

Opportunistic Media and Information Literacy: A Case Study of the Implementation of E-Commerce in the Food Retail Sector in Italy

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Based on a case study conducted in Italy in 2021, this case study examines the process of media and information literacy (MIL) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the transformation of entrepreneurial culture among practitioners. It focuses on the transformation of the food retail sector that occurred during the first and second coronavirus lockdowns in Bra, a city in northwest Italy famous for its food culture. By examining the pattern related to the use of digital resources in the city food retail sector, this study shows that the acquisition of MIL in the spring of 2020 did not lead to a structural change in the local firms' entrepreneurial culture. Thus, this longitudinal analysis shows an opportunistic approach toward MIL that contextualized it as a resource only for emergencies. Thus, it clarifies the aspects of the entrepreneurial culture that delay deeper implementation and understanding of MIL.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, e-grocery, e-commerce, Italy.

The retail sector in Europe has experienced a tumultuous transformation in recent decades. In the 2000s, the growth of suburban shopping malls completely changed the routine consumption practices and exposed the frailty of traditional sales systems (Tomka, 2013, pp. 233–243). In the past two decades, the emergence of e-commerce platforms has further reconfigured the retail sector, affecting the job market (Chava et al., 2022) and the urban spatial organization within the tertiary sector (Moriset, 2020).

In this increasingly competitive world, everyday purchases changed consumer behavior, moving them away from traditional commerce locations, such as city centers and commercial districts. This created a crisis for traditional small and medium-sized enterprises, which are often run by families (Arrieta-Paredes et al., 2020). This change forced shop owners to experiment with new commercial strategies, such as launching e-commerce platforms (Lu & Reardon, 2018). However, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was uncertainty regarding the implementation of these new technologies, which were based on substantial media and information literacy (MIL) among shop owners (Fouskas et al., 2020). The extended medical emergency and the ensuing strict restrictions on public mobility led shopkeepers to experiment with e-commerce, invest in new marketing strategies, and develop e-commerce tools (e.g., Beckers et al., 2021; Din et al., 2022; Kleisiari et al., 2021). Thus, this period was a catalyst for implementing digital technologies in the retail sector (Beckers et al., 2021). It represented an unprecedented acceleration in the widespread acquisition of MIL by retail professionals. MIL is the knowledge and skills required to find, analyze, critically evaluate, and generate information in various media and contexts (Lindman, 2020). In this process, institutional actors, such as national and local government bodies, may support the adoption of competences and digital tools (e.g., Nikolajenko et al., 2021; Reardon et al., 2021; Yong et al., 2021).

Despite this sudden transformation in digital knowledge and practices, its actual impact on shop owners' entrepreneurial culture remains debatable (i.e., how shop owners understand their work, the enterprise's mission of their enterprise, and how they choose to conduct their business, see Pfeilstetter, 2021) and their understanding of these novelties, along with the importance of institutional actors in supporting a process of MIL acquisition and the successful implementation of digital strategies and tools. Thus, this study addresses the following two questions based on in-depth fieldwork conducted in Italy in 2020–2021:

- How is MIL acquired and implemented into business practice and culture in a context of crisis?
- How is MIL preserved and integrated into business practice and culture after the crisis?

This study examines the consistency of MIL among retailers pre- and post-pandemic through a case-study analysis of the food retail sector in the City of Bra and highlights institutional actors' significant contribution to facilitate MIL acquisition and the use of digital tools. The study indicates that the local firms' entrepreneurial culture did not change significantly after MIL acquisition in the spring of 2020. It highlights an opportunistic approach for using digital resources, contextualizing them as a resource for emergencies only. Thus, it clarifies the aspects of the entrepreneurial culture that delay a thorough implementation and understanding of MIL.

The study examines the impact of the pandemic on the improvement of MIL in the retail sector, focusing on the role of MIL in transforming entrepreneurial culture among practitioners. This study suggests interpreting how and why MIL is achieved or disregarded by professionals from the perspective of their everyday business dynamics. The research was conducted by researchers of the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo in collaboration with the City of Bra and Associazione Commercianti (Retailers' Association, ASCOM hereafter) Bra and is part of the activities of the university carried out within the project "Food Drug Free" (www.fooddrugfree.it) funded by the Piedmont Regional Council (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021). This study describes the context of food e-commerce during the pandemic and outline the research objective before analyzing the ethnographic fieldwork.

The Pandemic Context in the Food E-Commerce Industry

Although e-commerce was developed in the 1990s, the food retail sector saw rapid growth only in the 2010s (Fedoseeva et al., 2017; Mortimer et al., 2016; Tadelis, 2016). This sector experienced growth in large urban centers with greater digital infrastructure and easier delivery logistics (Buldeo Rai et al., 2019). Food services customers were primarily young, urban, young, belonged to the so-called digital natives, mostly well-educated male with good computer skills (e.g., Hernández et al., 2011; Lian & Yen,

2014; Liang & Lim, 2011). Due to increasing expansion and improved online services, consumers used e-commerce as a complementary channel to traditional forms of food shopping (Benn et al., 2015; Conaway et al., 2018). It specifically represented a way to find better prices and products that would otherwise be difficult to find and save time by receiving food directly at home or work (Anesbury et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020).

Specifically, e-shopping for food or e-grocery was preferred for every day, long-life, and canned products, such as preserves, pulses, or pasta (Fontefrancesco, Cionchi, et al., 2021), or high-quality products with limited local availability or were highly expensive (Fernández-Uclés et al., 2020; Liang & Lim, 2011). This preference also includes fresh premium products (e.g., typical or organic products) as e-commerce is considered the simplest and safest way to build a connection and trust with producers (Bryła, 2018; Oncini et al., 2020). Along with this medium, e-grocery was used as an emergency option when in-store shopping was not possible due to the vicissitudes of life, such as the birth of a child or the onset of health problems (Hand et al., 2009). This role was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fontefrancesco, 2020).

The first cases of COVID-19 were officially detected in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China (Panneer et al., 2022). As the disease spread worldwide, countries took unprecedented public health measures (Thomson, 2020). Governments in the West implemented various methods and forms of containing the disease between 2020 and 2021. They imposed the use of personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, and restrictions on personal mobility. In this context, the possibility of buying in-shop products, including food, was limited if not prohibited. This new daily scenario led to a significant change in consumption patterns. It specifically marked an acceleration in the implementation of digital commerce tools (e.g., e-commerce platforms and online delivery services) even among micro-firms (Kim et al., 2021). This scenario led shopkeepers to shift from traditional forms of sale and embrace new multi-channel strategies during lockdowns. Thus, they demonstrated a rapid and unprecedented familiarization with media and information technology even in rural areas (Melis et al., 2015).

This phenomenon was particularly evident in Italy, the first Western country to enforce a national lockdown in March 2020 (Fontefrancesco, 2020; Guigoni & Ferrari, 2020). Specifically, the restriction led to the

extensive use of e-commerce, the emergence of e-grocery, and a shift in sale and purchase practices throughout the country (Ancc-Coop, 2020). This phenomenon also affected rural centers, which face a significant gap in terms of information infrastructure and the availability of online services (Selva, 2020). While these changes may indicate a long-lasting effect (Grishchenko, 2022), this study suggests an alternative interpretation.

In Italy, the COVID-19 emergency unfolded in February 2020, with the first hotspots identified in Lombardy, about 250 km from Bra. The first three cases were detected in Bra during early March. The first nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 11. The lockdown imposed extraordinary restrictions that blocked all economic activities, including the retail sector, with few exceptions such as the food sector. Food stores could remain open, although strict social distancing and sanitation were enforced. People suffered severe mobility restrictions (people could only leave the house for necessary and mandatory purchases, such as food and medicine or to reach their workplace) (Guigoni & Ferrari, 2020). In Bra, in particular, individual mobility was limited to 200 m from home, forcing people to shop for groceries from the nearest outlets.

The first lockdown ended on May 4. There was a gradual return to normal mobility till the end of summer. After August 15, the number of infections increased nationwide, which was accelerated by the reopening of school activities in mid-September. In response to the second wave of the pandemic, the government imposed several measures to restrict mobility and limit gatherings on October 8. This led to a second national lockdown on November 3. Although this lockdown imposed less severe restrictions (e.g., free movement within the municipality was allowed for shopping and several businesses was allowed to remain open) and their full enforcement depended on the intensity of the pandemic in individual regions, the state of emergency lasted till April 26, 2021.

Overall, the first and second lockdowns represented an abrupt end to conventional methods of retail management. This forced shop owners to explore new forms of service and channels of information to maintain the customer relationship. In this regard, despite age differences, they found solutions in implementing a complex array of digital resources to reinvent their business during the lockdowns.

Methodology

The ethnographic case study examined how MIL and the use of digital tools affected small-scale food retailers in 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Typically, the food retail sector does not rely much on digital resources for its business. We observed how retailers communicated using digital tools and possibly acquired new tools for use. This ethnographic case study (Schwandt & Gates, 2018) focused on small food retail companies in Bra in the province of Cuneo in northwestern Italy. The study followed earlier studies that examined the specificities of the town's food market (Corvo & Fontefrancesco, 2018) and its food retail sector (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021).

The study, spanning July 2020 to March 2021 covering two national lockdowns (spring and fall 2020), was conducted by the research team of the University of Gastronomic Sciences in collaboration with the municipality of Bra and ASCOM Bra, which is a business association of Bra shop owners.

The activity followed three phases:

- The first phase from July to September 2020 involved a systematic bibliographical review of Italian and international sources (academic literature and gray literature sources identified using online search engines, such as Google, Yahoo, and Duck, as well as citation databases, such as Scopus, EBSCO, and Google Scholar) on the impact of the pandemic on the use of e-commerce by the retail sector and e-grocery among consumers in the area (Fontefrancesco, Cionchi et al., 2021).
- The second phase, which included 30 firms, spanned from October to November 2020 and involved ethnographic fieldwork in Bra. This included participant observation of the city's retail practices and interviews with food shop owners and consumers. The firms were sampled among ASCOM Bra associates covering 30% of the food retailers. The sample includes the city's most common typologies of business and business structures. All participants were required to complete the following: (1) a preliminary 27-item questionnaire examining the shop's business structure and operation, as well as the use of digital tools in the business, and (2) an in-depth ethnographic interview based on the life-story method (Atkinson, 2002)

to examine the respondents' understanding of the pandemic and the impact on business perception, as well as the motive for implementing new digital tools (for further details on the tools used during the research, see Fontefrancesco et al., 2021). This study included a qualitative social media analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) of the digital content developed by respondents during the lockdowns.

- In the third phase spanning from December 2020 to March 2021, data were analyzed and the results announced by engaging the local population and professionals of the city (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021).

Digital Resources during the Pandemic

Bra has a population of 30,000 inhabitants and is one of the main economic centers of the province of Cuneo (Camera di Commercio di Cuneo, 2017). The city is well known worldwide in the food industry for its work with Slow Food, an international NGO that campaigns for the protection and valorization of local, traditional food products across the world (Fontefrancesco & Corvo, 2019), and the international food festival Cheese (<https://cheese.slowfood.it/>). Bra's economy is based on an active agricultural sector, specialized in cereal, horticultural, and livestock production (cattle and poultry), and a consolidated manufacturing sector (Bailo, 2014). In particular, the city has a remarkable number of small and medium-sized firms specialized in food retail, with over 100 shops in 2021, mainly distributed in the city center (see, for example, www.bracittaslow.it).

The city is characterized by a vibrant dynamism in food consumption, with strong appreciation for food quality and curiosity for new culinary trends (Corvo & Fontefrancesco, 2018). However, this gastronomic dynamism did not translate into a preference for new methods of consumption and purchase; instead, in December 2019, people purchased food from small and medium-sized shops located in the city or directly from producers (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021). E-grocery, in particular, was limited, where only 15% of consumers using it mainly for durable goods once or twice a year and not daily consumption (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021). Moreover, before the pandemic, few businesses in the city had an online presence through a corporate website or a social page. Underdeveloped e-commerce, combined with limited digital media competences among shop owners (Fontefrancesco et al., 2021), changed dramatically with the pandemic.

First, this study focuses the digital tools used by food retailers during the pandemic. We then discuss the four main categories of resources in various digital tools used by the respondents: messaging tools, social networks and corporate websites, e-commerce platforms, and delivery services.

Messaging tools were used to exchange messages or simple materials between individuals or within groups and most widely used by entrepreneurs even before the pandemic. During 2020, these tools were crucial for exchanging information between businessmen by organizing theme-based groups. ASCOM Bra played a key role in this regard. It created WhatsApp groups of shop owners and assigned the task of regularly updating them about the pandemic-related changes in the regulatory framework. These groups became essential for shop managements, particularly during the first lockdown when legislation changed daily. Moreover, some retailers organized WhatsApp groups with neighboring businesses. They formed street or neighborhood groups, which included the retailers and facilitated business collaboration. Together with these groups, many retailers organized groups or business accounts to collect delivery orders, mainly from trusted customers.

Social networks and corporate websites were used for promotional communication of goods and services. Before the pandemic, their use was limited to shops with younger owners and those targeting younger customers. Of the respondents, only three had such a network or website, and it was solely used for advertising, not for e-commerce. However, since the first lockdown, other firms created profiles to attract new customers due to decrease in their usual clientele (e.g., food and wine tourists) and the ineffectiveness of traditional promotional tools (e.g., advertising posters or leaflets). For a similar purpose, some of the shop owners created newsletters for their consumers to provide information about new products and special discounts.

E-commerce platforms were used to sell products and services to individuals or groups. Before the pandemic, research showed that e-commerce use was limited and sporadic, mainly among newly opened shops by young owners. Most of the city's businesses lacked websites or online sales channels. The pandemic introduced new needs for logistics needs and customer demands. In response, all shops implemented an e-commerce service through an app called Tutaca (<https://www.tutaca.it/>), developed by ASCOM Bra and promoted by ASCOM Bra and Bra municipality. This

is an e-commerce portal designed to incorporate a delivery service into a conventional retail firm. The low entry costs and fees for shop owners and the effective advertising campaign by the business association and municipality to encourage local consumers to use the app led to a wide range of shops, not only food retailers, joining the platform. Thus, Tutaca became a useful tool for citizens, who used it daily during lockdowns, even more than more established services such as Amazon.

Delivery services were used to ensure home delivery within the city. Unlike other cities, Bra was not served by platforms such as Deliveroo, Glovo, or Uber Eats. Instead, each shop organized its own delivery service using its own staff to meet the new needs of the Bra population. Concurrently, a local delivery service called Food Delivery Bra was created to ensure home delivery for food and other goods. This service was operational during 2020. However, in 2021, new competitors, such as Glovo and Justeat, entered the local market to become the main players along with the delivery services run by individual shops.

A Process of Competence Building

Spring 2020 was a period of dramatic and fast acquisition of MIL. All respondents confirmed they had become familiar with new digital tools, with all but five respondents having never used them for their business before. This was a process of learned by doing, with the added support of their peers and institutional actors, such as ASCOM Bra and the City of Bra. These institutions played a key role in interpreting a sector's professional needs and providing training and developing specific IT tools, such as Tutaca in March, and Bra città Slow (www.bracittaslow.it) later in November, which is a communication portal that highlights Bra's characteristics and aggregates its e-commerce functionality for local business members.

The longitudinal analysis shows that the acquisition of the new digital competencies and their use appeared to be incidental. The knowledge and use of digital tools for retail business was limited before March 2020. Few shops had experimented with social media communication and e-commerce for business. They too conducted their core business in person, in their shops because of three main impediments. First, the overall level of MIL among shop owners was low, as many were older than 50

years with no secondary education. Second, these firms' clientele were those living in close proximity to the shops, who also were not familiar with using digital tools. Third, there was limited staff in the shops, with all of them working full-time and leaving them very little spare time outside of work hours to manage a website or social profile or effectively run e-commerce activity.

The first lockdown (March–May) marked a drastic departure from the past. The stringent limitations imposed required rapid shift toward adopting digital communication and sales strategies. The launch of new technologies, such as Tutaca, facilitated many businesses to engage in e-commerce and online delivery services. Studies indicate that some environmental elements stimulated the change. First, the new legislative restrictions on the retail sector hindered in-store activity, which required a change in the business strategy and providing time to implement the digital tools. Second, customers' attitude toward visiting crowded places changed. Third, there was a consequent increased demand for delivery services and a direct connection with the shop owners to coordinate their shopping in response to the emerging medical, economic, and practical needs. By the end of the lockdown, all respondents were actively providing online e-commerce and delivery service.

However, during the summer months (June–September), as mobility restriction were relaxed, shop owners began to marginalizing and discontinuing the use of digital tools. Only five of them continued to update their company profiles and inventories in e-commerce platforms. This shift was mainly driven by customers' preference to return to in-store practices they were familiar with in the pre-pandemic period. Moreover, the shop owners preferred to return to commercial strategies that were focused on in-store sales, which led to a change in the use of personnel and the decision to discontinue online activities. The retailers justified the abandonment by the widespread belief that the pandemic had been overcome and future lockdowns were impossible. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

From October to December 2020, during the second lockdown, the shops resume their online services. Unlike the spring, the revival was faster and smoother, indicating the stability of firms' digital competences. The role of institutions was less prominent during this period, as there was no need to further promote the use of digital resources that were already known and available to the retailers.

Opportunistic Literacy

Before the pandemic, MIL was deeply linked with generational belonging and education. It was not considered a fundamental asset for the local food retail sector as most of the enterprises based their entrepreneurial model on personalizing the economic relationship and fostering direct, personal knowledge between retailer and customer. Specifically, this business model is embedded in a geography of proximity, where the shop is close to the customer's home, allowing for daily, on-foot visits and purchases limited to products for immediate consumption. In this context, the same retailers considered their stores as proximity services and did not consider the possibility of extending the business reach beyond the local space (e.g., block, neighborhood, or the town). Similarly, they did not consider their stores as potentially attractive services capable of meeting the needs of customers far from the city.

The lockdown led to significant disruption of this continuity. This “black swan” (Taleb, 2007) compelled the shop owners to explore new strategies for sustaining their business, which included developing key personal competencies such as computer and internet skills and advanced internet use (Durán-Becerra & Lau, 2020, p. 53), specifically related to e-commerce and delivery services.

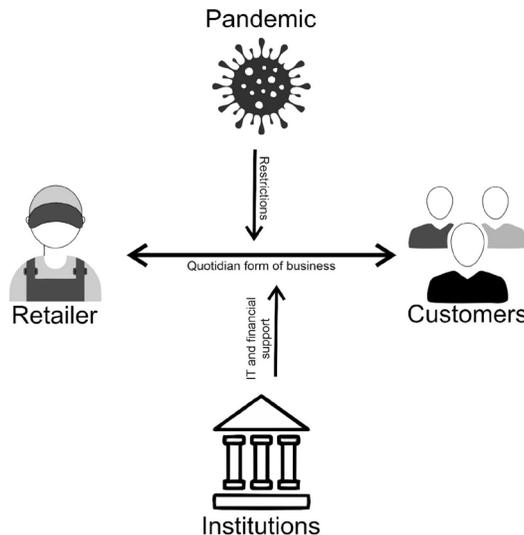
While e-commerce appeared as a possible solution, a substantial MIL was achieved through a combination of individual and collective efforts. Each company followed its path of implementing digital resources based on its IT capabilities, business characteristics, and clientele. While messaging services were widely implemented and corresponded to the application of familiar and used technologies to a new domain (establishing and maintaining relationships with clientele and other shop owners), the implementation of e-commerce and delivery services represented a completely new addition facilitated by institutions. ASCOM Bra and Bra municipality served as facilitators by lowering the costs and difficulty associated with accessing digital technologies and raising awareness among the shop owners and general public about the opportunities provided by these technologies.

Despite the positive combination of individual proactivity and institutional support that enabled retailers to master the required MIL competencies within a few weeks, the implementation of new digital tools and economic

strategies appeared only circumstantial and deeply linked with the emergence of the pandemic crises. Both the pandemic and institutional support affected only the quotidian practice without permanently changing the retailers' understanding of their work and activity (Fig. 1).

Despite the overall success of the implementation of e-commerce among Bra shop owners during the lockdown, it did not lead to a long-lasting transformation in the retail sector. The adoption of e-commerce was considered only a remedy to sustain business and maintain customer relationship. This conservative approach did not push the retailers to reassess their business structure or explore the new opportunities offered by online services in the post-lockdown period, especially to expand their commercial reach and enhance customer relationship and information flow. Retailers justified this opportunistic and conservative approach by indicating the uncertainty of the results from continuing online services and a cost-benefit ratio perceived as particularly burdensome for the businesses, especially during a complex economic period. Thus, both the stringencies of the pandemic and substantial institutional support could not generate substantial innovation in the sector, which resumed its activities in the post-lockdown period repeating commercial practices and entrepreneurial models used in the past.

Figure 1. Graphic summary of the impact of the pandemic and institutional intervention of the retail sector in Bra



Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions

This study shows that acquisition of MIL was crucial for the retail sector to counter the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, acquiring MIL and consistently using digital resources do not generate long-term effects in terms of changes of entrepreneurial culture and business practices. Therefore, the study emphasized the importance of contextualizing the process of acquiring MIL to assess its actual significance in terms of innovation.

The process in Bra involved the acquisition of basic skills related to retrieval and assessment of information online and especially competences related to the creative production of information (i.e., those competences referred to as 3.1 and 3.2 in the UNESCO MIL competence framework: UNESCO, 2013, p. 58; also see Grizzle et al., 2021). This study highlights the importance of noneconomic, institutional actors in supporting this process and providing effective digital tools. In so doing, it advocates a collective approach to acquiring MIL, thus moving away from the idea that MIL can and should be acquired by the individual enterprise independently and that the effectiveness of an approach that can involve entire sectors of a community and offer shared responses. This can be an important lesson beyond the city level.

This contingency led institutions to focus on providing resources that could be immediately used to sustaining their business. While this approach allowed economic success, it did not kindle long-term entrepreneurial innovation. Thus, to unlock the full transformational potential of MIL competencies for the sector in non-contingency situations, it is necessary to broadly intervene and assist entrepreneurs to reassess their activities, value, and potential, showing how digital competencies and tools can help in achieving larger goals. Otherwise, cultural inertia may prevent independent experimentation with digital tools and strategies.

Therefore, this study addresses entrepreneurs. More importantly, it addresses private and public institution that support them and suggests a direction of intervention to strengthen the sector's overall MIL. In this regard, future research will outline the necessary actions to progress toward the common good.

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