flour seemed to appear as a potential safe-haven asset with which to face the days of home confinement, a potential return to a family dynamic through creative, manual and relaxing processes. Flour, in short, could be seen as a connecting users to an Italian tradition united through the experience of using and producing content in digital format. Curiously enough, this peculiarly Italian cultural aspect emerges from some experiences of researchers abroad, as in the case of Siragusa, where baking is recognised as an element of socialization, expressed in a digital key [53].

With all the limits of this study, this could be a starting point to a further understanding and definition of some of the deeper motivations, both of value and symbolic, of the behaviours that drove the apparently senseless consumption and purchase of flour in Italy, as well as an in-depth study of the choices related to the processing practices of bread-making by the Italian population during the months of March, April and May 2020. The

main goal should be trying to identify motivations and cultural values, thus also justifying the consumption and production of digital content having flour as its protagonist.

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