False sense of security facing Covid-19

and its implications in the bakery industry

by Viviana Lily Pérez Camargo

More than a year after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are still doubts and misinformation among the population, regarding hygienic measures. In Mexico City the population was bombarded with false information that managed to divide the perception of the necessary hygienic measures. One of the prevalent measures is the use of plastic as a barrier or as a surface covering, to prevent the possible spread of droplets expelled by the infected population; this measure was seen in the food sector, where thin, single-use plastics are utilized, which were scheduled, since June 2019, to be prohibited by law (except those compostable and with some exceptions) starting from January 1, 2021, in Mexico City. This led to a contradiction between the government demands and the actions of the population alongside with the industries. Considering the above, arised my interest to present the current and future implications, as well as to understand the reasoning behind this phenomenon, specifically in the bakery industry.

Methodology

I conducted a research on the permanence and possible risk of Covid-19 infection present in food and packaging, to understand the level of threat they represented to the population; along with a research on the motives, development and management of the corresponding entities, around the reform of the Solid Waste Law in Mexico City; on the other hand, I conducted surveys and interviews with representatives of the sectors involved, to learn about the reasonings behind their actions, and their opinions on the matter. The above with the purpose of finding the hidden relationships, mapping the frictions between industries and contrasting them with the benefits obtained, in order to question the repercussions and responsibilities that this phenomenon left on the interested parties, which are presented here within a conflict actors map, which summarizes the panorama of Mexico City.

Conflict mapping key

- Actors involved in the conflict. The size equals the power they have over the situation.
- Links or close relationships.
- Informal links.
- Predominant direction of influence.
- Broken link.
- Conflict.
- Problems or factors involved.
- External actors, with influence on the problem.
- Main points of interest.

Results

Perspectives

32,7%
of respondents said they felt very safe with this measure.

Among the rest, it was commented that not knowing the hygiene measures in which the bread was packaged, made the bag lose its meaning.

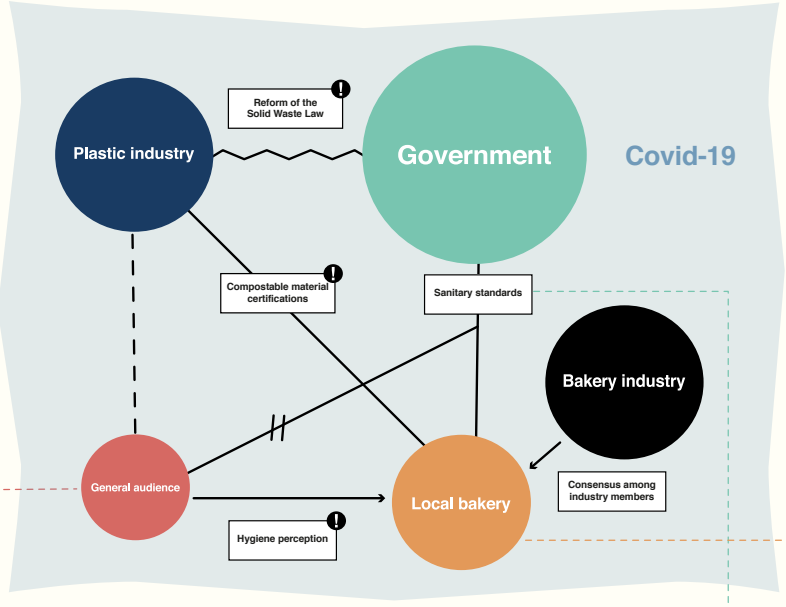
Would you like this measure to continue even after the spread of the virus is controlled?

47.8% Yes — **40%** No — **12,2%** Don't care

89%
of respondents expect the government to place environmental protection as one of the priorities when planning for the post pandemic recovery.

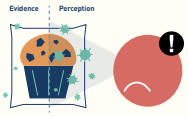
After a brief discussion with two General practitioners, both agreed that the possibility of contagion through food is minimal (based on their general knowledge),

nonetheless they prefer to take this extra precaution.



Risk level

The World Health Organization stated that the possibility of contagion through food or its packaging is almost nonexistent, while there is little scientific evidence demonstrating the permanence of Covid in foods similar to bread. The only extra measure that is recommended is the constant disinfection of surfaces that come into contact with food; therefore, the discourse is directed towards the prevention of contagion among workers.



"It's compostable"

Although the government demands certification of compostable materials, this implies an industrialized process, that was left in charge of the industry itself; besides to date there is no system in place to ensure the recovery and specialized management of such waste, so it will be discarded like regular plastic.

Is it worth it?

Benefits:

- Hygiene perception and sense of tranquility to the public.
- Prolongs the shelf life of bread.

Costs:

- Extra effort for scheduling and training workers.
- Increased cost of plastics due to the need for certificates.
- Increased friction between the plastic industry and the government, due to due to law's reform.
- Promotes the increase of pollutants by not questioning their future repercussions.

Discussion

The bakery industry decisions, rather than a responsible measure against Covid-19, are a response to the interests of the actors that surround it, so its effectiveness remains in doubt until the corresponding investigations are carried out.

The government did not consider the plastic industry, nor the context of the waste system in Mexico City. Additionally it leaves all the responsibility to the companies and citizens, therefore it isn't a coherent or sustainable measure.

Both measures feed the false perception of security, but we are dealing with mental factors, so rather than questioning its use and effectiveness, we must focus our efforts on the correct handling and disposal of said material, anticipating its possible permanence.

Conclusion

As long as there is a risk of contagion and the presence of misinformation, these measures will not diminish; however, plastic is not the problem, but the lack of structure and coherence within the proposals given in Mexico. We must question its permanence, while not overlooking the long-term effects they will have on the environment, as this also poses a health risk.

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