

An integrated time-space-interaction framework for the analysis of social media content creators’ practices: The case of translocal trajectories of @foodqood

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Abstract

Addressing a gap in extant research on social media content creation, the paper presents a time-space-interaction analytical framework for the investigation of content creators’ development of practices through time and orchestration across the spaces of their online presence, cross-checked through interactions with followers. While the framework is potentially applicable to any research focus, the paper focuses its application on the analysis of translocal trajectories as entextualised in the semiotic practices of social media video-based food content creators. The application takes as a case study @foodqood, a food content creator based in Italy who gained megainfluencer status (with over 23 million followers on TikTok) and analyses the creator’s whole production on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. The framework is structured along four analytical semiotic layers, i.e., the resources of the subject matter (food), the embodied and disembodied resources of the creator’s performance, the video-specific visual and auditory resources, and the resources in the paratext. The semiotic layers are considered by intertwining three dimensions of analysis, i.e., the creator’s trajectories through time, across the different social media platforms of their online presence, and in the interactions with followers. The findings show distinct phases in the creator’s development of practices, from experimentation to institutionalisation, and trace trajectories of the creator’s identity performances marked by distinctive strategies in the combined use of the three layers of semiotic resources; the development of these through time, across spaces and in relation to followers’ prompts reveals the creator’s shifting interests in terms of audience reaches, as well as a nuanced effort to appeal to different audience segments. The conclusions point to the usefulness of a social semiotic framework that includes a languaging perspective to observe transnational phenomena, and of such a time-space-interaction analysis to trace the complex dynamics of influence between practices from below and institutional ones, and between agency in sign-making choices and semiotic regime ideologies.

Keywords: TikTok; Instagram; YouTube; influencers; food content creators; provenance; video recipes; multimodal analysis

Foreword: Note to readers

This paper has been difficult to write. Instead, the data were incredibly fascinating and obsessively captivating to research; I could barely stop myself diving into them.

In 2022-23, my research on interactions about food on social media unexpectedly led me into the world of cooking tutorials on Instagram and TikTok. Initially disoriented, as always happens when entering a new social semiotic space, the more the platforms' algorithms presented me with new cooking videos to watch, the more I could immediately notice patterns, recognise similarities and differences among them, and started to become familiar with the creators of these videos from the semiotic resources used in them, which would shape their identifiable styles as well as the specific lifestyles, groupings/niches, and audience segments they positioned themselves in and appealed to. My curiosity grew, prompting me to follow a few creators closely over time, noticing changes in their content—stylistic elements emerged, evolved, or disappeared, and differed across TikTok and Instagram; their identities and audience engagement shifted through time and space.

Prompted by these serendipitous observations on both changes and variations, I entered a few rabbit holes, starting from one specific content creator, and then a few others, and I started to look at their posting activity throughout time in each media platform, taking note of my observations of both (1) changes through time for when a certain stylistic aspect would first appear or was later abandoned, and (2) variations across spaces for the same aspects, as well as (3) comments by followers in the videos that introduced such changes and variations, and (4) discourses about the creators' productions that would appear in online media outlets. The notes I took enabled my serendipitous research to construct a fairly clear and nuanced picture of the creators' development of semiotic practices through time, and the differences in their curation of content they offered on TikTok and on Instagram, and saw how these could enable me to identify changes and variations through time and across spaces in their identity performances and in foregrounding/backgrounding different audience segments among their viewers/followers, i.e., the creators' translocal trajectories.

When I came across the call for a special issue on translocal social media content creation in the journal *Discourse, Context and Media*, I wrote my proposal with the idea of drawing on those observation notes to present the findings on the translocal trajectories of two of these creators, which I had followed more closely as both based in Italy coming from another country (Morocco and Ukraine), but they had strikingly different followings, i.e., widely international for the former, while eminently Italian for the latter.

Then, when, a year later, I started to work on the paper, I reviewed relevant literature on representations of food on Instagram and TikTok, on social media influencers and content creators in general, as well as on food creators specifically, and realised that – quite surprisingly to me – none of the many studies published in the latest two decades presented findings drawn upon an analysis of the creators' whole content production through time and across different spaces. Most studies (see Section 2) drew either on interview data with content creators or their followers, or on a content analysis of videos and/or comments retrieved through relevant hashtag searches, or those few doing a multimodal discourse analysis, analysed in fine-grained detail only two or three videos – all studies I have come across discuss their findings synchronically, so without looking at development trajectories

through time and across spaces, , which is what fascinated me the most in my rabbit hole quest.

This realization shaped the work for my paper, together with the need of systematising the method I had serendipitously followed in my observations. I refined the method by analysing one creator's whole production, systematically annotating featured that emerged video after video. This led me to spend many nights into digital rabbit holes, following the creator's TikTok, Instagram and YouTube profiles; I felt I was turning into a detective, trying to find the traces of the motivations behind the changes I was observing. At the end, I had so many observations for this one creator that I realised I would struggle to fit the analysis into the word limits of an article, let alone introducing the methodology in detail and pairing it with the other creator for comparison.

I had to make a choice: Thanks to the guest editors who understood my struggle, I submitted a concise version for the special issue, presenting and discussing only the findings of the case study, while I'm here presenting the extended version with the full detailed literature review, presentation of the analytical framework, and detailed analysis.

This will be a long read, and I'm aware it reads rather sterile and soulless – although less so than the concise version; it does help to (evidence the findings discussed in the article and also) give back some life to the phenomena discussed. But they cannot even close give the sense of the lived complexities one would experience entering the rabbit holes of the investigation I was captivated in. The analysis provides links to the videos that mark changes in the creator's practices. I strongly recommend you to turn into detectives yourselves and venture in.

1. Introduction

Short videos have become an increasingly influential format in online communication, on social media platforms and beyond (Wei and Wang, 2022). They are used both by individuals and institutions for communicating contents effectively, privileged not only due to their relatively low production cost and effort, but also because media platforms' algorithms prioritise them over other formats, as they can more easily attract viewer's (increasingly shorter) attention and engagement within today's information overload media landscape (Rajendran et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Dedicated social media platforms have emerged, such as Twitch and TikTok, which are entirely devoted to sharing short videos (Feldkamp, 2021; Kaye et al., 2022; Su, 2023; Wang et al., 2019), and in the competition race for revenues, older media platforms traditionally designed for static posts, such as Instagram and Facebook, have expanded their functionalities to host short videos, while older video-dedicated platforms have also foregrounded this format, e.g., YouTube recently introducing 'shorts' as a distinct category from 'videos' (Rajendran et al., 2024).

With the use of TikTok surged particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Feldkamp, 2021), new content creators have emerged and gained a considerable follower base on the platform, which has consequently attracted increasing relevance and attention in the media – at the

same time, established content creators on older media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, have adapted and innovated their practices accordingly, by posting short videos on their established profiles as well as opening new ones on TikTok.

The following questions emerge:

- How do creators develop and orchestrate their online presence across social media spaces?
- How do creators develop their semiotic practices and strategies through time to build, maintain, and expand their follower base, given the platforms' opaque algorithms and competition in gaining viewers' attention?
- How do creators shape their identity performances to appeal to diverse viewers, given the superdiverse audiences characterizing social media spaces?
- Most importantly, what methods can be used to find answers to these questions?

To answer these research questions, the present work introduces an analytical framework that can provide a holistic and nuanced account of variations and changes in the sign-making practices of social media content creators, and exemplifies its application by analysing the video productions of a food content creator, with a specific focus on the translocal trajectories resulting from the creator's identity performances.

The framework can be used to focus on any aspects of social media content creators' semiotic practices and their social orientations and positioning, in terms of identity construction, appeal to specific audiences, and their relation to dominant trends and semiotic regimes, including linguistic ideologies. The case study exemplifies the framework application to an analysis focused on the creator's translocal identity performances. To keep with the special issue overarching theme, the analysis looks at the creator's multimodal and languaging practices to trace the extent and degree of translocality in sign-making trajectories and strategies. This enables the analysis to identify variations and changes in the creator's interests to reach different audiences, more or less globally, both in terms of locales/languages spoken and of lifestyles/preferences.

The development of such an analytical framework is motivated by the need to have an integrated methodological tool to provide a holistic picture of the complexities and nuances of semiotic practices both in terms of development and changes through time and variations across spaces, as well as in relation to or comparison with dominant semiotic practices ongoing within the same genre.

Section 2 justifies the need for such a framework by reviewing relevant studies on social media content creators, which tend to look at their productions only synchronically or draw on interview data to derive information on how the creator's practices have evolved through time. Section 3 presents the key theoretical concepts used in the analysis, before introducing the analytical framework in Section 4, later applied to the case of a food content creator in Section 5. The conclusions generalise from the findings on the case study in relation to the specific focus on translocal trajectories as well as on the contributions of such a time-space-interaction analysis framework alongside a social semiotic perspectives that considers

cultural affiliations in all sign-making, including, but not necessarily prioritising the role of language.

2. Content creators on video-based social media

Campbell and Farrell's (2020) widely used categorisation distinguishes 5 types of social media content creators based on number of followers, i.e., "celebrity influencers" and "megainfluencers" (1million+ followers, the former by virtue of their previous celebrity status outside their social media presence, the latter instead by virtue of their social media content), "macroinfluencers" (100k-1M followers), "microinfluencers" (10k-100k followers), and "nanoinfluencers" (0-10K followers). These have different potentials in influencer marketing resulting from their "perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital" (2020, p. 471). Studies on influencers' practices have proliferated in the fields of business, marketing and advertising, and in consumer research (e.g., Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022; Audrezet et al., 2020; Barta et al., 2023; Britt et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2021; Chetoui et al., 2020; Gamage and Ashill, 2023, 2023; Haenlein et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Mallipeddi et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021), as well as in linguistics, communication, media and cultural studies (Abidin, 2015, 2016a; Bhatia, 2023; Cotter, 2019; Drew et al., 2022; Kolo, 2024). Recently both in the industry and in research, there has been a tendency to prefer the term "content creator", perceived as less loaded and more authentic than influencer (Kozinets et al., 2023; Miguel et al., 2024; Weber et al., 2021).

When reviewing studies on content creators, Miguel et al. (2024) distinguish between a self-focus perspective and an audience-focus one. Studies using the former look at content in terms of creators' identity construction (e.g., Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011), while the latter consider its persuasive use in attracting audiences, gaining and maintaining their trust as well as creator's strategies to promote visibility of posts (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020; Cotter, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

"Regarding 'self-focus' and identity construction content, influencers walk a fine line between maintaining a constant personal branding image and adaptation to changes" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1537). Their self-branding strategies develop through time to attract new audiences, changing self-presentation styles from expressive storytelling less deliberately shaped with audiences' interests in mind to more purposely-refined content design and curation towards increased professionalism (Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Miguel et al. conclude therefore that influencers "move from a 'self-focus' content approach to an 'audience-focus' approach" (2024, p. 1538). This happens over time through the acquisition of skills for successful social media content production and distribution (Enke and Borchers, 2021), while they "develop an understanding of the dynamics that operate in different social media and the workings of their algorithms" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1532), and develop strategies to maximise their content exposure, including hashtags, captions and mentions.

Yet, as the cited studies indicate, research discussing creators' development through time is relatively scant, focuses on skills, strategies and understanding of different platforms with little or no consideration of semiotic practices, relying mainly on interview data with content creators. Interviews are adopted in most studies, also when not looking at development

through time, (Audrezet et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2021; Cao, 2023; Hödl and Myrach, 2023; Kolo, 2024; Lou, 2022; Miguel et al., 2024), sometimes combined with a content analysis of a sample of posts (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; Hoose and Rosenbohm, 2024), while building and maintenance of trust is studied mainly through surveys and interviews of followers and consumers (Abidin, 2015; Barta et al., 2023; Chetoui et al., 2020; Dekavalla, 2020; Gamage and Ashill, 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2022; Lou, 2022; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019; Rathnayake and Lakshika, 2022; Shan et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021).

Not in relation to changes through time but to variation across spaces, Álvarez-Monzoncillo (2022) acknowledge that “little is presently known regarding how influencer practices differ across platforms” (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022, p. 13) and suggest the adoption of digital methods such as automated content analysis and social network analysis (as in Britt et al., 2020), which however process only written data in posted content (through, e.g., predefined keywords and hashtags present in the posts, subject to topic and sentiment analysis) and metadata, e.g., profiles’ number of posts, followers and followed, and rates of engagement (Lee et al., 2023).

Studies focusing on posted content, generally privilege analysis of metadata and written language (as more easily searchable and analysable through more advanced, refined and tested technologies and frameworks for linguistic analysis) (Bhatia, 2023; Cotter, 2019; Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Mallipeddi et al., 2022; Rowe and Grady, 2020), paired with content analysis for visuals (through coding of isolated visual elements in images or videos for quantitative analysis) (Guégan et al., 2024; Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019; Winzer et al., 2022). Mixed-method and qualitative studies that have looked at self-presentation and communicative strategies and effects through analysis of meanings produced in images and videos discuss these synchronically (Meza et al., 2023; Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019), sometimes also paired with interview data (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021; Weber et al., 2021), yet with no consideration for changes through time (also in the large scale visual analyses on Instagram photos by Manovich, 2016). They do so either by analysing topic and/or style of (also large numbers of posts) retrieved through number of views and/or hashtag searches (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021; Ling et al., 2022; Schröer, 2023), or, more rarely, by focusing on selected creators’ profiles, either analysing their production as a whole (Wang and (William) Feng, 2022; Zappavigna, 2016) or through large samples of posts (Meza et al., 2023), also through ethnographic methods (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b, 2015). Their findings are extremely insightful in categorising different styles and typologies of posts and content creators’ projected identities and roles, yet with no consideration for changes through time and variations across spaces. Finally, studies conducting fine-grained multimodal analysis, informed by social semiotics or integrated with other perspectives such as translanguaging, necessarily focus on single videos or a very limited number of posts (e.g., Darwin, 2022; Ho, 2024; Toh et al., 2023).

One exception is the study by Erz and Heeris Christensen (2018), who looked at five Danish fashion bloggers’ posts through time, supporting their analysis through interviews with four of them. Their findings trace a development path in three stages, from individual consumer, through to collective blogger, up to blogger identity phase, identifying the shaping of blogging as a professional practice, through a continuous “process of identity negotiation, adaptation, and re-interpretation with a set of multiple stakeholders” (2018, p. 79), encompassing readers, other bloggers and the product brands they review and/or promote and sponsor. The fluid and emergent character of practices in these spaces requires them “to

‘move back and forth’ in identity (co-)construction” (Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018, p. 79). In the absence of institutional mediation in the blogosphere, “the bloggers have to constantly engage in a process of public negotiation between their past, present and future selves in an identity co-creation process” (Erz and Heeris Christensen, 2018, p. 79). In turn, as they discuss, the growing of the activity as a profession (at least for those bloggers perceived as more successful) is contributing to shaping the blogosphere as an organisational space, with its own institutionalisation of practices, validity and recognition. Their findings on bloggers are extremely insightful. Given that blogging is the precursor of social media communication and the oldest form of online influencing, made mainly through writing and image-based posts, and many bloggers with influencer status or aspirations have either moved or branched out to Instagram or TikTok using short-video as a more effective way to attract viewers (also to their blogs) and revenues, and cultivate their popularity (e.g., the case of fashion mega-influencer Chiara Ferragni, see Bazaki and Cedrola, 2023), questions open on how content creators develop their practices through time and across spaces in these newer forms of social media content. In sum, the state of the art of research on social media content creators, presented here as a necessarily selective overview, provides both the grounds and the needs for looking at short video creators’ production through time and across spaces.

2.1. The case of food as social media content

For the case study, a food content creator has been chosen in reason of his gained mega-influencer status on TikTok (and micro-influencer ranking on Instagram), which allows the analysis to show the usefulness of the framework to trace trajectories of variation and change of semiotic practices in relation throughout the arch of development in popularity.

Food as a sub-domain has been chosen as one of the most popular content on Instagram and TikTok (Schröer, 2023; Wang et al., 2022), which has attracted a lot of attention in terms of food representations on social media and their effects (e.g., Benasso and Stagi, 2021; Calefato et al., 2016; Contois and Kish, 2022; Feldman and Goodman, 2021; Lewis, 2020; Schröer, 2023), yet with no specific focus on food content creators. While research has focused mainly on beauty and lifestyle influencers (e.g., Britt et al., 2020; Cao, 2023; Chetoui et al., 2020; Dekavalla, 2020; Glucksman, n.d.; Rathnayake and Lakshika, 2022; Rocamora, 2022), “less academic attention has been paid to food influencers” (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1531).

The case of food is also particularly interesting in terms of translocality, in reason of a deeply-felt relation with culture and identity, of the tensions between tradition and innovation, and between practices resulting from circulation and contact vis. pervasive protective discourses about typicality and national(ist) canons (for gastronationalism both as institutional top-down policies and as bottom-up banal nationalism, see DeSoucey, 2010; Ichijo, 2020; Leer, 2019), in short, for its profound social semiotic significance (for reviews, e.g., Marrone, 2016; Stano, 2015). Against the many studies on representations of food on social media, no specific attention has been devoted to how these texts index their creators’ trajectories of identity performances and interests in reaching specific audiences.

3. Relevant theoretical underpinnings

The framework introduced in Section 4 draws on key principles and tenets of social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). For the specific focus of the case study analysed in Section 5, the paper draws on translocality from Kytölä (2016), and unpacks its complexity by deriving identification axes through the dimensions of provenance developed in Adami (2025) within a social semiotic perspective onto translanguaging (Adami, 2018, 2017), and on culture and interculturality (Adami, 2023). The sub-sections below present a selective review of each, limited to aspects that are relevant to the method and analysis introduced later in the paper.

3.1. Translocality (Kytola 2016)

I follow Kytölä in defining translocality as

a sense of connectedness between locales where both the local and the global are meaningful parameters for social and cultural activities, and, second, as a fluid understanding of culture as outward looking or exogenous, characterised by hybridity, translation, and identification (Hepp 2009a, 2009b; Nederveen Pieterse 1995).” (2016, p. 2) (2016, p. 371)

Globalisation has made more manifest the complexities of cultural dynamics (Appadurai, 1996), as increased international circulation of money, goods, representations and people enhances the deterritorialized character of discourses, lifestyles, and semiotic practices (i.e., ways of making meaning and doing things with others).

As a result, any cultural production needs to be conceived simultaneously “as partly territorial, tied to a (habitable or occupiable) space, and partly de territorial, finding dimensions and meanings from spaces and locales beyond our daily habitats” (Kytölä, 2016, p. 4).

Some discourses and semiotic practices are transnational from the start, with no identifiable local origin, while others originating in a specific locale are appropriated and refashioned in others through “borrowing, blending, remaking and returning” (Pennycook, 2007, p. 6).

This is particularly the case of content produced and circulated on social media, thanks to the enhanced connectivity opportunities of digital technologies as well as the affordances of audiovisual representations, encompassing photos, videos and music, and in-built functionalities for interlingual translation. These all facilitate access of cultural texts and artefacts – as well as discourses and semiotic practices represented in them – not only among people based in different countries but also by people speaking different named languages, consequently enhancing the potential transnational, transethnic and translanguingual reach and character of social media content.

The already problematic essentialism of common conceptions of culture(s) as tied to nationality, ethnicity and/or language, highlighted by many in ethnography, applied linguistics and cultural anthropology in the last decades of the last century (e.g., Baumann, 1996; Holliday, 1999; Street, 1993), is even more untenable in social media communication.

This does not mean however that essentialised national, ethnic/group identity, and/or logocentric discourses of culture cease to be pervasive (Jones, 2013), also among social media users.

Therefore, when faced with social media content, it is crucial to examine “the semiotic (often linguistic, multilingual) choices that people make to identify themselves and to orient to their audiences ranging in the continuum between local and global (Leppänen et al. 2009)” (Kytölä, 2016, p. 371)

Kytölä (2016) identifies five dimensions of translocality in digital communication, i.e., at the level of *individuals*, who can participate in multiple spaces, of *communities*, spanning across different locales, of *communication*, connecting different locales, of *culture(s)*, *cultural expressions and products*, produced and consumed across locales, and of *experience and social meanings*, as a result of people in different locales partaking the same interests, values and affiliations.

If research has extensively focused on communities of interest and practice (Barton and Tusting, 2005) and affinity groups online (Gee, 2005), by showing not only the more positive effects of cosmopolitanism in questioning national(istic) boundaries of culture but also more recently by showing the negative effects of social media echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016; Garimella et al., 2018) and cultural tribes (Jones, 2024), little has been studied on translocality in digital communication at the level of individuals.

Yet social media afford and generate increasingly individualised communication and meaning-making practices (Adami, 2010, 2014a, 2015), and while some platforms afford the creation of collective spaces where people participate as communities of interest, e.g. Facebook groups, the design of social media platforms shapes social semiotic spaces increasingly less as a collective, community or group place and more as an individualised stage, with individuals performing by uploading their content to be viewed, liked and commented on by viewers/audiences, who can only comment in that space, or respond to it from their own profile/space, generating a loose type of connection, what Zappavigna calls ambient affiliation through hashtags (2018).

The phenomenon of social media influencers, macro/micro-celebrities, and of content creators more generally is particularly emblematic in this regard. Hence the present paper aims to contribute not only to social media research on content creators but also to Kytölä’s (2016) individual dimension of translocality.

To do so, however, we need a more refined conceptual tool to further qualify the translocality of a given content. If a key aspect of translocality (and related concepts such as transnationality, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism) lies in the fact that “points and axes of identification cut across more traditional boundary markers such as nationality, ethnicity or language” (Kytölä, 2016, p. 379), then we need a tool that allows the analysis to identify these points and axes of identification, to enable research on translocal phenomena to unpack their complexity, and go in depth into the variables and components that make contents not only translocal, but also *differently* translocal among them. The social semiotic concept of provenance provides such conceptual tool.

3.2. Social semiotic multimodal approach

The present work adopts a social semiotic perspective onto the analysis of meaning, communication and interaction in considering all that one perceives as potentially meaningful, if somebody gives a meaning to it, thus turning it into a sign. Meanings and signs can be made out of anything, so not just writing or speech for language and, as a key tenet of multimodality, it is crucial to consider the meaning made by the intertwining of multiple semiotic resources together, as communication is normally multimodal rather than relying on only one semiotic mode. This is obviously the case for video recipes posted by content creators on social media such as TikTok and Instagram, as they make meaning out of a combination of resources, which include resources specific to the food preparation itself, those involved in the creators' video performance, those in the video paratext (title, description, hashtags), as well as specific filmic resources (see section 4.1).

Differently from other traditions in semiotics, social semiotics talks about semiotic resources or modes rather than codes. Also differently from most approaches in linguistics, it postulates that signs are made rather than used every time a resource is used, and meanings are made every time a resource is engaged with, rather than being decoded from ready-made signs. Indeed, meanings are not pre-given, fixed and stable and there is no inventory of ready-made signs that can be used and interpreted correctly by knowing the code. Analogously, there is no grammar or rules but only regularities, shared or dominant uses of resources. Rather than signs with pre-assigned meanings, sign-making and meaning-making in communication relies on 'meaning potentials' of semiotic resources.

Meaning potentials derive – and so can be analysed too – from the materiality of the specific resource and its past uses in the same or other context. Analogy – and hence metaphor – is the key device humans use to make signs and meanings out of semiotic resources. A sign-maker selects a resource that is 'apt' to express their desired meaning, apt for some criterial aspect in its materiality or past uses that can be associated to that meaning. Every time a resource is used, a sign is made. Rather than arbitrary, signs are thus created through a motivated association between the resource and the meaning that it is intended to express (Kress, 1993). Hence, by tracing the motivated association, the analysis can make informed hypotheses on the sign-maker's 'interest' (Kress, 2010) at the moment of making the sign, defined as the momentary focusing of the sign-maker's social history and positioning in relation to the specific communicative situation at hand. This, integrated with a contextualisation work (van Leeuwen, 2021) on broader social dynamics, enables the analysis to derive the positioning of the sign-maker's communicative practices and meanings in relation to power, i.e., their agency in conforming to or contravening/distancing/innovating from dominant and/or space-specific semiotic regimes and ideologies.

Analysing the sign-making practices in relation to the affordances of the medium and media platform and to ongoing dominant semiotic practices of the genre and specific space allows the analyst to pinpoint the sign-maker's interest also in respect to the type of audiences they aim to reach and the ways they shape their relation with them, which is useful to derive the extent/degree and type of translocality in their identity performance.

As discussed in Adami (2018, 2017), a social semiotic perspective on sign-making and meaning-making is fully compatible with a translanguaging perspective (Canagarajah, 2011; Creese and Blackledge, 2018; Garcia and Li Wei, 2014; Li Wei, 2017), in that

- it is interested in socially-situated semiotic practices, with a focus on the sign-maker's agency and assuming the 'social' as prior to semiosis;
- it sees meanings as fluid and contextual;
- it conceives of meaning- and sign-making as practices and processes;
- signs are never used, they are always newly made each time a sign-maker chooses a semiotic resource and associates it to the meaning s/he wishes to make in actual representations;
- in labelling sign-making practices, it does not use notions such as national codes, (non-)standard varieties, let alone (non-)nativeness of sign-makers;
- it uses modes as heuristics; they are not fixed or pre-given codes or systems of ready-made signs and rules for their use; rather, they are semiotic resources, which have an ever-changing set of meaning potentials as derived from their materiality and previous uses, developed by specific social groups to fulfil specific functions;
- sign makers draw on the resources available to them to make signs in socially-situated contexts, in relation to their interests, their communicative purposes and their assessment of their audiences. (Adami, 2018, p. 40)

This makes social semiotics a suitable overarching approach onto meaning making in all resources; in considering any instance of signification in all forms an act of sign-making and of meaning-making, the perspective can easily accommodate a view on language in terms of *linguaging* acts. Research on linguaging has indeed been

questioning the ideological nature of national languages, as separate, bound and identifiable entities that speakers need to master to be fully proficient, and is instead interested in situated practices of 'linguaging', and in how these reveal individuals' dynamic repertoires that draw on diverse linguistic resources, as needed to communicate in specific situations. (Adami, 2018, p. 41)

While research in translanguaging has expanded the meaning of the label to include multimodality within it, so that combining writing and image or emojis in novel ways is discussed as (multimodal) translanguaging (see, e.g., Baynham and Lee, 2019), social semiotics warns against logocentric views on communication and meaning, still traceable in considering multimodal sign-making as part of (trans-)linguaging. The logics should be reversed in its hierarchy, with sign-making in all resources as the superordinate, and linguaging as the label that refers to acts of sign-making in the modes of speech and writing.

3.3. Provenance dimensions

To trace the motivated association in a sign, and hence the meaning potentials of semiotic resources, social semiotic analysis uses two tools, which are two basic principles of human semiosis, i.e., *experiential meaning potential* and *provenance* (Kress, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2021). The former refers to the motivated association between form and meaning by virtue of physical and psychological experiences, e.g., we make the meaning 'emotional' when we hear a trembling voice because of our experience of a trembling voice when we are emotional. Provenance refers to the motivated association of meaning to form by virtue of past uses of the resource in previous contexts (what would be called 'convention' in sociolinguistics for language 'use'), e.g., we consider pink a gendered colour not out of any physical property of the colour being intrinsically (or iconically, in traditional semiotics) more suitable to express a certain gender, but out of having seen that colour being used for girls and women in other contexts. When employing a resource identifiable as coming from another context, the sign made achieves the social meanings attributed to that other context by the sign-maker and meaning-makers in the new context: that is the case of many examples of cultural appropriation, in which resources are taken from

minoritised contexts and used in dominant ones with newly made meanings which stem from the dominant context's values give to the minoritised one. That is the case of resources identifiable in provenance as coming from the global south and achieving an 'exotic' meaning potential when borrowed by the global north, for example.

Drawing on Adami (2025)'s mapping of attributions of provenance in discussions about food, provenance is not only origin from a place, as we are used to conceive of borrowings in linguistics; rather provenances can refer to different dimensions, i.e.,

- *Space*, when resources used are identified as originating from
 - o a specific place, from household to locality, from region to nation, up to broader geopolitical area, or
 - o a semiotic space, such as specific media platforms and sub-contexts within these
- *Time*, for provenances from
 - o A decade/time in the past
 - o A generation
 - o A certain age group
 - o A specific situational time (or occasion)
- *Lifestyle, Class/taste, or Expertise*
- Various *sociodemographic variables* such as Occupation, Gender, Religion or Ethnicity, with the latter often times associated in discourse with geographical space (in an ethnoracial ideology), in spite of circulation of people and ethnic diversity in most countries today
- *Neurodiversity* or *sensorial* dimension (which bridges between provenance and experiential meaning potential).

These dimensions, originally derived from the attributions and identifications of provenances expressed verbally in Facebook group discussions about food, constitute attributions of non-/sharedness (e.g., when avocado on toast is interpreted – through provenance – as indexing millennials, the food practice is attributed as shared by that generation and not others), so provenance dimensions work as cultural dimensions. Using provenance dimensions can help the analysis produce a more diversified picture of the cultural affiliations and axes of identifications expressed/performed through the use of specific semiotic resources, reducing the risk of restricting attributions of culture to nations.

Using provenance dimensions when looking at social media content allows the analysis to map the multiple axes of identification in a creator's identity performance, hence specifying the contexts – and consequently social groupings – that are indexed in it, as well as the type of audiences these might appeal to, hence also tracing the intended addressees of a given content.

This creates a detailed picture of the type of translocality, which goes beyond the mere labelling of a phenomenon as translocal, or as originating (through borrowing, appropriation and resignification) solely from other geographical/political places, crucial for social media

content creation given that it often relies on resources that are not identifiable as originating from a country but rather from (and appealing to) specific lifestyles or affinity semiotic spaces that are transnational in their composition.

4. Analytical framework: integrated time-space-interaction analysis

The framework presented in this section is suitable for analysing the trajectories of variation and change of social media creators of video content. Developed specifically for food video content creators, with a research focus on their translocal aspects, it can be applied to other genres/domains and with other research questions or foci.

Analysing the production of social media video content creators can be quite overwhelming and disorienting, as videos are multimodally complex in themselves, creators' production is frequent, in their aim of maintaining their social media presence and increase their followers, and often spanning across different media platforms. To make the data selection manageable and at the same time to provide a holistic analysis of their trajectories of variation and change, the framework structures the multimodal analysis in four semiotic layers, distinguishing among types of semiotic resources, and along three integrated dimensions, across time, space and in the interactions with their followers, as well as along axes of contextualisation for support materials (Figure 1).

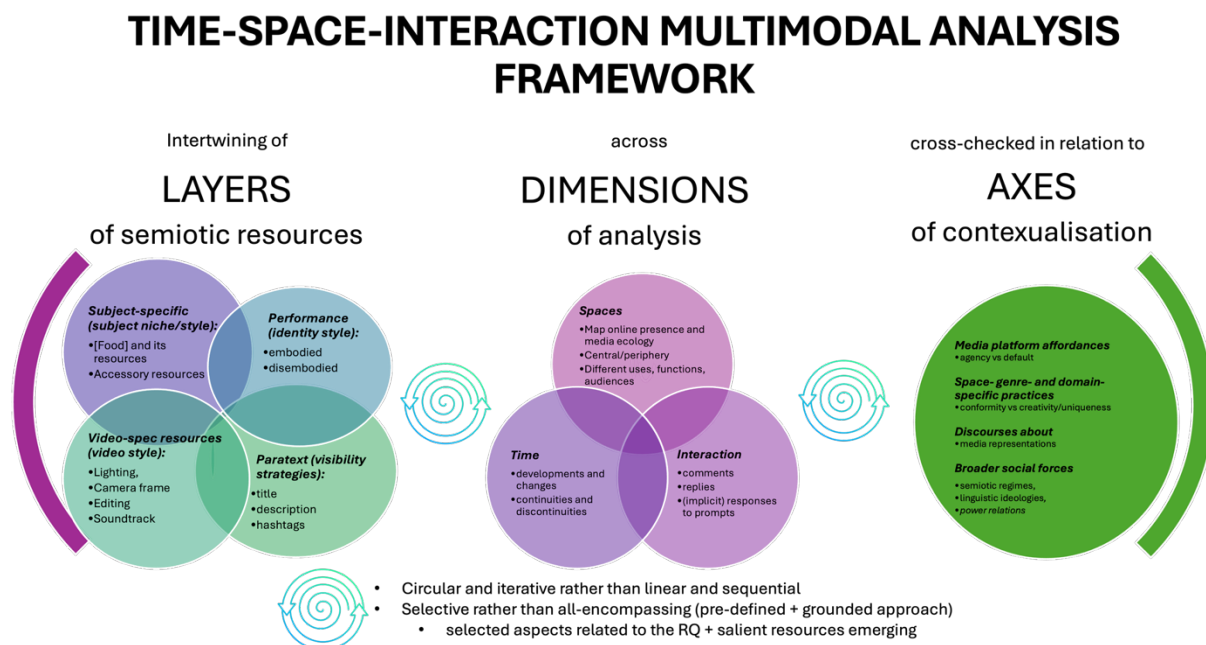


Figure 1. Time-space-interaction multimodal analysis framework.

Due to the many layers and dimensions of the framework, the research focus must always drive the analysis selectively, to make it manageable. Indeed, multimodal transcription,

annotation and analysis of even a very short video can be extremely time consuming unless there is a specific focused aspect. The framework is therefore suitable if the research wants to provide an account of the creator's semiotic practices and strategies as a whole and throughout their whole production, with reference to a specific focus (such as translocal trajectories, as in the case study presented here), rather than analysing the meaning potentials of specific videos in depth. It has been developed precisely to fill the gap identified in section 2, i.e., to analyse changes through time and variation across spaces of social media (video-based) content creators' video-based productions.

4.1. Layers of multimodal analysis

A key step in any multimodal analysis is to identify the different semiotic modes and their roles in meaning making before considering the meaning created in the relations between them. To ensure that the analysis considers all meaningful resources relevant to the specific research questions that are co-deployed in time and space in a social media post, the following layers can be identified:

- ***Resources of the subject content matter***, i.e., food in our case. Food makes meaning multisensorially, through taste, smell, sound, temperature, texture and visual composition. Videos afford only audio-visual resources, which are used synesthetically to evoke other senses (e.g., crunching sound for texture, or saturated colours for taste): these involve not only a dish name and function, but also its ingredients, its overall assemblage and its components in the final preparation, with modal resources involving shapes, colours, sizes, composition/layout (in the presentation of the dish), as well as visual- and auditory-resources indexing textures; the site of display can be considered here too, as co-text of the dish, e.g., the type of kitchenware used, the container and stand on which the dish is presented. It might sound strange to consider these as semiotic resources, however the meaning-making potentials of food have long been analysed in semiotics (for reviews see e.g., Marrone, 2016; Stano, 2016, 2015). Food resources can be analysed through provenance for their indexical meanings, in terms of social values, aesthetics and identities, also in terms of translocality, e.g., whether a certain dish, ingredient or preparation method is considered more or less traditional (pointing to past or innovation), more or less local (pointing to geographical place/ethnicity), elite or popular (pointing to taste/class), for specific lifestyles (vegan, high-proteins), group ages (food shaped in funny shapes as appealing to children), neurodiverse sensitivities (privileging food components kept separate on a plate or certain colour palettes), or indexing expertise vs. lay cooking, and so on for all dimensions of provenance, which point to specific cultural affiliations in food practices and resources. These all achieve social values on the basis of where we encounter them first and from which sources, and how we locate them within the foodscape, including what is trendy as promoted by content creators. These resources contribute to shape the style of the content and hence attract certain audiences rather than others; they are indicative of the content creator's positioning of their content in the vast foodscape present on social media.
- ***Resources in the video performance*** (characters and mise-en-scène in cinematic terms), encompassing embodied resources like gestures, face expressions, body

proxemics and movement, speech, as well as disembodied ones like clothing, objects, the background setting and any writing shown or overlaid on the video. These resources contribute to shape the identity of the content creator's persona, and their performing style and aesthetics, along various provenance dimensions (e.g., professional or homely/lay, expert or amateur, refined or careless, but also fashionable or not, and also indexing sociodemographic variables such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender (through the language used as well as clothing, somatic traits and overall grooming and clothing style), as well as the tone (e.g., serious or humorous, friendly-peer or expert towards learners). This is particularly relevant in shaping a unique and recognisable style needed to stand out among the many creators competing for viewers' attention, and in indexing the implied audience segments or type of viewers to which the style can appeal to.

- ***Video-specific audio-visual resources*** (filmic effects and editing in cinematic terms), such as filmic cuts, lighting, transition and speed change effects, camera positioning, movements and frame, and music/soundtrack; these contribute to the video's aesthetics whose provenances viewers might recognise and affiliate with, e.g., the typical fast-paced style of TikTok videos with action scenes dense in editing cuts, or the hyperrealist intimate aesthetics of ASMR videos achieved through close-up filming and enhanced sound effects (Niu et al., 2022; Zappavigna, 2023); soundtrack provenances might also be more or less cohesively tied with resources in the subject matter to mark a local/national identification of the dish.
- ***Resources of the video paratext***, such as its title and description/caption, including hashtags as a key resource that indexes the creator's interest in appealing to specific audiences through ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2018, 2015).

The identification of different layers of semiotic resources prevents the analysis from the risk of missing potentially relevant semiotic resources. It mitigates the risks of devoting unbalanced analytical scrutiny to language vs other resources. It aims at achieving a holistic picture of the resources that contribute to meanings and effects relevant to the specific research focus.

As a methodological caveat, resources are necessarily selectively annotated and analysed only for the relevance to the specific research question or aspect that is the focus of the research. Multimodal analysis is time consuming and effort taking, particularly for videos, as these afford the co-deployment both in simultaneity (in space) and sequence (through time) of all kinds of visual and auditory resources. A multimodal annotation of all resources deployed, even at the mere level of form, can take hours for a very short scene in a video, let alone an analysis of 'the meaning potentials' of a video, making it unmanageable for the many layers and dimensions of analysis of the framework, which are needed to aim for an holistic picture of (a) social media content creator(s)'s semiotic production in reference to a specific aspect/focus.

In short, rather than applying available multimodal frameworks developed to analyse the nuanced meaning of a specific text/artefact, such as, for example, multimodal adaptations of Halliday's three metafunctions (e.g., for images, Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) or formal annotations such as the GEM model (Bateman, 2008) and recent developments (Bateman and Wildfeuer, 2014; Bateman et al., 2017). It is rather advisable to select pre-identified aspects and analytical tools by drawing on existing literature relevant to the research focus (e.g., for

the case study of the present paper, translocality and dimensions of provenance introduced in Section 3) combined with a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to allow the analysis to include new aspects that might emerge from the videos themselves. The annotation and mapping of only those meaning potentials that are relevant to the specific research questions is necessary to make the analysis manageable across all layers and dimensions of the framework, as it involves a considerable number of videos and interactions across time and different spaces, as described in Section 4.2.

4.2. Dimensions of analysis

To provide a holistic and nuanced picture of a creator's semiotic practices (relevant to specific research questions/aims), the analysis should consider the creator's productions across the following dimensions and sources of data:

- ***Across semiotic spaces.*** For social media content creators this means looking at their production across the different media platforms on which they maintain an online presence. To identify them and their relevance to the creator's activity, one can draw on the method sketched in Adami's (2014b), which indicates how to trace different social media profiles that are linked to the same persona and map their relations, in terms of which spaces are more central/peripheral for their online presence. This allows the analysis to achieve a fuller picture of their sign-making ecology, addressed audiences, and hierarchies/prioritised spaces in curating their content. It is often the case that creators repost the same content across different social media, although selectively, and purposively adapted for the different affordances of each media platform as well as to cater for the specific uses, expectations and preferences of their followers in each platform/space. Not only number of followers and their level of engagement (views, comments, reactions), but also differences in overall number of posts and dates of posting of the same/adapted content will help establish which media platform is more central or peripheral/derivative for the creator's activity. This serves different functions in the research, i.e., (i) informing the choice of the main platform/profile to be used for the analysis of the creator's posting activity through time, as well as (ii) tracing the history of development and changes in the creator's online presence (who might have started on a platform and then branched out onto new ones, with prioritised platforms changing through time). Relevant aspects emerged in specific posts in the more central media platform can then be cross-checked in other platforms to map variations across spaces. This will provide indications of the creator's varied positioning and relations with audiences/followers in different spaces.
- ***Across time.*** This involves analysing the selected aspects in the different layers (section 4.1) throughout the content creator's posting history to trace developments and changes through time. As posting of new content is essential to sustain and increase a creator's online presence, their posting activity is usually frequent, so selectivity of aspects to be identified along this dimension is essential to make the data analysis manageable across the many videos in a creator's posting history on each platform. Rather than aiming for a fine-grained comprehensive multimodal analysis of each video, the analysis through time should be aimed to identify when a

specific semiotic resource features for the first/last time in the creator's video history; selectivity in resources mapped should be driven by both relevance to the research focus and salience in characterising the creator's style (derivable also with the aid of contextualisation work through external media sources, see related point below).

- ***In interaction with followers.*** Once identified when a resource was first and/or last used, analysis of the followers' comments¹ in that and immediately earlier/later videos can ascertain any possible followers' prompts/responses to the change, whether comments mention it and how the change is received, and also possible replies to comments by the creator justifying their choice. This dimension allows the analysis to make informed interpretations of the creator's interests in taking up (or not) the prompts from their followers, and, when comments conflict in their stance, also the creator's interest in different types of followers/audience segments. Comments to posts can be retrieved through scrapers available, for example, in Github repository, e.g., for TikTok (cubernetes, 2025), Instagram (Maulana, 2025) and YouTube comments (Bouman, 2025); here too however, for videos with large numbers of comments, rather than conducting systematic corpus analysis, it might be necessary to limit the search purposefully, and stop once identified comments prompting/responding to the relevant change in semiotic resource or practice.

4.3. Contextualisation

As in all semiotic and textual analyses, looking solely at the creator's sign-making is not enough and requires contextualisation (van Leeuwen, 2021). This involves considering the selected aspects in relation to four further axes:

- ***Affordances of the specific media platform:*** knowing the constraints and possibilities made available by the platform is a preliminary step, which mitigates risks of overinterpretation or misattribution of aspects, and allows the analysis to distinguish between practices resulting from the creator's agency against default-features pre-determined by the platform design;
- ***Space-, genre- and domain-specific semiotic practices,*** by looking at other influential content creators in the same domain and genre (e.g., in the case study, food and instructional videos respectively, so video recipes), in that specific space (e.g., Tiktok rather than Instagram), to trace possible influences in the creator's practices, and to position the creator's production in relation to degrees of normativity/conformity and innovation/creativity;
- ***Document/discourse analysis,*** involving researching media and institutional representations of the content creator outside their own semiotic spaces of activity, by looking at, e.g., how they have been reported on various media outlets, any controversy or special praise involving any of their practices, as well as the creator's own interventions, in case of interviews or participation at media events. This can provide background information about the creator that might not be present on their

¹ Comments to posts can be retrieved through scrapers available, for example, in Github repository, e.g., for TikTok (cubernetes, 2025), Instagram (Maulana, 2025) and YouTube comments (Bouman, 2025).

profile, as well as media representations of their persona. It can serve both as a starting point for the selection of aspects to analyse in their videos in 4.1 and 4.2, and to cross-check those that instead emerge throughout the analysis, as well as providing a broader picture of institutional interests towards (which aspects/practices of) the creator. Cross-checking this in reference to time can also provide elements informing interpretations on how media discourses might have influenced any changes in the creator's practices, by identifying correlations in time between, e.g., an aspect highlighted in a news feature, or an aspect subject to criticism and controversy, and whether/how any changes involving said aspect can be identified in the creator's videos before and after then;

- **Broader social forces** at play, by considering ongoing semiotic regimes, linguistic ideologies and broader power dynamics (e.g., the dominant social values attached to Arabic language or to Muslims in the case study). This allows the analysis to trace power dynamics at play to ground informed hypotheses on possible influences and motivations in specific developments in the creator's practices.

The layers, dimensions and axes are not meant to be a step-by-step sequential method. Annotation and analysis will need to be iterative and cyclical rather than linear, with aspects emerged in one dimension or axe needing cross-checking in the others. A grounded non-linear approach is needed to allow for some serendipity in the research process, as examining videos for a specific aspect in a dimension can lead to identify another aspect to be further cross-checked across the other dimensions and axes. This can be manageable, against a creator's large number of posts through time and across spaces, when their content is published in very short videos, lasting only a few seconds and generally less than a minute, a trend set by TikTok, which used to limit the video duration to one minute (although also TikTok is currently encouraging longer videos "TikTok Creator Academy," 2024). However purposeful selectivity should always guide decisions on thresholds for optimal data saturation levels.

5. Application to the case study: @foodgood translocal trajectories

This section applies the framework to the analysis of the social media productions of @foodgood, the profile name of the food content creator Kaled El Mahi. The research focus is on the translocal trajectories in the creator's identity performances, so the analysis focuses on selected semiotic resources that are relevant to translocality, with specific attention to videos that show changes in the creator's uses of these resources.

The analysis of translocality is done by identifying the provenances of the resources. Data were retrieved 11 September 2023 – changes in the creator's production after that time are mentioned whenever relevant as further contextuallisation, without however being subject to analysis. Due to space constraints, the presentation does not include all relevant aspects emerged from the annotation and is necessarily restricted to a limited number and type of aspects, which exemplify how the different layers, dimensions and axes of the framework can be used in integration.

5.1. Contextualisation

@Foodgood, is a social media food content creator profile name based in Italy created by Kahlid El Mahi. **Contextualisation** can provide the starting aspects to observe in the data.

Online media sources retrieved through searches for Foodgood and Kahlid El Mahi, are feature articles and entries in Italian online media and magazines dedicated to showbiz and cooking from September (Minini, 2021; Ziomuro, 2021), November (Monno, 2021) and December 2021 (Mosciatti, 2021), January 2022 (Piselli, 2022), with the latest retrieved one dated 9 August 2023 (Fontana, 2023).

As is often the case with online media websites, the texts overlap in contents and phrasing, presenting the following key information about the creator:

- Moroccan origins
- Moved to Italy, where he studied at a college for hospitality, worked in several restaurants and became the head chef of a restaurant in Trentino Alto Adige (region in Northern Italy bordering with Austria), where he still lives with his wife and son
- His popularity achieved on TikTok after opening a profile during lockdown in 2020
- His catchphrase *Bismillah*, always present in his videos, explained as abbreviated form of *Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*, meaning ‘in the name of compassionate and merciful God’, as the Arabic equivalent of *Bon appetit*, and his TikTok profile describing himself as *CEO of Bismillah*
- His popularity, as the most followed food creator on TikTok in Italy and fourth worldwide (no source provided as evidence)
- The reason of his popularity identified in his fusion of Middle Eastern and Italian cooking through simple and fun recipes shown in fast-paced videos
- His multilingualism, with videos titled/subtitled (depending on the reports) both in Arabic and Italian, as well as his frequent use of English
- His popularity gaining the attention of *GialloZafferano* (‘Zafran Yellow’), a major Italian food media brand, originally started as a grassroots cooking blog and now owned by *Gruppo Mondadori*, one of the largest Italian publishing groups (Lorini, 2024). Earlier reports mention his collaboration with the media brand, then on 13 December 2021 a press release by Mondadori (reproduced nearly verbatim by several online media outlets) announces *GialloZafferano*’s acquisition of the Foodgood profiles, as part of their plan of international expansion (Gruppo Mondadori, 2021).
- His yearly revenues of €1.67 million.

Sources conflict on whether he first started on TikTok and later moved to YouTube and Instagram, or whether he started on YouTube and achieved popularity after moving to TikTok, then later deciding to focus back on YouTube and Instagram. Let us try to clarify this by mapping his online presence.

5.2. Semiotic spaces mapping

Table 1 maps the online presence of the profile name @foodgood (changed into @gzfoodgood after GialloZafferano's acquisition, 13 Dec.2021):

@foodgood online presence	Profile created	Followers	Posts	Likes (views for YouTube)	Oldest post date	Latest post date	Profile linking to
TikTok	n.a.	23.3M	1,047	408M	16 Jul-2020	Date of data collection	Instagram
Instagram	Oct-2020	2.1M	514	16.8M	2 Oct-2020	Date of data collection	TikTok
YouTube	10 Dec-2011	58K	47 (23 videos; 24 shorts)	1.1M views	30 Jun-2020	7 Jun-2021 (video) 15 Nov-2021 (short)	TikTok Instagram Website: Giallozafferano.com

Table 1. @foodgood online presence mapping (data retrieved 11 Sep.2023).

As Table 1 shows, his online presence has the most posts, longest posting activity and largest number of followers and likes on TikTok, followed by Instagram, which started 2.5 months later (through a TikTok repost). The over 23 million and 2 million followers respectively classify him as a megainfluencer on the two spaces in Campbell and Farrell's (2020) categorisation. On YouTube the profile records considerably less popularity (typical of a microinfluencer) and posting activity, which started two weeks earlier than TikTok and stopped just after a year (for full videos) and 1.5 year (for shorts). All posts in the three platforms are about his food preparations, so these profiles are entirely devoted to his food content creation activity, which – at least as curated at the time of data collection² – started in June 2020 on YouTube, expanded on TikTok in July and then further on Instagram in October of the same year. Unfortunately, TikTok does not make available the date of profile creation, so we cannot identify how long he might have 'lurked' on the social media space before posting his first video. As for the other two, while his YouTube profile was created much earlier (2011) than the date of his oldest video currently on the channel,³ his first Instagram post was made at the time of his profile creation. Hence, unlike YouTube, he joined Instagram with the precise aim of posting his food creations soon after he started posting them on TikTok. His YouTube channel links both to TikTok and Instagram, while the latter two profiles link to each other and not to YouTube, further confirming that his online presence prioritises TikTok and Instagram over YouTube.

² The profile owner might have deleted posts before the date of data collection.

³ This means either that he deleted previous posted videos or, more commonly, that, before the date of his oldest video, he used his YouTube profile to watch, like and comment others' videos.

On all three platforms his profile name changed from @foodqood to @gzfoodqood after *GialloZafferano* acquisition (Dec.2021)⁴. His TikTok profile was originally named *lemiericette1* (my recipes1) while his YouTube channel and Instagram account were under the chef's name, Khalid El Mahi; although the platforms do not make available the date of the changes, this indicates that he started to create a cohesive brand name (foodqood) for his social media presence at a later time, when his food-related posting activity had already started.

Let us then analyse his semiotic practices on the more central space of his posting activity, TikTok, crosschecking it against his other social media profiles whenever relevant.

5.3. Layered semiotic resources through time

All his posting activity on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube is focused on food preparation, hence the three profiles are curated as dedicated spaces.

Looking at his production through time, it is possible to identify different stages of development and translocal trajectories. The following sections present the analysis for each phase, focused firstly on the posting activity on TikTok, then compared with that in the other spaces and cross-checked whenever relevant with followers' interactions.

5.3.1. FIRST PHASE (JULY 2020-MARCH 2021): EXPERIMENTATION WITH SPACE-SPECIFIC PRACTICES, TOWARDS VISUAL COHESION AND NICHE CARVING.

The oldest videos are mainly focused on visually-striking aspects of his food preparations, such as creative plating, decorations or shapes, achieved in apparently easy ways and through rather simple ingredients (e.g., egg shaped as the TikTok logo, see the second thumbnail on the fourth row in Figure 2). They are varied in multimodal deployment, with different camera frames, angles and background, sometimes with close-shots on the dish and hands preparing it, sometimes with longer shots revealing a professional kitchen as background and location (judging from the size of the stainless steel countertops); in some occasions the plating involves several portions (e.g., 9th and 11th Thumbnail on first row in Figure 2), further suggesting that these early videos are shot from the restaurant where he works as a chef.

In these first videos, he never speaks and his face is shown only rarely. They have typical TikTok up-beat fast-paced global music soundtracks chosen from the extensive Music Library available on the platform (Kaye et al., 2022; Radovanović, 2022; Wang, 2024). Very few soundtracks repeatedly feature in his videos, often chosen among viral ones, such as

⁴ The analysis section refers all provided information to the data collection date, 11 September 2023. Since then, the Tiktok and Instagram profiles have changed further into @giallolovesitaly. The latter are now managed by the media brand, hosting content made by the brand's many chefs, including Foodqood, and have lost any references to Foodqood in their profile descriptions. At the time of writing (September 2024) @giallolovesitaly has just over 24 million followers on TikTok and 5.3 million on Instagram (so not a considerable increase in a year, when the profiles were managed by Khalid/Foodqood and entirely focused on his contents).

[Breakfast Challenge Song \(Slowly\) – SPENCE](#), which is also thematically related as it was created by sampling and mixing cooking preparation sounds (see the TikTok creator’s original video <https://www.tiktok.com/@spence/video/6670653463174581509>), and gave way to viral TikTok dance videos with moves miming cooking preparation movements, see (“‘Breakfast Challenge’ Is TikTok’s Most Delicious Soundtrack,” 2021; Kozma, 2021).

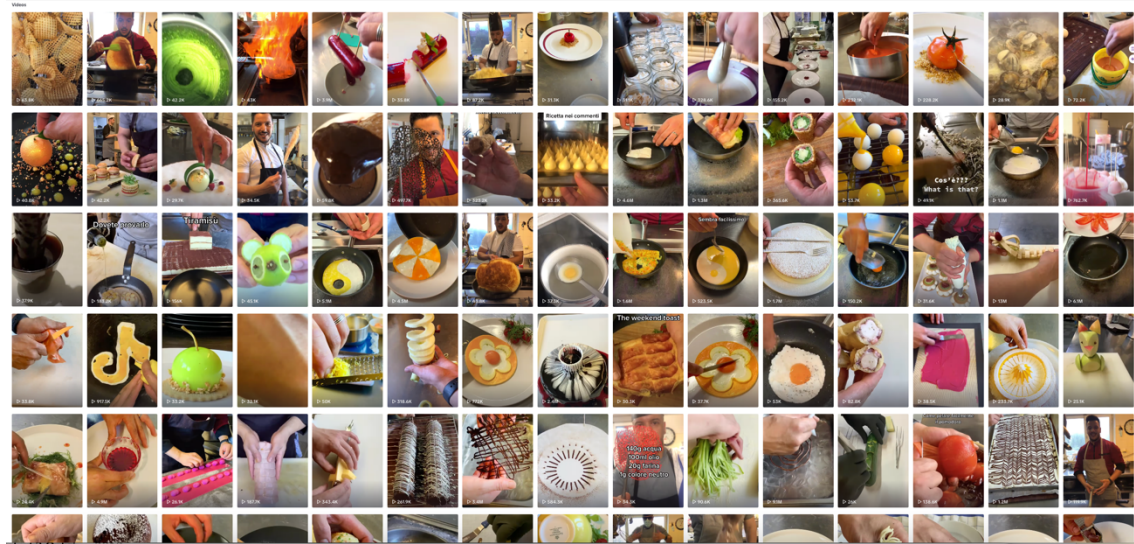


Figure 2. Thumbnails of @foodgood TikTok oldest videos (top to bottom) up to 3 October 2020: varied multimodal deployment.

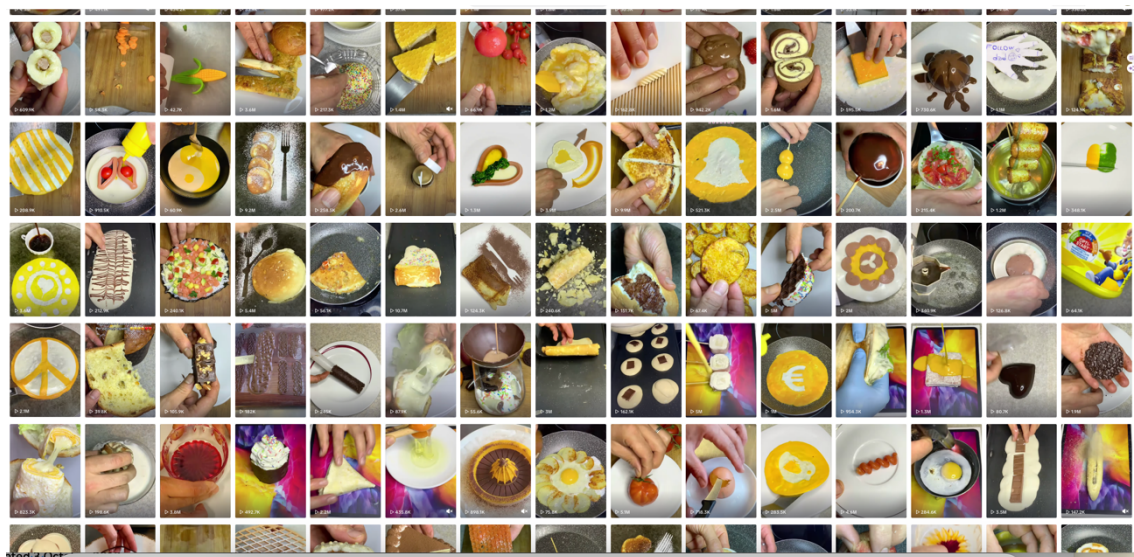


Figure 3. Thumbnails of @foodgood TikTok videos from 7-Nov-2020 to 17-Dec-2020: close-shot on dish

Within a few months from his first videos, the filming from the restaurant kitchen progressively disappears in favour of close-shots of a dish being prepared (

Figure 3), with videos showing only his hands; this change indicates a progressive visual cohesion of his content. His posting activity increases in frequency too: he posts 20 videos overall in his first month and a half (July and August 2020), while he posts daily and even multiple videos on the same day in the next four months (35 in September, 61 in October, 45 in November and 49 in December), occasionally reposting also older videos.

Although his early videos do not show an identifiable visual and/or auditory pattern across them, indicative of some tentativeness and randomness in his early production, the resources deployed nevertheless suggest the creator's awareness of social media popular trends and possible experimentation with different ones to see whether they attract views. These include both food-specific resources and video-specific ones. Among the former, along with the just mentioned striking or funny shapes created out of simple food, there are food illusions, i.e., dishes that are shaped to look as other foods (e.g., a hot-dog-looking dessert in his 5th and 6th video) and online controversy-stirring dishes (such as carbonara, in his 7th video) or un-orthodox preparation methods for recipes well-known internationally (e.g., boiling basil before blending it to make pesto in his 3rd video). The carbonara and pesto speak both to viewers worldwide (as dishes widely known and available transnationally) and to Italian viewers too, stereotypically known as particularly vocal on cooking canons and prescriptions (Benasso and Stagi, 2019; Ginanneschi, 2024) – comments abound in the pesto video voicing their disapproval of cooking basil.

Among the video-specific resources are tripophobia-triggering shapes (7th video second row in Figure 2) and first attempts at so-called ASMR videos (well attested in the literature on social media videos, especially on YouTube, e.g., Gallagher, 2016; Niu et al., 2022; Smith and Snider, 2019; Zappavigna, 2023), through heightened sound effects triggering the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), which will later become more salient of his food video style and appeal to a specific transnational affinity group/lifestyle that, in terms of provenance dimensions, is space-specific to online (social) media rather than to geographical/geopolitical areas.

He also introduces guessing prompts in writing as in the video posted on 10 August 2020 <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6866707261016919298> in which his hands feature peeling a root with an overlaid written “Cos’è??? What is that?”. This is also the first video in which he includes English, indicative of his intention to address viewers beyond Italy. **The Interaction dimension** cross-checked with the posting timeline can help here: Indeed, although all his previous videos had only Italian hashtags (except #fyp, see hereafter), they were already attracting comments in other languages (including Russian, French, Spanish, Japanese and Indonesian) – the use of globally-viral TikTok soundtracks might have facilitated exposure of his videos outside Italy, overruling the profile's geolocation as criterion for distributing videos to users⁵ while the absence of spoken explanations in the videos and of written recipes in their description facilitated international appreciation of the video content. Moreover, international viewers might have been attracted to his TikTok profile also through the link from his YouTube channel, where videos are subtitled in different languages (see 5.4.1 below).

⁵ Not only does TikTok algorithm include sounds as an element for tailored users' recommended videos (“How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou,” 2019) but also, whenever a video uses a soundtrack from the TikTok Music Library, this is automatically linked to in the video description; users clicking on the soundtrack from any video or searching on TikTok for the specific soundtrack, will be presented with all the videos featuring that soundtrack (see, e.g., the case of the [Breakfast Challenge Song \(Slowly\) - SPENCE](#) cited earlier).

The **paratextual layer of semiotic resources** offers further elements: At the start of his TikTok posting activity, hashtags used are few, mainly his name and rarely food-related words in Italian, except for #fyp (with the two variants #foryou and #foryoupage). The hashtag is used by TikTokers wanting to increase their video exposure, in the belief that the hashtag prompts the platform algorithm to feature the video on other users' *For You Page*, which is the first page that opens on the TikTok app – the belief seems unfounded (Klug et al., 2021; Rahyadi et al., 2023) yet its frequent use is well attested in the literature (Ling et al., 2022; Oktaviany et al., 2024). This shows not only the creator's awareness of TikTokers' hashtagging practices, but also his interest in maximising the views of his content – however, note that, although the Italian version of Tiktok translates the For You Page as *Per Te*, and Italian TikTokers use also #perte as hashtag to promote their videos to viewers based in Italy, the #fyp hashtag is also widely used in Italy and equally mentioned and recommended by Italian online media to enhance one's video exposure (Aranzulla, 2022; Arianna, 2024). In a translanguaging perspective, rather than considering #fyp as English after the named language, it seems more sensible to consider it as a space-specific label that is fully part of the linguistic repertoire of TikTokers based in Italy, hence one cannot use its occurrence in a video paratext as evidence of its creator's interest in addressing international audiences.

So Foodgood's 'What is that?' overlaid on his video in August is the first clear evidence of use of English on TikTok, which follows his videos receiving viewers' attention internationally. The timeline correlation with the multilingual interactions to his earlier videos allows us to hypothesise a causal relation, with him wanting to cater for, maintain and enhance international followers through English (while still paying attention to his Italian-speaking viewers through the equivalent Italian "Cos'è???").

On TikTok the descriptions of his early videos merely tag his YouTube and/or Instagram profiles, with very few hashtags other than his name and #fyp until the end of March 2021. However, on 13 November 2020 he thanks countries of his followers through hashtags: [#thankyou](#) [#for](#) [#like](#) [#italia](#) [#russia](#) [#brasil](#) [#america](#) [#maroc](#) [#love](#) (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6894684640250973442>). Since then, he starts adding two or three hashtags in Italian and English, and occasionally in other languages (including French, Spanish, German, transliterated Arabic, and Turkish). The variation in languages in the hashtags does not seem to match a related geographical provenance of the dish nor of other resources in the video; for example, the video posted on 26 March 2021 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6943945545455095046>) has two hashtags #furdich #parati, i.e., the German and Spanish equivalent of #foryou, but the dish is a toasted cheese+turkey+tomato+egg sandwich and the soundtrack is Paul Anka's evergreen [Put Your Head On My Shoulder - Julia with a G](#); so there is no apparent relation with the German- or Spanish-speaking world in either dish or soundtrack, nor any indications that the video could appeal more to these audiences. Together with his use of #fyp, it thus seems that hashtags in different languages are simply aimed to reach further viewers to sustain and expand his followers' base internationally.

Since September, when the posting activity increases and the videos become a close-shot of the preparation, the range of food resources featuring in the videos becomes more limited, with eggs cooked to make different shapes being dominant together with dessert decorations, while only occasionally some main dishes (such as fish or meat) appear. This suggests a phase in which Foodgood was trying to carve his niche as food creator, possibly following up from a first video in which he received more views/likes than the preceding ones.

As for **provenances**, these seem more media- rather than geographic-specific, as they involve transnational food trends that one can find also on Instagram and other social media, such as again, different ways of cooking eggs (including, e.g., folding ones with chopsticks, those creating shapes by frying the egg with frankfurters or tomatoes laid out as borders, eggs in a cup). Contrary to the online media reports retrieved through contextualisation, traditionally considered Middle Eastern dishes never feature and Italian dishes are extremely rare throughout his production, and always involve types that have wide transnational circulation: besides the carbonara and pesto of his two early videos cited above, we can see him cooking pizza once, making ravioli another time, and shaping a piece of fresh pasta in two different videos.

For all 2020 his videos are silent with TikTok viral soundtracks, although since October (when his posting activity has become more frequent and visually cohesive), occasionally a few very short videos appear without the soundtrack, displaying instead heightened sounds of the cooking preparation (e.g., knife scraping the board or chopping, salt or pepper grinding, frying sizzling, bottle uncorking, etc.) recalling ASMR-style videos. After posting three of these videos in October and two in November, he posts his first explicitly-intended ASMR video, using the hashtag #ASMR, on 8 December 2020 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6903841063363038465>); here he breaks an egg onto a pan laid on an Apple iPad box and cooks it by torching it – this video includes tropes of his earlier content, the eggs and the unusual cooking method (as well as the iPad box, which he used in a few videos earlier, perhaps in an attempt at triggering viewers' curiosity and launching a viral trend). He posts three more ASMR-hashtagged videos with only sounds and no soundtrack and then on 18 January 2021 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6919102541636816130>), he posts his first video with both soundtrack and heightened ambient cooking preparation sounds. Since February the combined ASMR+Soundtrack pattern becomes more frequent up to being present in nearly all of his videos for the whole of 2021 and 2022.

Before the end of this phase, he has already gained a substantial level of popularity, evidenced by a video posted on 11 March (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6938696375685156102>) marking his TikTok profile reaching 1 million followers: the video does not show any cooking; rather, it shows his hand writing '1M ❤️' with ketchup on a bun filled with slices of cheese, (unidentified) cured meat, tomato, and lettuce, and then his face sending a kiss with his hand to the camera. He thanks his followers with hashtags in widely known and space-specific words: **#thankyou #1M #loveyou #follower #🥰**) with a themed choice of soundtrack too ([thank you – Lena](#), no longer available at the time of writing). By then the comment section is entirely multilingual.

Therefore, the analysis of the creator's first period of posting activity on TikTok shows that he has reached his first milestone in popularity by experimenting with and making increasingly salient semiotic resources that have transnational circulation, by combining provenances that are specific to the semiotic space (such as the viral TikTok soundtracks), to the global genre of online food videos (in the type of dishes prepared), and to specific transnational communities/interests/sensitivities that have emerged on social media (ASMR). The absence of speech and the very little writing, limited to widely known and space-specific English words in hashtags, also facilitates a transnational reach, while the presence of Italian hashtags still allows him to cultivate his most immediate audience, given that his profile is set as based in Italy and geolocation is a TikTok criterion to recommend videos to users.

Cross-checking his practices along the **space dimension** provides further insights into his orchestration of semiotic practices and strategies for attracting different audiences throughout his online presence across TikTok, YouTube and Instagram (see detailed analysis in section 5.4).

In tune with the different affordances and audience preferences of the two platforms, while his TikTok videos are very brief (only a few seconds up to no longer than half a minute), his YouTube videos of the same period, focused on the same dish preparations of the TikTok ones, are much longer, spanning several minutes, without editing cuts that had become a typical stylistic feature of TikTok videos, and with extended explanations accompanying each step of a dish preparation, spoken in Italian with a Middle Eastern accent, and subtitles in Italian and Arabic, Italian and English, or Italian and French (occasionally only in Italian). In the TikTok video descriptions he does not include recipes, comments or explanations, and invites viewers to follow his YouTube profile, an index of his interest in this first phase of using TikTok as a springboard towards his earlier established YouTube activity. Since October, when he joined Instagram, the descriptions promote also his Instagram account, while he stops promoting YouTube by the end of the year, and the recipes, always absent in his TikTok posts, start appearing in his Instagram post descriptions.

Hence YouTube first and then Instagram later function as re-directed spaces for reference material, with the videos having (also) an instructional function, while Tiktok serves as a space where his videos have a main entertainment function. This is in line with the more ludic character of viewers' uses of the platform (Barta et al., 2023; Kaye et al., 2022), and with some food creators' attested uses of these platforms with complementary functions (Schröer, 2023, who however observes creators themselves indicating in their TikTok posts that the recipe is available on Instagram).

In spite of this, when checking the **interaction dimension**, throughout his whole posting activity, his TikTok videos often gather comments asking for the recipe; while the creator never replies (to any of the comments), other viewers reply that these can be found on YouTube/Instagram or even repost the recipes from there. This indicates that (1) the creator does not engage with comments, against what many identify as a necessary practice for creators to maintain and grow a follower base, and that (2) while some of his viewers access his content only on TikTok, he has also a more established fan-like following that watches his content across spaces and is acquainted with the more entertainment vs informative uses he makes of them.

5.3.2. SECOND PHASE (END MARCH-OCTOBER 2021): IMAGE BRANDING, TRANSLOCALLY-MARKED IDENTITY PERFORMANCE, AUDIOVISUAL COHESION TOWARDS PROFESSIONALISM.

After his niche carving attempts and the close-shot on dish preparation as first markers of visual cohesion, a new phase starts with visual cohesion further shaped through his presence progressively featuring as a salient stylistic choice to construct a brand image.

As shown in

Figure 4, towards the end of March his persona enters as a salient visual cohesive pattern of his videos, with the video opening and closing showing him with the prepared dish, smiling at the camera and tasting it, while the core part of all videos maintain the earlier introduced visual coherence of the close-shot on the food preparation.

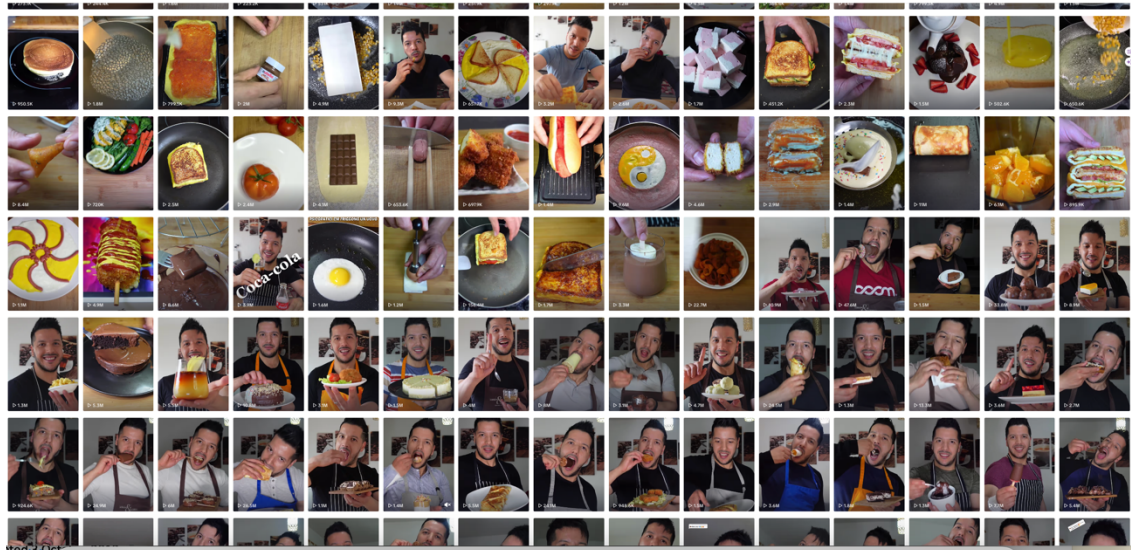


Figure 4. Thumbnails of @foodqood TikTok videos from 25-Mar-2021 to 24-May-2021: his face as stylistic feature.

On 28 March 2021 he posts his first video featuring an opening and closing close-to-mid-shot of himself looking at the camera, smiling and tasting his preparation, always without speaking (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6944658888729906438>), which features also as the video thumbnail (10th thumbnail, first row,

Figure 4). After then, this shot type becomes the standard video opening, closing and thumbnail, with the videos not showing his face decreasing up to disappearing. In this, Miguel et al. (2024) report that the presence of a human body works as self-presentation strategy for a digital identity construction and to facilitate viewers' sense of likeness and closeness; in spite of many food influencers privileging food as the sole represented participant (Lewis, 2020), evidence shows an increasing performer role of food influencers to facilitate engagement and a sense of personalisation (Miguel et al., 2024).

If the closing shot showing his face while tasting the dish aligns with emerging practices of food video content creators on social media, the choice of making his face a salient marker of his videos (by using it also in the video opening and as thumbnail indexing the video on his TikTok profile) is specific to his style. **The interaction dimension** provides correlating elements to ground hypotheses on this marked brand-image choice. The rare early videos in which his face shows (e.g., <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6854029071207189766> posted on 27 July 2020) attracted appreciative comments on his looks; hence he might have taken up these comments as prompts to making his face salient as a strategy to increase his followers.

While maintaining the visual cohesive pattern throughout his production since the start of this phase, April 2021 witnesses a marked turn in identity performance and appealed/addressed audiences, identifiable as a move from social media/space-specific provenances to translocal

ones. A video posted on 14 April 2021

(<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6950931273296760069>), on the preparation of deep fried pasta seasoned with spices to be eaten as a snack, opens with the usual shot of him smiling at the camera, picking a piece of food from the prepared dish and making the act of tasting the dish. Yet he stops before putting it in his mouth, widens his eyes at the camera, places the pasta back on the dish, makes a 'no' gesture (by lifting his index finger and moving it repeatedly sideways) and says 'no no no, Ramadan'; then the usual dish preparation follows. The video closes showing the dish on the chopping board, presented in a plate with a cone-shaped lid recalling a *tajine* (or tagine in English, i.e., a pot historically of Moroccan origins, now endowed with broader Middle Eastern and North African provenance as the traditional dishes cooked in it). This is the first of his TikTok videos in which he speaks and the last one featuring a thumbnail of the dish rather than his face (6th thumbnail to last in third row in

Figure 4). The next video, posted on the following day, 15 April 2020, on the preparation of strawberry jellies that resemble Turkish delights, opens with him saying '*Bismillah*' for the first time, picking a jelly from the plate and dropping it, shaking his index finger and saying 'Nein, Ramadan'. Since then, also after the end of Ramadan (in 2021 Ramadan started on 12 April evening until 14 May), his videos all feature *Bismillah* as his only spoken word, when showing the prepared dish to the camera either/both at the start and/or end of the video. The videos posted during the Ramadan period either repeat the act of stopping himself from tasting the dish, looking at the camera smiling with a finger gesturing 'no' or saying 'respect Ramadan', or 'nein, es ist Ramadan', or show him actually tasting the dish when the setting has a darker lighting, suggesting that the sun has set so his fasting has ended.

To note also that up to 14 April – including three videos he posted since the start of Ramadan – videos have his frequently used TikTok viral soundtracks, so global in geographical provenances and rather identifiable as space-specific provenance for TikTok viewers (including the already mentioned [Breakfast Challenge Song \(Slowly\) – SPENCE](#) in his 12-April, [Hello - OMFG](#) in a first video posted on 13 April and [SugarCrash! - ElyOtto](#) in the second video posted on the same day). The 14 April one (when he says 'no, no, no Ramadan') has *Mi Gna* as soundtrack, drawn from [original sound - Unique Fazza](#), which is a song by Armenian-American rapper Super Sako with lyrics in English and Armenian (surged in popularity through social media, as the most viewed ever song by an Armenian artist on YouTube, then subject to remixes and a wide number of language versions; see the list in the related Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mi_Gna). The following one, in which he first says *Bismillah*, has an Arabic soundtrack [Aaja Bahon Me \(Arabic Instrumental Version\) - Aamir Kangda](#). After then, his videos continue with soundtracks either/both related to the Muslim world, and/or Middle Eastern in sounds, and/or with Arabic or Turkish lyrics. His hashtags too, address the Muslim world now, with #ramadan being used in all his videos since his 14 April, then with #halal replacing #ramadan in the videos posted after the end of the Ramadan period.

On 13 May, which marked the end of Ramadan in 2021, he opens his video (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6961725473340558598>) saying 'Eid Mubarak', then '*bismillah*', making a chocolate salami with dates, and the soundtrack is the refrain of *Eidu Saeed*, by Mesut Kurtis & Maher Zain, in translanguaged Arabic and English:

عيد سعيد (eid saed = happy holidays) let's enjoy this happy day
عيد مبارك (eid Mubarak) come on let's celebrate

عيد سعيد let's enjoy this happy day
عيد مبارك come on let's celebrate
Celebrate, let's celebrate

The reference to the Arabic and Muslim world continue after the end of Ramadan, with the hashtag #halal replacing #ramadan and also occasional references in the videos themselves as on 30 May (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6968413348945743110>), when he makes the act of picking a slice of the prepared dish with his left hand to taste it, then stops, looks at the camera, says 'no, no, no', waves his right hand to the camera saying *hahdih* ('this one') and picks the slice with it to taste it. Many comments take up this as a reference to the Muslim custom of using only the right hand to bring food to one's mouth.

The interaction dimension provides further insights to inform hypotheses on the motivations of this change. Some followers in the comments to his pre-*Bismillah* videos posted since 12 April (the start of Ramadan) remark humorously that they're fasting and his mouthwatering videos are painful to watch, or point out more or less seriously (depending on the emoji in the comment) that he should be fasting; comments of this kind are mainly in English, Arabic and Turkish. Therefore, the posting of the video where he stops himself from tasting and says 'no, no, no, Ramadan' might indicate that he has taken up the prompt from these comments and intends to cater for the Muslim sector of his followers.

This is the first time that he performs a Muslim identity; in fact, not only are any references to the Muslim world absent in his previous videos (and so are any references to his Moroccan origins and the Arabic world, if we exclude his name Khalid El Mahi, sometimes present as hashtag), but also do his recipes occasionally include pork among the ingredients (see for example speck, a typical cured pork meat of Trentino Alto Adige, where he lives and works as a chef: <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6890840099269938433> posted on 3 November 2020).

Contextualisation in terms of genre is instead useful in situating his use of the same opening and closing shot; it is indeed a common generic feature of both TikTok and Instagram food videos to open with the same shot that closes the video, which shows the final dish often times with the creator tasting it, before showing the key preparation steps through edit cuts. This is a strategy to solicit the viewers' interest by showing the final result and trigger their curiosity towards how this is achieved, and also to lead to repeated viewings (a TikTok video plays in loop as default platform setting, so if the final shot is the same of the first one, viewers might not realise the video has ended and restarted, thus increasing the video number of views). So, rather than a marker of his own creativity and uniqueness, his introduction of this visual pattern follows an established semiotic practice of the genre. A careful mix between compliance with genre-established practices and innovation from these is key for social media content creators who want to expand their follower base; foodgood manages this by using the genre-specific filmic pattern of shots, and by marking his uniqueness through his *Bismillah* catchphrase as well as his stopping-from-tasting surprise effect, which deviates from the convention.

If the soundtracks and the #ramadan and #halal hashtags are cohesive in provenance with the spoken *Bismillah* and his Muslim performed identity, the dishes are less so. Except for the earlier mentioned *tajin*-looking dish and the dates used as ingredients (both widely known and available transnationally, yet traceable in provenance to the Middle East and the Arabic

world more generally), dishes in the videos of this period include, e.g., chocolate ice cream (16 April <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6951672111316339973>), chocolate cake topped with Nutella (17 April <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6952032142859767045>), hand-made baked cheesy crisps labelled in Italian through the hashtag #fonzies (22 April <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6953883614392093957>); fried potato patties (28 April <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6956153130438380805>); another ice cream (30 April <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6956880942686391558>); chocolate mousse (1 May <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6957228349869608198>); a deep fried wrap containing a battered chicken fillet with chips and veggie garnish topped with mayo and ketchup (3 May <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6957998298913426693> perhaps showing a transnational Middle Eastern and Italian fusion: the dish is labelled kebab by some comments and the flour+egg+breadcrumbs battering of the chicken fillet follows the flour+egg+breadcrumb stages traditional of an Italian *cotoletta*), a dessert with Milka chocolate and mascarpone (4 May <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6958358503056559366>), and a chocolate stick made using Nutella (9 May <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6960976370792926470> showing the Nutella label of the jar to the camera, perhaps due to a sponsorship by the brand).

Hence the creator mixes Arabic provenances (through the spoken *Bismillah*), Muslim provenances (the non-tasting, and the written hashtags) and broadly Middle Eastern provenances (the soundtracks), with transnational resources in his food content.

His number of followers skyrockets in this phase: on 22 May he posts a video marking a 3 Million follower milestone (through the hashtag #3M and thanking his followers in French through #merci <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodqood/video/6965079720916536582>) and marks his gaining of 6.8 Million followers on 24 July (always through hashtags <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6988462351196359942>).

In this period, along with the (translocal) *Bismillah* catchphrase and the social media community-specific ASMR style of cooking preparation sounds becoming increasingly his auditory stylistic feature, his videos show also enhanced cohesion in their visual patterns: As shown in

Figure 5, he features dressed in black against a black background (since 3 August onwards), rather than dressed with colourful aprons against a white wall with hanged pictures of the previous videos; this makes salient his dish and face through colour contrast. The black chef uniform he wears now has his name Khalid El Mahi embroidered on the side pocket. He also progressively uses a filming aesthetics with depth-of-field effect (by blurring what is not in the camera focus, firstly visible in the 6th and 5th but last thumbnails of the third row in

Figure 5). This effect, through provenance, adds a professional aesthetics in terms of social values, as an affordance available only in professional cameras.⁶ The ASMR style, the black dress code with the embroidered name, the heightened saturation of the dish colour against

⁶ Relatively recently introduced as ‘portrait’ mode for photos in smartphone and tablet camera settings, the functionality was not available for videos in smartphones at that time, as it was first introduced by Apple in Autumn that year (“Apple iPhone 13 brings portrait mode for video,” 2021).

the black background, together with the depth-of-field camera effect all cohesively concur to index his videos and contents – hence the dish preparations as well as his persona identity – as professional. These are semiotic resources that will remain constantly present in the creator’s videos up to the date of data collection.



Figure 5. @foodgood TikTok video thumbnails from 27-Jul-2021 to 21-Oct-2021: Increasingly professional aesthetics.

5.3.3. THIRD PHASE (NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2021): ABANDONMENT OF TRANSLOCAL-SPECIFIC IDENTITY MARKERS TOWARDS DOMINANT TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION.

As mentioned earlier, his *Bismillah* videos always have soundtracks with Middle Eastern sounds and/or Arabic in the lyrics and/or by Middle Eastern authors (including Turkish ones). The first one that breaks the pattern is the soundtrack of a video posted on 2 June <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6969168664989830405> which features US-based rappers’ Levitating by Dua Lipa, feat. DaBaby; however Dua Lipa originally grew in an Albanian Muslim family and rapper DaBaby declared being Muslim. After then, the first soundtrack breaking the Middle Eastern pattern is in a 16 June video (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/6974703330174029062>) in which he uses the TikTok viral [scorpion - S C O R P I O N](#) 🏹. Since then his videos go back to use and reuse the same narrow range of TikTok viral tracks, analogously to the pre-Bismillah posting activity.

The spoken *Bismillah* is present in all videos (except one on 26th July 2021 in which he says *Mashallah*, with some comments asking ‘no bismillah?’ <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6989207210404646150?lang=en>), up to 3 November 2021, in which he says *ciao* at the end of the video instead of *Bismillah*, while he maintains an Arabic related reference through the hashtag ‘#maroc’, paired with #italian though (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7026365815582641413?lang=en>). Here comments remark on the change and plead him to say *Bismillah* again. In the following days, he alternates videos with and without the spoken *Bismillah* (and with and without

soundtrack). The utterance appears for the last time in a video posted on 7 November (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7027801654263139589>), in which he also features wearing a white rather than black cooking uniform.

On 12 November 2021, a few days and only two videos after the last *Bismillah* (shown as the 3rd thumbnail top row in Figure 6), he posts a video (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7029705533095562502>) featuring for the first time what will become his closing signature gesture replacing his spoken catchphrase. The gesture is known among Italians as equivalent of the phrase *Al bacio* (lit. ‘to the kiss’); performed by approaching the closed fingertips of one hand to the mouth, kissing the fingertips, then slightly opening the fingers while moving the hand away from the mouth, it is used emphatically to mean ‘perfect!’ or ‘perfection!’ with exclamatory values. The gesture can be seen as the 6th thumbnail on the top row in

Figure 6 (i.e., the video in which it features for the first time, posted three videos after him wearing a white uniform and saying his last *Bismillah*) and then appearing increasingly frequently. Since then the creator has always performed the gesture in the closing of his videos, while among the comments have continued those who ask why he does not say *Bismillah* anymore (even in the latest videos collected, in September 2023, so nearly two years after he replaced the catchphrase with the ‘Al bacio’ gesture).



Figure 6. @foodgood TikTok video thumbnails from 5-Nov-2021 to 27-Jan-2022: Al bacio gesture

So the shift towards a more professional aesthetics, started during his *Bismillah* period, is later coupled with his abandonment of the translocal reference with Arabic provenance and the Muslim identity performance, in favour of another, with Italian provenance, possibly capitalising on the transnational value of Italian food and cooking practices, and the many Italian celebrity chefs worldwide who often adopt exaggerated gesture performances to mark their Italianness (e.g., Gino D’Acampo on British TV). Later, this stereotypical national provenance will become in tune with the *GialloZafferano* brand image promoted internationally, so his collaboration with the online media brand is likely to have played a role in this.

It is worth noting that the period, in which he posts videos with the *Bismillah* Arabic reference (as well as the Muslim references through #ramadan and #halal), records the fastest increase rate in his follower base, as shown in

Table 2, and visually reproduced in Figure 7, based on the dates of the videos he posts announcing the newly reached milestone and thanking his followers. He reaches his highest increase rate when, along with *Bismillah*, he also introduces a more professional aesthetics, while he records a (slight) contraction in the increase rate when he abandons the catchphrase, even after introducing his ‘al bacio’ gesture. Indeed he gains 11 million viewers in 8 months (between March and November 2021, with his *Bismillah* phase starting in April), while it takes him nearly double the time to gain his next 9 millions (up to January 2022, the last video he posts celebrating a reached milestone in followers). His decision not to re-adopt the Arabic catchphrase, in spite of this contraction and also of the comments asking for it in all is videos, is indicative of his interests in addressing the institutional preferences of the *GialloZafferano* media brand over those of the audience sector that contributed to his peak in popularity.

Date of posting (year 2021)	Video link	Million followers	Increase	timespan from previous	Average increase/day
11 Mar	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/6938696375685156102	1 M	+1M/7months	--	
22 May	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/6965079720916536582	3 M	+2M	72 days	27.8K
24 Jul	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/6988462351196359942	6.8 M	+3.8M	63 days	28.6K
9 Aug	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/6994418235227524358	8 M	+1.2M	16 days	75K
23 Aug	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/6999597116125416709	9 M	+1M	12 days	83.3K
9 Sep	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/7005908775076924678	10 M	+1M	17 days	58.8K
3 Oct	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/7014799316485147909	11 M	+1M	24 days	41.7K
14 Nov	https://www.tiktok.com/@gfoodgood/video/7030416050852302085	12 M	+1M/5 weeks	42 days	23.81K
26 Dec	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/7045987553371081990	13 M	+1M	52 days	19.2K
16 Feb	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/7065296804153134341	14 M	+1M	52 days	19.2K
6 Jan	https://www.tiktok.com/@giallovesitaly/video/7185502124170661126	20 M	+6M	355 days	16.9K

Table 2. @foodgood rate of follower base increase (calculated considering the date of posting of the video celebrating the reached milestone).

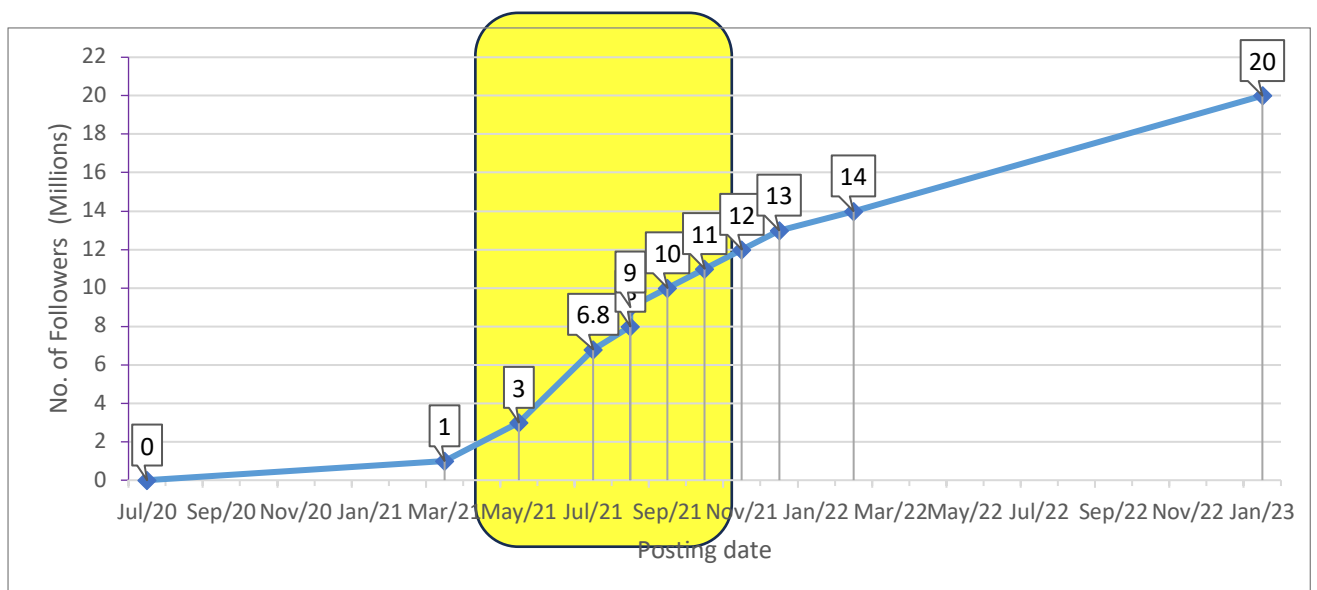


Figure 7. @foodgood Tiktok follower base increase (charted considering the date of posting of the video celebrating the reached milestone). The area in yellow covers the second phase.

As another element of translocality, on 24 October 2021 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7022650317397380357>) and 1 November 2021 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7025634984274824454?lang=en>), before closing the video with the usual shot of him tasting the dish and saying *Bismillah*, he performs Salt Bae's signature gesture of throwing salt flakes on his cooked steak and grilled salmon respectively, as a sort of intertextual reference, ambiguously positioned between homage and parody of the Turkish chef Nusret Gokce (known as Salt Bae on social media), whose goose-neck salting gesture had become an Internet meme a few years earlier and gained celebrity for his extremely expensive barbequed meat served at his restaurants (in Turkey and in New York/USA among others). Only a few days before Foodgood's homage/parody videos, the Turkish chef had made the news for a £37,000 bill in his then newly-opened restaurant in London (Cooper, 2021).

All in all, if we look at all layers of semiotic resources, his videos feature a mix of translocal provenances throughout his TikTok posting activity though, starting with the provenances of his dishes, which are highly varied, against the characterisation made in the online reports of his cooking being a fusion of Middle Eastern and Italian – there are occasional references to these culinary traditions, but overall his food creations are not traceable to a precise geographical provenance in terms of local cuisine canons. As the multimodal composition of his videos develops a recognisable pattern towards a professional aesthetics visually, and ASMR-style auditorily, the range of his dishes expands in world cuisine provenances, from US-style sandwiches to Asian rolls, for example. They also combine in the same dish more globalised and more traditionally local ingredients. The soundtracks he uses in his videos also show a wide range of provenances. These add a further layer in terms of translocality, often producing a mash-up in geographical provenances. Just as an example, he can cook noodles in cream sauce, adding fried chicken on top, and tasting it at the end by using chopsticks, while a traditional Greek 'Zorba' soundtrack plays (video posted on 11 November 2021 <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7035235248015199494?lang=en>).

Note however that in most cases the geographical provenance, even if reviewed in a translocal sense rather than in a fixed and essentialised national one, is of little use if not even misleading when trying to use provenance to identify the meaning potentials of the resources used in these videos. As exemplified in the earlier observations about the soundtracks, many resources that an outsider of the space might label geographically/geopolitically or ethnolinguistically, are rather space-specific for TikTok users, hence their provenances (of viral soundtracks as much as viral recipes or gestures and catchphrases) need to be researched within the practices of circulation of the media platform, as well as the genre-specific practices of circulation across platforms/spaces, on social media more broadly. Social media content creation and circulation is contributing to deterritorialising provenance identification of resources and those who follow multiple creators on a specific genre and theme (as is the case of cooking videos) will recognise a recipe as seen on TikTok or as a specific sub-type responding to specific transnational lifestyles (vegan, or no waste, or junk etc.) – see in this regard also Adami (2025).

The abandonment of his Muslim identity does not pass unnoticed among his followers. On 8 Dec 2021 he posts a video with Holly Jolly Christmas by Michael Bublé as soundtrack and the hashtags [#christmas](#) [#dinner](#) [#idea](#) [#tiktokitaly](#) some comments remark, e.g., 'how do

you celebrate Christmas?’ ‘bro became atheist this winter’ ‘aren’t you muslim?’ and ‘he forgot how he became famous’; the same happens a few days later when he posts a video with the soundtrack *All I want for Christmas* by Mariah Carey (yet he had used the same soundtrack also the year before on 25 Decemebr 2020 –

<https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/6910223102098148609> there nobody commented against it as he was not known as a Muslim yet). Hence the interactional dimension checked against time shows that his choice of abandoning a Muslim identity performance, reverting back to a dominant/mainstream transnational mash-up of (translocal and space-specific) provenances is not only noticed by his followers but also sarcastically remarked against by some, who express a sense of betrayal of the specific audience base that contributed to his popularity. As this change correlates in time with the start of his collaboration with *GialloZafferano* and the media brand’s later acquisition of his social media profiles (including their extensive follower base), these comments achieve “selling-out” undertones (e.g., the cited one ‘he forgot how he became famous’), and frame his Muslim identity performance as merely utilitarian, exploited to gain popularity and then immediately disposed of (e.g., ‘bro became atheist this winter’) after reaching its purpose.

5.3.4. FOURTH PHASE (JANUARY 2021-ONWARDS): (TRANSNATIONAL) INSTITUTIONALISATION UNDER THE GIALLOZAFFERANO MEDIA BRAND.

Since 11 December 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@gzfoodgood/video/7039327024531393797> his video descriptions add #giallozafferano to the other hashtags (which alternate and combine Italian, English and transliterated Arabic), marking the media brand acquisition, and since 3 March 2022, his black chef uniform shows the *GialloZafferano* logo on it in place of his name (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7071619666505927941>).

Finally, since July 2022 (Figure 8), his videos show less frequently his face+gesture as opening shot and also as thumbnail, replaced by the dish preparation, which becomes the standard in 2023 (Figure 9). These videos deploy a close-shot framing the food on the board, with his hands preparing the dish, and only at the very end the camera showing his face and upper bust, with his hand showing the prepared dish to the camera, then tasting it and performing the ‘al bacio’ gesture. So his presence becomes increasingly less salient in the videos; perhaps, given his well-established popularity, he decides to leave viewers suspended until the end, as they might find clues of his identity in the other recurrent stylistic features of his videos (i.e., ASMR+soundtrack and black background), and find reward of their guessing in the final ‘identity reveal’ shot eventually showing his face.

In any case, the gradual backgrounding of his persona is in tune with the media brand strategy, which later (after data collection) turned the @foodgood profile into a collective *Giallo Zafferano* space, with the name changed into @giallolovesitaly (see Footnote 4). Hence it might be a preparatory strategy agreed with (or imposed by) the media brand acquiring his profiles.

Interestingly enough, in many of his later videos one can find comments asking him why he does not say *bismillah* (and others replying sarcastically that he has become famous as the

reason), even in videos posted nearly two years after his abandoning the catchphrase (e.g., <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7269015163498515745> dated 16 August 2023).

This institutionalisation phase includes

- the posting of promotional videos of the media brand (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7104309755337805061>, 1 Jan 2022),
- sponsorship of McDonald's Italy, as the media brand signed a chicken-filled burger for the fast food chain, promoted through a teaser first on 10 May 2022 <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7107562127174503685>, which foodgood makes in a video <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7113937175183445253>, posted on 25 June 2022, and then uploads one promoting the collaboration on 30 June 2022 <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7114984840734231814>);
- a book published (by Mondadori, the publisher owning GialloZafferano) announced both through a photo on Instagram and a video on TikTok (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7155845364279528709> 18 October 2022), with a description in Italian saying that when he was younger he had always admired chefs who made it, mentioning his hard work as a chef in different restaurants, and saying the book is a dream come true, closing by thanking his followers, his family and the Mondadori team;
- the introduction of the recipes in the TikTok descriptions (since 8 Jan 2023 <https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7186258483682053382>), almost always with the English version before the Italian one (some comments thank him for finally listening to the requests to provide the recipes);
- a duet with celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, who ran a commentary on a video in which @foodgood had prepared a recipe from Ramsay's new published book, tagging Ramsey and the book in the video description (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7228173516842093851> 1 May 2023). In the duet Ramsay (known for his volatile vitriolic criticisms) praises his method closing with "you're wasted in Italy, come to London! [...] dude, well done! Finally, a decent Italian chef, have a word with Gino, will you, please?" @foodgood posts the video of himself watching Ramsay's duet on 12 May 2023 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7232199641704434970>, receiving many comments objecting to Ramsay and specifying that he is Moroccan and not Italian.

There are also traces of a shift in positioning as when he posts a recipe cooked in tajin tagging it #international #recipe (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7091298215789595910> 27 April 2022), while in the following video he prepares pesto and tags it with #italianfood (<https://www.tiktok.com/@giallolovesitaly/video/7091982146759347461> on 29 April 2022). Here the generic othering provenance 'international' for the Middle Eastern dish has him take the position of non-belonging to that dish tradition, in spite of his Moroccan origins (and

against his previous *Bismillah* phase), while the #italianfood hashtag in the video showing pesto in its classical version, which is a fairly basic and widely known recipe, frames the video as addressed to an international audience, in line with the media brand strategy.

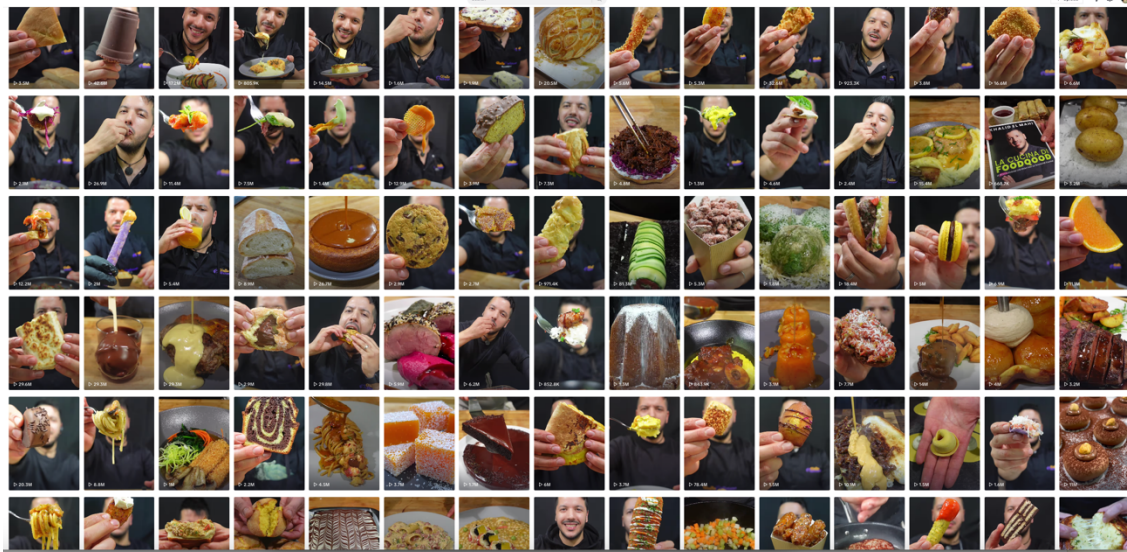


Figure 8. @foodgood TikTok video thumbnails 23-Jul-2022 to 18-Jan-2023: the dish taking over the creator's face.

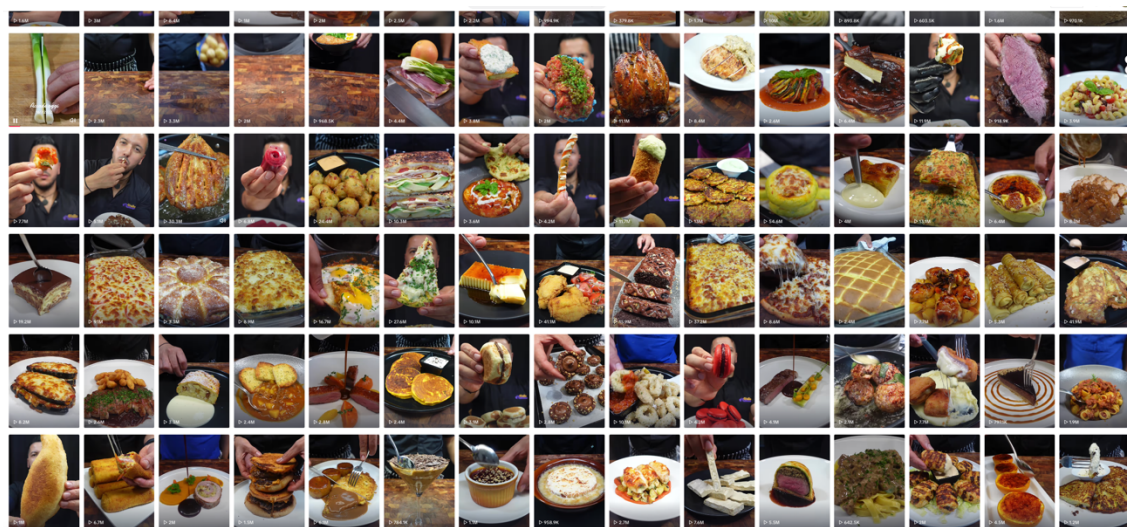


Figure 9. @foodgood TikTok video thumbnails 16-Jul-2023 to 11-Sep-2023: his face disappears.

5.4. Development and variation in the other spaces

5.4.1. THE YOUTUBE TRAJECTORY

As shown earlier in Table 1, on YouTube he posts fewer videos (47 videos in total, among which 24 shorts). The shorts are the same versions of the videos he posts on TikTok, while the full YouTube videos show the same preparation in a longer version, without the TikTok editing cuts and sped-up effect. The timespan of posting is short and encompasses only the first two phases of his TikTok trajectory: he posts the first video on 30 June 2020 and his last

one on 7 June 2021

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAcMvkuffLQ&t=4s&ab_channel=GZfoodqood, in which he does not speak, and instead shows overlaid written ingredients and instructions in Italian and Arabic, with the description displaying the recipe in Arabic, Italian, Turkish and English). His first short is dated 2 February 2021

(<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/3I8IMqywFUc>, with the recipe in the description in Italian and in English); the last short is on 15 November 2021

(<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/L3hm7qVr0Ss>), has only the English caption ‘MY burger XXL’, while he still says *Bismillah* (he had first posted it on TikTok on 5 November, two days before abandoning the catchphrase).

On YouTube, he starts with only Italian, then soon introduces also English, and then Arabic. During the Ramadan period, Arabic takes precedence over Italian and English, featuring first in the overlaid writing and in the recipes, in which he also occasionally adds Turkish.

His first YouTube video is dated 30 June 2020, before he starts on Tiktok as @foodqood, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExQuiS-mkl8&t=85s&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) the video shows a venison-based preparation, his face never shows but his voice explains the actions shown in Italian, with a soft voice (he mentions that he lives in Alto Adige, while his pronunciation sounds Middle Eastern); the title is in Italian *Piatto pazzesco e molto semplice di capriolo*, and the description links to his then other social media profiles on Instagram (@khalid_el_mahi, which stopped posting after October 2020), Facebook (Khalid El Mahi, which up to then hosted mainly personal posts not related to food), and TikTok (profile @ricettekhalid no longer existing). The second video is much later, 27 January 2021

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TijWGEJZABM&ab_channel=GZfoodqood), tagged #ASMR (a month after he had first used the same hashtag on TikTok), titled *Ricette: Churros*, he prepares churros but he doesn’t speak and there is no overlaid writing, his face does not feature, only his hands are shown while preparing the dish, with heightened effects of the sounds produced during the preparation. In the video description the recipe is in Italian and in English. The following videos show the same multimodal deployment in the video, with ASMR sounds and no speech, and couple Italian to English not only in the recipes in the description but also in the title, e.g., the third one on 1 February

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcl-nqJTDvc&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) *Pasta di Frutta alle Arance/ Orange Pate De Fruit*, with the French incorporated in the name of the dish preparation not reflecting an innovation/translanguaging practice as it is established in English due to prestige borrowing from French cuisine, and fourth one on 3 February e.g., (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDkPCizJwu4&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) *Trancio di salmone all’aceto balsamico / Salmon steak with balsamic vinegar*.

On 24th February

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BrDUxrUZsE&ab_channel=GZfoodqood 8th oldest video on his channel), while the video description maintains only Italian and English in the recipes, the title adds Arabic and also foregrounds ASMR: *Il miglior sandwich al tonno / the best una sandwich / أحسن ساندويش بالتونة / ASMR*

On 19th March (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmcV-qEqoc&ab_channel=GZfoodqood)

the title always pairs only Italian and English (Hamburger, impossibile non rifarlo un altra volta / the best hamburger), yet not through equivalent translations as the Italian translates as ‘Hamburger, impossible not to remake it again’; the description has no recipe, instead adds in Italian, English and French the links to

his TikTok and Instagram profiles with an invitation equivalent in all three languages (Eng. ‘For any clarification write to me and I will answer you’). However, he never replies to comments asking questions on any of the three media platforms (he might on direct messages though); one comment to that video says ‘*Salam ! Can you please write the ingredients in the English please. You have a lot of English speaking followers :-)*’, highlighting, through the *Salam* the shared Arabic heritage of foodgood and the commenter (‘*Salam*’), as well as the international character of his viewers.

The following video, posted on 31 March, at the start of the second phase, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB96YTajPP8&ab_channel=GZfoodgood) seems to follow up from this comment as it overlays the recipe ingredients and instructions on the video itself as close captions in Italian, English and Arabic (the ASMR also has a music soundtrack). The video, pairs the ASMR enhanced sounds with a music soundtrack, which will become a consistent auditory feature in this phase also in his TikTok videos. He also appears tasting the dish at the end of the video (the background shows the sofa of his living room, so the cinematography has still a home-made aesthetics), which closes with his logo. The logo, shown in Figure 10, which he only introduces on this platform for a handful of videos and soon abandons, includes an avatar image (vaguely reminiscent of an anime aesthetics) on top of his name, Khalid El Mahi, and the tagline “food for all”, which marks the inclusiveness of his content: this can speak in different ways to different segments of his viewers, signalling inclusivity to viewers belonging to minoritised groups, such as Arab-speakers and Muslims in Italy and in the English speaking world, and to viewers belonging to dominant groups that his offer is not only for those minoritised groups.



Figure 10. The creator's persona logo introduced on YouTube.

For the following videos until the start of Ramadan, he goes back to the previous multimodal deployment, i.e., no music, no overlaid writing, and recipe in Italian and English (no Arabic) in the description.

On 14th April, which coincides with his first no-tasting gesture on TikTok, on YouTube instead he posts a video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6d7OLu6YlQ&ab_channel=GZfoodgood) with overlaid writing in Italian and English, the title in Italian (Gelato al cioccolato con ingredienti semplici 🍦), while the recipe in the description is (only) in Arabic.

On 16 April (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jh5GtY-Porg&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) he posts the strawberry jellies video (which he had posted the day before on TikTok, in which he said *Bismillah* for the first time and ‘*Nein, Ramadan*’). On YouTube, the video opens with him featured smiling with the dish in his hand, but cuts out the ‘*Nein Ramadan*’ and ‘*Bismillah*’ shots, showing only the preparation of the dish with his spoken ‘mashallah’ at the very end of the video. The recipe in the description is in Italian, English and Arabic.

During the Ramadan period, videos always have Arabic for the recipes, either/both in the description or/and as overlaid writing in the video, together with Italian and English (e.g., 21 April https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcw1RJBb4rc&t=6s&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) Italian, English and Arabic recipe both overlaid and in the description) or only with Italian (e.g., 25 April

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xso_A8C8y5Q&ab_channel=GZfoodqood, in which he opens with *Bismillah* and the recipe is overlaid writing in Arabic first and Italian second, although the video title is only in Italian: *Torta di cioccolato e biscotti*, and the description has an hashtag in Arabic ‘sweet’: [#حلوة](#) [#nutella](#) [#foodqood](#)). The closing logo has disappeared by then.

On 5 May (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcU7YA7WrYg&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) he opens the video speaking Arabic with a caption in Italian that says ‘Benvenuto sul mio canale’ (welcome to my channel) and the preparation has overlaid writing in Arabic first and then Italian that indicates ‘you can find all ingredients in the description’. Then the description shows the recipe in Arabic, Italian and Turkish. Turkish features in place of English also as overlaid writing on 9 May

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zH2iak9RKsA&ab_channel=GZfoodqood), in which he says ‘*respect Ramadan*’, which he had instead cut out from the strawberry jellies video on YouTube. This indicates that he is no longer hesitant in performing his Muslim identity also on this media platform. On 24 May

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=034nKM3KuZc&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) he only speaks in Arabic with no overlaid captioning nor recipe in the description, while the video title is in Italian (*Caramelle al cioccolato coperte al cioccolato bianco*). Finally, his last YouTube video, posted on 7 June 2021

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAcMvkuffLQ&t=4s&ab_channel=GZfoodqood) deploys no speech, and goes back to overlaid Italian and Arabic captioning, with recipe in the description in Arabic, Italian, Turkish and English. Thereafter, he posts only a few shorts reposting his TikTok videos, with no more recipe in the description either.

By then Instagram has already taken priority over YouTube, as the space to repost usually a few days later the same videos uploaded on TikTok complete with recipes. Given that the videos are the same, only posted at a later time than TikTok, it is worth focusing especially on the paratext.

5.4.2. THE INSTAGRAM TRAJECTORY

On his Instagram profiles he generally posts some (not all) of the same videos a few days later than on TikTok, complete with recipe in the description. However until 21 February 2021 he only posts pictures rather than videos; the photos follow the typical Instagram food photography aesthetics (Contois and Kish, 2022), with nicely plated food and saturated

colours. The description is mainly a list of hashtags, the same repeated in all posts, which combine Italian and English words (the latter are commonly used social media labels for food, such as *foodpic*, *foodblog* or *foodporn*), referencing Italy and Italian cuisine in both languages; occasionally the description has the name of the dish and/or recipe only in Italian:

.. #cucina #food #foodporn #foodblogger #cibo #foodie #cooking #dinner #foodlover #instafood #cucinaitaliana #foodblog #delicious #eat #foodpic #italy #foodgasm #foodart #eating #fashionfood #instagood #foodpics #italianfood #foods #italia #foodaddict #chef #delish #breakfast #foodism

On 21 February he posts his first Instagram reel (<https://www.instagram.com/giallolovesitaly/reel/CLj9FBmomdU/>), which is an illusion dish (mozzarella balls dipped in tomato sauce and laid on the plate to look like vine tomatoes); here the hashtags have changed, with no more references to Italy and Italian cuisine, nor hashtags in Italian, in spite of the arguable relatedness with the use of mozzarella (and tomato sauce):

#cook #food #chef #cooking #foodie #foodporn #delicious #yummy #cheflife #eat #restaurant #dinner #instafood #love #kitchen #instagood #foodphotography #healthy #foodgasm #lunch #yum #foodstagram #culinary #tasty #chefsofinstagram #homemade #foodpic #healthyfood #foodblogger #truecooks

Since then, except for four more pictures (with the old list of hashtags), his Instagram posts are almost exclusively reels; the hashtags are in English with no reference to Italy or Italian cuisine (and like on TikTok, since 12 April, they open with #ramadan, and then with #halal after Eid Mubarak). The captions start including the recipes, which are only in Italian until 16 April, when he posts the strawberry jellies video in which he says *Bismillah* for the first time (<https://www.instagram.com/giallolovesitaly/reel/CNuH7u4IqnZ/>), complete with recipe in Italian, English and Arabic as he did on the same day on YouTube (while the video posted a day earlier on TikTok had no recipe, like all his TikTok videos). This is his first Instagram post in which he includes Arabic (all his previous posts have recipes only in Italian) and, unlike on YouTube, he does not censor the ‘nein Ramadan’ shot. Since then, analogously to YouTube, his Instagram posts have recipes in Italian and Arabic, or Italian English and Arabic, or Italian Arabic and English. Occasionally the description has only Arabic and Turkish, as in a video posted on 17 May (https://www.instagram.com/giallolovesitaly/reel/CO_Hqddoue0/), which he reposts also as a short on YouTube two days later (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/qncApMoWegw>) with only a description in Arabic: كلاص بطريقة رائعة.

His Instagram posting activity continues after he stops posting on YouTube, and the captions always include Arabic along with Italian (sometimes also with English), until 6 October (<https://www.instagram.com/giallolovesitaly/reel/CUsJyWnoGG1/>), when the description is only in Italian, has no recipe and says that the recipe is published at @giallozafferano, signalling the start of his collaboration with the media brand. Since then and throughout November he alternates posts with descriptions only in Italian and in Italian and Arabic. On 26 November the description is only in English instead (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CWwHUSuAALV/>). On 1 December he posts the last Instagram video with the recipe also in Arabic (featuring last, after Italian and English); after

then, the recipes are either only in Italian or in English or both, and the Arabic disappears. On 7 December he posts a video titled *Barbout pane marocchino* (Moroccan bread) <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXMJZGGtSJG/> where the recipe is only in Italian and French along with making explicit in Italian that it is a collaboration with *GialloZafferano* (which, in a few days, will announce the acquisition of the @foodgood social media profiles). Since 11 December, when the acquisition is announced, his Instagram posts have the English recipe first and then the Italian (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CXWIk6AgcAz/>), occasionally also French as last (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CYbz3I4JAox/>), but the Arabic disappears.

The crosschecking across spaces of his use of language resources, either in the videos or in their paratexts, evidences different timelines in the creator's translocal trajectories: On YouTube he starts immediately projecting his content transnationally, through ASMR videos (labelled so in the title/hashtags) and by pairing Italian with English in the overlaid captions and/or in the video description. On Instagram he starts by foregrounding Italy and Italian in the hashtags, and, except for social media-specific hashtags in English, he only writes recipes and names of dishes in Italian. Arabic enters his YouTube videos first, since February, while on Instagram it starts appearing alongside Italian around the start of Ramadan; however, on YouTube he censors his Muslim identity at first (by editing out the 'nein, Ramadan' shot), which he instead performs in the video posted on Instagram on the same day (and two days earlier on TikTok). Arabic achieves priority during the Ramadan period in both spaces, also paired by Turkish and persists alongside Italian on both platforms. Unlike on YouTube, English starts entering his Instagram posts only occasionally during the Ramadan period (when also Arabic is introduced), and its presence decreases also on YouTube in favour of Arabic and Turkish. Arabic continues its presence after then, although it disappears in the last YouTube videos and shorts, while it continues on Instagram, along with Italian and a more consistent presence of English. Eventually, since the creator's collaboration with *GialloZafferano*, Arabic starts disappearing from the Instagram posts too, while English increases both in frequency and in salience, also compared to Italian.

The overall trajectory arch of the creator's social media presence across the three spaces features transnational and social media space-specific semiotic resources throughout in the food content, in the TikTok soundtracks, as well as in the ASMR style of sounds. It records the same peak of translocality in the use of language resources, with Arabic (occasionally also Turkish) and Muslim references in the videos and paratext for a few months since the start of Ramadan (as well as related soundtracks on TikTok), which also coincides with his highest increase rates of followers on TikTok, and the enhanced visual cohesion towards a professional aesthetics and a salient presence of the creator's persona in the opening and closing shots. The Arabic and the Muslim references soon later decrease, up to disappearing in the institutionalisation phase, with the collaboration and later acquisition by the *GialloZafferano* media brand, which also records a backgrounding of the creator's persona. To note also that the Muslim references disappear first from the video content (i.e., his mentioning of Ramadan, followed by his abandonment of the *Bismillah* catchphrase, replaced by the transnationally recognisable stereotypical Italian 'al bacio' gesture), while both #halal in the hashtag and the Arabic in the recipes in the descriptions persist on Instagram until the creator's collaboration with the media brand is announced.

Throughout the creator's posting activity in all the three spaces, the posts record a lot of variation in the assemblage of linguistic resources that can speak to different audiences (through the named languages of English and Arabic, alongside Italian, and occasionally also Turkish, German, Spanish and Portuguese). If the recipes in the Instagram and YouTube

descriptions and in the YouTube captioning present content translated in one or more named languages, these do not match however the linguistic resources used in the video titles or in the creator's utterances. In this, the videos posted can be legitimately considered as cases of translanguaging rather than multilingual translation, as not all content is presented in all named languages. Different elements of the content will be accessible to viewers with different linguistic repertoires. The fact that the functions of named languages change from one post to the other, however, enables the creator to sustain and increase the international reach of his contents, by addressing different language speakers not only at the same time in parts of the linguistic resources of a single post, but also throughout time, by varying the language mix across different posts. In this sense, his content can be considered as inclusive.

It must be noted however that, as the analysis of the layered semiotic resources has shown, considering only the linguistic resources would produce a skewed picture of the audiences to which the creator appeals. Certainly, the use of a named language is a marked sign of explicit address for that speaking audience; analogously its disappearance is an equally marked sign: so the introduction of Arabic (together with Muslim-related references during Ramadan in music and words) indexes an explicit address towards Arabic speaking viewers, while its abandonment, when the media brand collaboration starts, signals that the creator has stopped addressing explicitly an Arabic audience, while the foregrounding of English over Italian signals that the creator starts prioritising an international reach over explicitly addressing Italian speakers. However, the non-verbal resources appeal to (space- and lifestyle-specific) audiences transnationally, such as ASMR viewers. While explicit address in a named language means also exclusion of those who do not speak it, the foregrounded role of nonverbal resources with different provenances together with a relatively backgrounded role of linguistic resources (nearly absent in the videos) and their varied, non-systematic mixing in named languages, broadens the potential accessibility and enjoyment of content to multiple audiences worldwide.

5.5. Discussion of findings

The analysis of the provenance dimensions of @foodgood's semiotic practices through time and across the three social media spaces, cross-checked with the interactions in viewers' comments and through contextualisation, has identified trajectories of variation and change in the creator's communicative practices and strategies in terms of his self-branding, identity performances, and explicitly addressed audiences. These have traced four phases in the creator's trajectory.

An initial more tentative phase records high variation in multimodal deployment and experimentation with no clear multimodal cohesion which however shows awareness of the media platforms' (1) functionalities - in using hashtags, (2) preferences of use, chiefly ludic for TikTok, also informative for YouTube, on which he publishes recipes and preparation explanations, and Instagram, which he starts later, through photo posts with recipes in the caption), and (3) cultural practices, on social media space-specific food content niches, tropes, ASMR and soundtracks). These all facilitate reach and engagement with diverse segments of viewers. The phase concludes with the shaping of a brand image, through a unique name across spaces (@foodgood) and logo (inclusive in its slogan 'food for all', under his name marking his Arabic identity, and an anime-style chef avatar, indexing sub-culture affiliation and professional identity), and increased cohesion in the video multimodal

deployment through a foregrounding of the food (typical of social media food content), with close shots of the preparation and opening, closing and thumbnail framing of the final dish. On TikTok he never speaks and the hashtags are space-specific words (in English, following the named language nomenclature, but in fact part of the space-specific linguistic repertoire of TikTok), so his videos in this space are accessible to all viewers transnationally, with no specific named language group of speakers explicitly addressed. Instead on YouTube his production is markedly projected internationally along with addressing Italian speakers, through the pairing of English captioning in the videos and/or title and recipes in the paratext, as well as Arabic, along with his Italian spoken explanations, written captions, titles and recipes.

The following self-branding phase combines both transnational appeal and translocally-marked identity performance. The phase is characterised by increased visual cohesion, the use of resources shaping a professional aesthetics, both in filming style and in his cooking identity, and the foregrounding of his persona as recognisable marker of his content (video opening and closing shot, and thumbnail image). In this phase, resources appealing in provenance to transnational social media- and lifestyle-specific cultures-of-use (through the refinement of the ASMR style and the offer of apparently simple and visually-effective dish preparations with foods widely available internationally), combine with resources shaping his identity as Arabic (through the spoken catchphrase *Bismillah!* and Arabic soundtracks), and Muslim (through his marked avoidance of tasting the dish during fasting, his reference to Ramadan in speech and hashtag, replaced with @halal after the end of Ramadan, and the use of Ramadan-related soundtracks translanguaging in Arabic and English or by US-based Muslim and Muslim-heritage rappers). The establishment of a catchphrase is fully part of a self-branding strategy, while his stopping from tasting introduces an unexpected variation to his recently established opening&closing tasting shot, providing an engaging surprise effect to followers familiar with his videos. At the same time, in the specific resources, these two innovations explicitly address Arabic speaking viewers and Muslim viewers, both of whom were already part of his followers as evidenced in the comments to videos prior to these innovations. This phase witnesses the highest increase rates of followers with numbers passing from 1 to 12 millions, ranking him as a mega-influencer on TikTok. During this phase he starts prioritising Instagram over YouTube (where his posting activity eventually ends); while the latter started markedly internationally-oriented, Instagram starts more explicitly addressing Italian speaking viewers, and later expands through the introduction of English and Arabic, along with occasional elements in Turkish, French and other named languages. The language combinations do not provide systematic translations of all verbal elements in a video and paratext, and they alternate and vary across videos, in their presence, in their pairing, and in the functional elements of video and paratext, offering different access to viewers with different linguistic profiles.

The last two phases record a progressive transnational shift towards institutionalisation. The move is characterised by the embracing of dominant semiotic practices, marked by the abandonment of his Muslim identity performance, the replacement of the *Bismillah* catchphrase with the transnationally recognisable stereotypical Italian ‘al bacio’ gesture, the going back to space-specific globally viral soundtracks, and the progressive backgrounding of his persona (appearing only in the closing shot towards the end of the phase), while broadening the international provenance of ingredients and cooking methods (expanding to Asian style dishes) and maintaining the ASMR style through auditory resources and the cohesive professional aesthetics in the visual resources. The innovations coincide with his initial collaboration with the Italian online food media brand *GialloZafferano* and become

permanent markers of his video performances when the media brand announces the acquisition of the creator's social media profiles, in spite of the many comments pleading him to say *Bismillah* again or hinting at his betrayal of both his Muslim identity and the audience segment which gave him popularity. Arabic eventually disappears from all textual and paratextual elements also on Instagram, while English is increasingly prioritised over Italian in salience, in line with the media brand social media strategy aimed at international expansion capitalising on the transnational appeal of Italian chefs. The @foodgood profiles, renamed @gzfoodgood in these phases, will later change into @giallolovesitaly (after the date of data collection for the present study) to become the media brand international profiles hosting videos featuring different chefs along with those by foodgood/Khalid El Mahi. Yet even in the latest videos, his appearance keeps attracting comments by viewers asking him why he stopped saying *Bismillah*.

The changes and variations of the creator's practices identified through a time-space-interaction analysis can be interpreted as shifts in orientation and positioning towards dominant/niche semiotic regimes and dominant/minoritised linguistic ideologies, achievable through broader contextualisation in relation to power dynamics and minoritised group identity issues.

While multimodal textual analysis can identify the what, when and how, and only trace possible motivations and effects, triangulation of data analysis through a mixed method approach combining also interview data with the creator and the media brand as well as surveys with viewers/followers could provide insights into the relevant participants' perceived causes and effects of the observed changes and variations. Ethical approval is currently undergoing to approach the creator, the media brand and followers, so in the meantime only interpretations of correlations and informed hypotheses can be derived from the findings.

The creator's trajectory shows a strategic use of viral TikTok soundtracks as well as a translanguaged use of linguistic resources and hashtags in the other media platforms to facilitate international visibility of his content. The analysis of different layers of semiotic resources through time and across spaces, however, allows us to reveal and unpack the complex changes and variations in the mix of provenances, which goes well beyond the role played by linguistic resources. @foodgood gained mega-influencer status when his content combined simultaneously (1) increased multimodal cohesion and professional aesthetics, using semiotic resources and food practices that appeal to a broad audience of cooking videos on social media, with (2) resources appealing to transnationally widespread/influent online niches (such as ASMR viewers), and, significantly, with (3) his identity performance explicitly relating to Arabic-speaking and Muslim viewers. The multimodal assembling together of transnational social media-specific dominant practices and translocal identification with groups racialised and minoritised for their language, ethnicity, global south nationalities, and/or religion proved successful in attracting new followers internationally (as well as in Italy); those who identify with any of those minoritised groups could feel represented in mainstream social media food practices, while his content could still appeal to other viewers less in need of representation as belonging to dominant groups (like the author, a white Italian speaker not affiliated with any religion) and to social media influent affinity groups that transcend sociodemographic variables (like ASMR viewers worldwide).

The abandoning of markers of Arabic and Muslim identity aligns with dominant ethnoracialised power dynamics and linguistic ideologies in the global north. The fact that this happens after the creator's gained popularity can be seen as a betrayal of his following and can lead to interpret retrospectively his Arabic and Muslim identity performance as an exploitative strategy to gain following and trust among these minoritised groups, soon abandoned when no longer needed, as comments by some of these viewers indicate.

The progressive change coinciding with the collaboration with the media brand and its later acquisition of the creator's profiles can be seen as a shift towards the creator's corporatisation and institutionalisation and can suggest a concerted strategy with the media brand towards a realignment with dominant semiotic regimes and ethnoracial linguistic ideologies as well as with the media brand international expansion strategy through the marked Italianness promoted by the brand image.

We however cannot determine the creator's degree of agency in this shift and various hypotheses can be formulated, ranging in a continuum from his active role and intentional, planned strategic exploitation of his identity performance, through to an unplanned change in practices decided after his achieved popularity, as a selling out or mere self-censoring, or also a change of mind in self-branding towards even more cohesion, by abandoning the *CEO of bismillah* brand and presenting himself solely as a major ASMR food video creator, or even, a change of sensitivity in his own identity, beyond the projected/performed persona, as an internationally recognised chef based in Italy, or even as identifying himself more as Italian and less with his heritage country/ethnicity/language/religion, up to an equally plausible scenario in which the creator has fallen victim of the media brand persuasive power and appeal, unaware of the media brand corporate plans on the development of his content and profiles until later, after signing the acquisition and being bound by contractual obligations to conform to their indications. After all, the exploitative and self-exploitative pressures to which content creators as digital workers are subjected are well known in the literature (Ahmad et al., 2021; Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020; Hoose and Rosenbohm, 2024).

Hopefully a more complete picture will be achieved in a follow-up study through triangulation of the findings with interview data (undergoing ethics approval at the time of writing). It seems however sensible to close the discussion of the findings by adding a further contextualisation element: @foodqood had reached the considerable peak of 23.4 million followers on TikTok by September 2023, when the data were collected. Still, the latest online page (outside social media posts) retrievable searching for 'foodqood' or 'Khalid El Mahi' in any language and country dates 30 November 2022 in Italian websites (Francesco, 2022), repeating the same bio information of the previous ones; only one was retrieved in English, reporting on the viral reach of one of his videos (de Graaf, 2021), dated September 2021, when the Tiktok profile had reached 10 million followers, and one in Arabic, by the Saudi online news media outlet *Al Marsad* (2023, المرصد) (only reporting a recipe of the creator, labelled in the title as "أشهر شيف على "التيك توك" ('the most famous chef on TikTok'). He does not feature in any report on TikTok food influencers either, in spite of a following that should have placed him in the first positions in the years 2021-2023 and of *GialloZafferano* declaring him the world's fourth food TikToker for number of followers in the press release issued announcing his profile acquisitions (Gruppo Mondadori, 2021), and the "the world's third most followed cookery account on TikTok" in a later press release in July 2022 (Cavaliere, 2022) that attributes the record numbers of the media brand on social media mainly to @gzfoodqood's over 17 million followers on TikTok.

It is true that the creator's production is entirely focused on his food preparations and, if we exclude the occasional appearance of his son's hands or voice in his videos, he never shares details of his personal life in his videos, nor controversial opinions, which would make him a more likely target of attention of showbusiness gossip. However, even when considering this, the scarcity of media reports available on a creator with such mega-influencer status stands out as a rather puzzling exception against the wide attention devoted by soft news to social media influencers (Anđelić, 2021). Academic sources too seem to ignore him, while @emilymariko, a US-based food content creator is often cited in studies on social media food representations, e.g., Schröer, who characterises her as “arguably the most important food influencer on TikTok” (2023, p. 224) by virtue of her then 12.5 million followers, i.e., nearly half of @gzfoodgood's in the same period. This leads to further hypotheses on the geopolitics of celebrification, with a disproportionate media attention given to US-based and Anglophone personalities than others, on top of possible ethnoracial factors (although @khaby.lame has enjoyed considerable media attention since he became the world's most followed TikTok profile, while being based in Italy, of Senegalese origins and declared Muslim).

While the readings of the findings are informed hypotheses that would require further verification to go beyond their mere speculative value, it is hoped that the case study has shown the usefulness of a time-space-interaction framework in providing a holistic and nuanced picture of the trajectories of a creator's production and online presence.

6. Conclusions

The case study on @foodgood's trajectories showcases the strategically combined use of semiotic resources with different provenances to attract and engage a diverse audience. The creator initially experimented with various content styles before developing a distinctive professional aesthetics incorporating ASMR, a global online phenomenon. Notably, his introduction of an Arabic and Muslim identity performance during Ramadan proved highly successful in attracting followers. Its abandonment after partnering with *GialloZafferano* raises questions about the creator's agency and the influence of institutional power dynamics. The shift suggests a strategic alignment with the media brand's image, sacrificing the representation of minoritised identities that contributed to the creator's initial success. This raises concerns about the (self-)erasure of minoritized identities in mainstream social media content to cater for a global market, simultaneously influenced by and fuelling dominant ethnoracialised linguistic ideologies. The study highlights the complex interplay of individual agency, institutional forces, and semiotic choices in shaping content creation and identity performance on social media. Further research, including interviews with the creator and audience surveys, could gain insights into the motivations and perceived impacts of these choices.

The integrated time-space-interaction analysis proves valuable for examining these complex translocal trajectories. It captures how creators develop their strategies through time and orchestrate their presence in different spaces, adapting resources across different provenances to engage diverse audiences, selectively orienting and responding to audience feedback, platform affordances and corporate interests.

The analytical concept of provenance, in its several dimensions, proves useful to trace the meaning potentials of semiotic resources in terms of projected social values and identities and hence audiences they appeal to. Provenance dimensions can unpack the complex identification axes of translocality and reveal cultural affiliations beyond a simplistic association of culture to nationality, ethnicity, or language. They can provide a more nuanced and multifaceted picture of translocal semiotic practices and strategies as well as the content's positioning in relation to power dynamics.

In @foodgood's case, the changes and variations in the creator's strategic assemblages of different provenance dimensions and identity performances show successful resonance with varied audiences and build broad engagement. The analysis reveals also the potential tensions as well as porous boundaries between individual agency and institutional forces in shaping content creation, raising ethical questions about the (self-)exploitation and (self-)censoring of minoritised identities to sustain mainstream appeal.

Responding to an existing gap in research methods on social media content creation, a time-space-interaction analysis can provide evidence-based data to scaffold and cross-check interviews with creators and audience surveys for perceptions on motivations, effects, and appeal of changes and variations in practices and strategies, thus enabling more reliable and nuanced insights through data triangulation.

The study shows the potential of looking at multimodal and translanguaging repertoires in terms of trajectories through time rather than solely synchronically. It also shows the fluid boundaries between grassroots and mainstream digital practices in the highly competitive race for content visibility. It further demonstrates the usefulness of looking at translocal phenomena through a social semiotic lens that incorporates languaging practices within a holistic consideration of the overall semiosis. Considering languaging acts as part of an examination of provenance in all sign-making can calibrate the interpretation of their specific weight and role, to achieve a more holistic understanding of the complexity of translocal phenomena, factoring in different dimensions of cultural affiliations that supersede geopolitical, ethnic, or named language categories, hence helping mitigating methodological nationalist biases in the analysis of cultural phenomena.

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- 2023 , المرصد, ص. شاهد: أشهر شيف على "التيك توك" يكشف عن أسرع طريقة لتجهيز البطاطس باللحمة المفرومة. Al Marsad.