Inventing Marketplace Traditions: Italian Breakfast 1975-1995

Pirani Daniela

*Abstract*— Building upon Hobsbawn & Ranger (1983), this paper tries to understand if commercial traditions can be invented like social and political ones, and how that can be done. This question is answered through historical research, observing the marketing activity of an Italian brand in 20 years (1975-1995) and its role in establishing the national practice of Italian breakfast. Through rich and novel archive data, this paper attempts to demonstrate how commercial traditions are created by combining elements of nostalgia and innovation at the level of materiality, meaning and practices. Commercial tradition becomes productive of a marketplace shift, generating new products, competences and understandings.

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To cite: Pirani, D, (2020) Inventing Marketplace Traditions: Italian Breakfast 1975-1995. In G. Patsiaouras, J. Fitchett and AJ Earley (Eds.), Consumer Culture Theory Conference 2020: Interrogating Social Imaginaries. Leicester, United Kingdom.

# Introduction

Building upon Hobsbawn & Ranger (1983), this paper tries to understand how commercial traditions, like social and political ones, can be invented, and how they intersect with wider social stability.

This question is answered through historical research, observing the marketing activity of the brand Mulino Bianco in between 1975 and 1995 and its role in establishing the national practice of Italian breakfast. Through rich and novel archive data, this paper attempts to demonstrate how commercial traditions are created by combining elements of nostalgia and innovation at the level of materiality, meanings and practices. Commercial tradition are not only linked to the past, but they also become productive of marketplace changes, generating new products, competences and understandings, as in the case of the Italian breakfast

# LIterature Review

While drawing onto Hobsbawn & Ranger (1983), this paper is also indebted to Scares (1997) concept of living social tradition. According to Scares, traditions are not only the product of dominant powers, but they are productive of material and symbolic resources for those involved, who are engaged in their emplacement and preservation. Hence, this paper explores the role of tradition in the marketplace, established by brands and cultivated by consumers. The semantic of tradition is linked to nostalgia, whose potential in the marketplace has been already explored (Havlena & Holak, 1991; Holbrook, 1993). Nostalgia is a back-word idealisation that reimagines the past in the face of the current turmoil, producing past as an alternative rather than a prelude to the present (Stern,1992; Tosh,2013). Despite reimagining the past, traditions are conceptualised as distant from novelty. For instance, sociological literature on food consumption has defined novelty and tradition as key antinomies, since heritage is conceptualised at the opposite of new food products and recipes (Warde, 1997). Historical studies contribute to this literature by showing how food traditions are the result of drastic transformations that happened overtime (Geizen et al., 2019). This paper addresses this direction by observing how the Italian breakfast, based on a formula that includes coffee, milk and bakery products, has become a canonical model within Italian food habits (Vercelloni, 1998), despite having been introduced to Italian consumers only in the 1970s.

# METHODOLOGY

This paper is based historical research of the Brand Mulino Bianco, that adopts the principles of 'brand genealogy' (Holt, 2006), to understand how the cultural context influenced the development of the brand. In doing so, this paper sits with other authors such as Pinchera and Rinallo (2017) who try to assert the role of consumer culture in historical research. The data collection spanned over two years and it used novel data that from the Barilla archive, that hosts Mulino Bianco's documents, the Italian bakery association and the Mondadori publisher archive. Such data include outsourced market researches, internal company’s communication, documents from Mulino Bianco bakery and marketing departments. Interviews with former Mulino Bianco managers have been used to integrate the documents.

# Findings

Findings show how Mulino Bianco managed as an Italian tradition to establish a kind of breakfast based on biscuits. The analysis shows how such a result was achieved in three stages.

The first was the testing and development of new recipes of the *frollino*, a rich biscuit developed from the know-how of British bakery. The second stage was the use of Motivational Research to build the marketing strategy of Mulino Bianco. Mulino Bianco is the first Italian brand that adopted such a method, and it did so by establishing a connection between biscuits and personal nostalgia. The third stage was the development of a PR campaign, aired between 1992 and 1995, that branded the practice of the Italian breakfast through media coverage and scientific support. This last step built on the previous stages, the materiality of the products and the nostalgic appeal they had acquired. Archive data show how these three stages all implied an element of innovation, such as new recipes, new marketing research and novel scientific data.

The example of Mulino Bianco shows how, to invent a tradition, a brand should innovate products and materiality, leverage on nostalgic meanings (both personal and collective), and emplace a legitimising narrative that combines both innovation and nostalgia. This paper contends that the Italian breakfast was a novel practice marketed as a comeback of tradition.

# Conclusion

This paper offers a contribution to historicizing consumption practices, such as the Italian breakfast, and to bridging historical research and consumer culture theory. The analysis of Mulino Bianco offers a caveat on the importance of the socio-political background in which traditions are established. In fact, it observes how commercial traditions are linked to stability and reassurance, and thus how their effectiveness is related to contexts of instability and change.

The production of tradition at the turn of the 19th century worked as a device to stabilise the social fabric during the emergence of mass politics. Albeit not sharing the same scope of political or social traditions, commercial ones answer the same tension towards social stability. In specific socio-historical condition, commercial traditions provide the cultural tenants to reproduce a sense of common identity and continuity with the past, while contributing to change the marketplace.

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