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Multimodal time–space-interaction analysis of content creators' translocal trajectories

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines social media content creators' practices development over time and across platforms, through the case of @foodqood, an Italy-based food content creator who achieved megainfluencer status. An integrated multimodal time–space-interaction analysis of the creator's 3-year long production on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube maps shifts in semiotic resources and audience engagement. Findings identify three phases in the creator's practices, showing a trajectory from experimentation to institutionalisation. Changes through time and variations across spaces, cross-checked with followers' prompts and responses, reveal shifts in identity performances and prioritised audience segments. The time–space-interaction analysis evidences complex dynamics of influence between grassroots and institutional practices, and between agency in sign-making and dominant semiotic regimes, including ethnoracialised linguistic ideologies. The study advances a social semiotic approach that includes translanguaging for the analysis of translocality. Using provenance to identify the cultural dimensions in semiotic assemblages allows for nuanced considerations of the import of dimensions such as lifestyles and space-specific affiliations alongside geopolitical and ethnolinguistic provenances. It mitigates the risks of unbalanced analyses towards named languages, and reductionist interpretations of cultural phenomena solely/chiefly along a geopolitically-defined local–global continuum. The study addresses gaps in research on content creators by integrating a longitudinal perspective to multimodal analysis. It also raises questions regarding the (self-)exploitation and (self-)erasure of minoritized identities in social media ecosystems increasingly shaped by corporate interests.

1. Introduction[1]

Short videos have gained prominence in social media communication, with algorithms prioritizing content that quickly captures viewers' attention (Zhang et al., 2024). Short-video-dedicated platforms like Twitch and TikTok have emerged with older ones like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube introducing short videos among their posts. TikTok's surge during COVID-19 (Feldkamp, 2021) led to a new generation of creators gaining large followings and media attention, while creators on other platforms adapted by including shorts and expanding on TikTok.

Given such fast-changing landscape, platforms' opaque algorithms and competition for viewers' attention, questions emerge on how creators:

- develop semiotic practices and strategies through time,
- orchestrate their presence across spaces, and
- shape identity performances that appeal to diverse viewers, to manage the need of building, maintaining and simultaneously expanding their follower base.

This paper addresses these research questions through a time–space-interaction analysis framework applied to the case of @foodqood, a food creator based in Italy who gained over 20 million TikTok followers. Analysis of his entire posting activity across time and spaces (i.e., TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, from his first posts dated 16 July, 2

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[1] An extended presentation of literature review, analytical framework, and detailed case study data and analysis can be found in Adami, E. (2025a) *An Integrated Time-Space-Interaction Framework for the Analysis of Social Media Content Creators' Practices: The Case of Translocal Trajectories of @Foodqood* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 5435234). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5435234. I am extremely grateful to the guest editors for their thoughtful support and advice.

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October, and 30 June 2020 respectively, to data collection on 11 September 2023, see Table 1), cross-checked with followers' interactions, shows the dynamics of variation and change in his sign-making practices and traces the translocal trajectories of his identity performance.

Findings identify phases in the development of his multimodal and languaging practices, revealing changes in his interests to reach different audiences, globally, across locales, language profiles and lifestyles/preferences. Findings highlight his trajectories in social orientations, positioning, identity construction and audience appeal, and interpret changes with reference to corporate interests and dominant semiotic regimes, including linguistic ideologies—i.e., attitudes and beliefs about semiotic resources and language use (for an overview, Blommaert, 2006). Through indexicality, both regimes and ideologies construct mutually referential, fractally recursive iconised relations with (attitudes/beliefs about) the social groups identified with certain practices and languages, reproducing hierarchies of distinction and discrimination, as in the case of ethnoracialised minoritised groups and the semiotic constructions attributed to them. The case study findings raise questions on the (self-)exploitation and (self-)erasure of minoritized identities in social media ecosystems.

Responding to the theme of this special issue by integrating translanguaging within an overall social semiotic multimodal perspective for the observation of social media content creators' practices, the paper contributes to: research on content creators, by filling a methodological and analytical gap, and showing the usefulness of integrated time–space-interaction multimodal analysis for a nuanced picture of creators' practices development through time and responses to competing influences, such as corporate interests and different audience segments' engagement; research on translocality, by considering the import of cultural dimensions such as lifestyles and space-specific affiliations to avoid reductionist interpretations of cultural phenomena solely/chiefly along a geopolitically-defined local–global continuum; and research on translanguaging, by adopting a social semiotic approach that reassesses the role of named languages within a holistic consideration of all sign-making.

2. Content creators on video-based social media and the case of food

Content creators develop self-branding strategies by "walk[ing] a fine line between maintaining a constant personal branding image and adaptation to changes" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1537). To attract new audiences, their self-presentation styles shift towards more purposely-refined content design and curation (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021) in a "move from a 'self-focus' content approach to an 'audience-focus' approach" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1538). This occurs through time, acquiring skills (Enke & Borchers, 2021), developing "an understanding of the dynamics that operate in different social media and the workings of their algorithms" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1532), and strategies to maximize exposure, including hashtags and captions.

Research on creators' development over time remains scant, relying mainly on interview data on creators' self-reported skills, strategies, and platform understanding, without thorough analysis of their semiotic practices in posts. Moreover, "little is presently known regarding how influencer practices differ across platforms" (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022, p. 13). A few studies analyse selected profiles' entirety of posts (Wang and Feng, 2022; Zappavigna, 2016) or large post samples (Meza et al., 2023), yet taken as a synchronic dataset. Their findings insightfully categorize post types, projected identities and roles, without however considering development through time and orchestration across spaces. By examining a food creator's production throughout the arch of popularity development, this study demonstrates the need of considering posts as situated in time and in relation to each other in the creators' posting activity, and the significance of intertwining time, space and interactions as analysis dimensions to identify trajectories of variation and change in semiotic practices, identity performances and orientations towards audiences.

Food is among the most popular content domains on Instagram and TikTok (Schröer, 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Food representations on social media and their effects are widely researched (Contois & Kish, 2022; Feldman & Goodman, 2021; Lewis, 2020), yet without specific focus on content creators. While research on beauty and lifestyle influencers abounds (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Bhatia, 2023; Dekavalla, 2020; Rocamora, 2022), "less academic attention has been paid to food influencers" (Miguel et al., 2024, p. 1531).

The case of food is especially relevant to translocality, due to its deeply-felt relation with culture and identity, tensions between tradition and innovation, and between practices of circulation and contact vs. protectionist discourses of typicality and national(ist) canons (for dynamics in Facebook groups, Adami, 2025b). Already widely mediatised through cookbooks and TV shows, food has found new representation practices online, producing field-defining labels such as "digital food" (Lewis, 2020) and "digital food cultures" (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). Yet no attention has been devoted to food creators' practices, projected identities, and appealed audiences.

3. Translocality

Kytölä sees translocality as connectedness among locales with local and global intertwining in social life, within a fluid conception of culture "characterised by hybridity, translation, and identification" (2016, p. 371).

As increased circulation and connectedness enhances the deterritorialized character of discourses, lifestyles, and semiotic practices, any cultural production needs to be conceived at least partly "deterritorial, finding dimensions and meanings from spaces and locales beyond our daily habitats" (Kytölä, 2016, p. 373). Some discourses and semiotic practices are transnational from the start, with no identifiable local origin, whereas those originating in specific locales are appropriated and refashioned in others (Pennycook, 2007).

Social media connectivity, audiovisual representations and built-in functionalities for interlingual translation facilitate access to content not only worldwide but also among people speaking different named languages, enhancing the potential transnational, transethnic, and translingual reach and character of social media content. This does not mean, however that social media communication is exempt from essentialised views of culture and ethnoracialised and linguistic ideologies. It is therefore crucial to examine creators' choices of semiotic and linguistic resources for self-presentation, identification, and audience orientation (Kytölä, 2016; Leppänen et al., 2017).

4. A social semiotic approach to (trans)languaging and translocality

This paper adopts a social semiotic approach to analyse translocality in posted content, incorporating (trans)languaging, and using provenance (4.1) to identify the cultural dimensions of semiotic resources and trace the creator's posts translocal positioning.

Social semiotics views the situated use of resources as sign-*making* (rather than 'use'). Meaning potentials derive from resources materiality and past uses. Analysing the association between a resource and its situated meaning informs hypotheses on the sign-maker's 'interest' (Kress, 2010), i.e., the momentary focus of their social history and positioning in the situation. This reveals the sign-maker's orientation in relation to dominant semiotic regimes and interest towards specific audiences, useful for identifying the type and degree of translocality in identity performance.

As detailed in Adami (2017, 2018), considering signification as sign-mak*ing* acts accommodates views on language as langua*ging* acts. Research in translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge,

2018; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018) has paid increasing attention to multimodal phenomena. While Li reconceptualises "language as a multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource for sense- and meaning-making" (Wei, 2018, p. 22), some studies extend translanguaging to include multimodal sign-making within it, as 'multimodal translanguaging' practices and/or strategies (e.g., Amondarain-Garrido & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025; in this special issue, Perez-Arredondo et al., 2025; Y. Wang et al., 2025), and consider the combined use of writing and image as (multimodal) translanguaging (e.g., Baynham & Lee, 2019). The present study reverses the view, treating sign-making in all resources as the superordinate, with languaging as sign-making in speech and writing.

Viewing languaging within all sign-making mitigates risks of disproportionate analytical focus on language alongside methodological nationalism, e.g., labelling the hashtag '#fyp' (the acronym of 'for your page') as English, rather than a space-specific resource, originating from TikToker's practices and used transnationally.

Given the affinity (Gee, 2005) character of social media spaces and (corporate algorithm-driven) interest-based access to contents, resources are often adopted and identified as originating from transnational lifestyles and other dimensions of affiliations, creating non–/sharing (Adami, 2025b) boundaries and ties to imaginaries that transcend and intertwine with hegemonic national and ethnic constructions of culture and identity.

In translocal phenomena, "axes of identification cut across more traditional boundary markers such as nationality, ethnicity or language" (Gee, 2005). To identify these axes, the analysis unpacks the cultural complexities of semiotic assemblages, considering the provenance of each resource and role in relation to others.

4.1. Provenance dimensions

Provenance (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2021) refers to the meaning potentials associated to a resource through its identified origins in other contexts. Signs made with that resource achieve the social meanings attributed to the originating context by those using/encountering it in the new one, e.g., when resources from the global south gain an 'exotic' potential when appropriated in the global north.

Drawing on Adami's (2025b) mapping of attributions of provenance in food-related Facebook group discussions, provenance can refer to various socialisation dimensions. These include: space, socially-constructed as place (household, locality, region, nation, or geopolitical area, also ethnicised, e.g., Asian), or as semiotic spaces including online media spaces; time, identified with a decade, generation, age group, or situational occasion; lifestyle (e.g., vegan), class/taste (elite to popular), expertise, occupation, gender, religion, or neurodiversity (e.g., sensorial preferences in colour palettes).

Not a closed list, provenance dimensions work as cultural indexes, as attributions of non–/sharedness, e.g., when avocado on toast is interpreted, through provenance, as indexing millennials, attributed as shared practice by that generation (not others). So analysis of provenance dimensions provides a holistic and nuanced picture of cultural affiliations indexed in semiotic assemblages, mitigating risks of reductionist conflations of culture with nation, ethnicity, or language.

Analysing provenance dimensions in the creator's posts, the case study will map multiple axes of identification in his performance, tracing the constructed groupings and appealed audiences indexed in it.

5. Analytical framework: Integrated time–space-interaction analysis

To trace creators' content development over time and orchestration across social media spaces, the study structures the analysis in semiotic layers along the integrated dimensions of time, space and interaction with followers (see Adami, 2025a for details on the framework).

The semiotic layers considered involve:

1. **Resources of the subject matter,** i.e., food (type of dish, ingredients, appearance, site of display and kitchenware). These shape the style of the content subject, attracting specific audiences, and index the creator's positioning in the social media foodscape.
2. **Embodied and disembodied resources in the performance**: gestures, facial expressions, body movement, speech, clothing, background, overlaid writing. These shape the creator persona's self-presentation and index implied audiences addressed/excluded (also as required linguistic repertoires).
3. **Video-specific resources**: camera framing, movements, lighting, editing, music/soundtrack. These build the video aesthetics, and soundtracks may also mark local/national identification of dishes.
4. **Paratextual resources**: titles, descriptions/captions, hashtags, used to frame, add/contextualise, and increase visibility for specific audiences through ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2018).

As for the dimensions of analysis, annotation of relevant resources in each layer focuses on:

1. Changes through time: when a resource is first introduced/abandoned, tracing translocal trajectories through development of semiotic practices.
2. Variations across spaces: identifying more/less prioritised platforms, their uses/functions, indicating positioning and relations with followers in each.
3. Interactions with followers: cross-checking changes and variations with comments on the specific video and those before/after, to identify prompts/responses to the change and the creator's take up (or not), as indications of prioritisation of audience segments.

Contextualisation (van Leeuwen, 2021) supports analysis considering:

1. Platform affordances, to distinguish practices resulting from the creator's agency from those pre-defined by platform design.
2. Space-, genre-, domain-specific practices, to identify degrees of creativity/innovation alongside verifying provenance of resources (e.g., viral TikTok soundtracks or challenges).
3. Document analysis, for sources reporting on the creator, to trace institutional representations and discourses, both as starting point for selecting aspects to analyse and crosscheck those emerging from analysis.
4. Broader social forces, including hegemonic semiotic regimes, linguistic ideologies, and dominant values, grounding interpretations of power dynamics at play in the creator's practice development.

For manageability, the research focus guided the analysis selectively, combined with a grounded approach for new aspects emerging during the observation. Annotation followed an iterative process: observations in one dimension required cross-checking in others, leading to new relevant resources being annotated and examined across the other dimensions until data saturation was reached for relevance to the specific focus.

6. Time-space-interaction analysis of @foodqood translocal trajectories

This section presents the key findings of the integrated time–space-interaction analysis of @foodqood, the profile name of food creator Kaled El Mahi. The dataset includes all his video content on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube over three years, from the oldest available posts, i.e., 16 July, 2 October, and 30 June 2020 respectively, see Table 1, to 11 September 2023, the date of data collection.

Contextualisation. Online sources retrieved by searching

'foodqood' and 'Kahlid El Mahi' comprise feature articles published from Sep 2021 to Aug 2023 in Italian showbiz and cooking outlets (with only one in English and one in Arabic, focusing only on specific recipes, see 6.4). El Mahi, of Moroccan origin, moved to Italy as a child, attended a hospitality college, worked in several restaurants, and works as head chef at a restaurant in Trentino-Alto Adige, where he lives (at the time of reporting) with his wife and son. Sources report he rose to popularity on TikTok after opening a profile during 2020 lockdown, becoming the most followed food creator on TikTok in Italy and fourth worldwide (no references or ranking provided).

As for his content, sources foreground:

1. his fusion of Middle Eastern and Italian cooking through simple, fun recipes in fast-paced videos;
2. the catchphrase *Bismillah*, always present in his videos, with his TikTok profile reportedly describing him as *CEO of Bismillah* (explained as the Arabic equivalent of *Bon appetit*, short for *Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*, "in the name of compassionate and merciful God");
3. his multilingualism, with videos titled/subtitled in Arabic and Italian, alongside frequent English use;
4. his rapid growth, which gained the attention of *GialloZafferano* ("Saffron Yellow"), a major Italian food brand launched as a grassroots blog and now owned by publishing giant Gruppo Mondadori (Lorini, 2024).

Reports mention collaboration with the brand. On 13 December 2021, a Mondadori press release (reproduced across outlets) announces *GialloZafferano*'s acquisition of @foodqood profiles as part of their international expansion (Gruppo Mondadori, 2021). Some sources cite El Mahi's €1.67 million annual revenue.

Sources conflict on whether he began on TikTok and later expanded to YouTube and Instagram, or first started on YouTube and gained popularity after moving to TikTok, before focusing again on YouTube and Instagram. This can be verified by mapping his online presence.

Semiotic spaces mapping. The mapping of @foodqood's social media presence (Table 1) identifies TikTok as his main space, with the longest posting activity and highest number of posts and followers. His YouTube activity started earlier but ended after a year, while Instagram began later and overtook YouTube as his second main space.

Analysis of his TikTok videos over time, cross-checked with other spaces and followers' comments, identifies three phases in his trajectory of self-branding, identity performance, and audience appeal.

6.1. First phase (July 2020-March 2021): Experimentation with space-specific practices, towards visual cohesion and niche carving

This initial, tentative phase shows high variation in multimodal deployment (Fig. 1) and experimentation with different practices and strategies, with no cohesion across videos.

The oldest videos focus on visually-striking aspects of food preparation—creative plating, decorations or shapes—achieved with simple ingredients (e.g., an egg shaped as the TikTok logo, second thumbnail, fourth row, Fig. 1). Multimodal deployment varies: different camera framing and backgrounds, sometimes close shots of the dish and hands, sometimes longer shots revealing a professional kitchen. Plating often shows multiple portions (e.g., 9th and 11th thumbnails, first row, Fig. 1), suggesting early videos filmed at the restaurant where he works as a chef. In the videos, he never speaks and rarely shows his face. They use upbeat, fast-paced global TikTok soundtracks from the platform's Music Library (Kaye et al., 2022; Radovanović, 2022; Wang, 2024). Few soundtracks repeat, often chosen among viral ones.

He also introduces guessing prompts in writing, as in a video posted on 10 Aug-2020, showing his hands peeling a root with overlaid text "Cos'è??? What is that?". This is the first video with English, indicating an intention to reach viewers beyond Italy. **The Interaction dimension** cross-checked with the posting timeline helps explain this choice: although earlier videos used only Italian hashtags (except #fyp, see hereafter), comments already appeared in Russian, French, Spanish, Japanese and Indonesian. Globally-viral soundtracks may have exposed his videos beyond Italy, overriding geolocation,[2] while the absence of speech and written recipes facilitated international appreciation. International viewers may also have accessed his TikTok profile via his YouTube channel, where videos are subtitled in different languages (see hereafter).

Paratextual resources add more: at the start, TikTok hashtags were few, mostly his name and occasional food words in Italian, plus #fyp (and variants #foryou, #foryoupage). TikTokers use #fyp to boost exposure, in the belief that the hashtag prompts the platform algorithm to feature the video on other users' *For You Page* (the first page showing on the TikTok app). Although unfounded (Klug et al., 2021; Rahyadi et al., 2023), its use is well attested in the literature (Ling et al., 2022; Oktaviany et al., 2024). @foodqood's use shows awareness of TikTok practices and his interest in maximizing views. Although the Italian TikTok app translates "For You Page" as *Per Te*, and Italian creators also use #perte, #foryou is equally used and recommended by Italian media to enhance exposure (Aranzulla, 2022; Arianna, 2024). In a translanguaging perspective, #fyp is better seen as a TikTok-specific resource part of the linguistic repertoire of TikTokers based in Italy, rather than evidence of its creator's interest in addressing international audiences.

The phase shows also awareness in different platform affordances and audience preferences: TikTok videos are brief (a few seconds to half a minute), while YouTube videos of the same period are much longer, with no editing cuts typical of TikTok-style videos, and spoken step-by-step explanations in Italian (with a Middle Eastern-sounding accent), with subtitles in Italian and Arabic, Italian and English, or Italian and French (sometimes only Italian) and recipes in the description. TikTok video descriptions have no recipes or explanations, only invitations to follow his YouTube channel, showing his early use of TikTok as a springboard to his already established YouTube activity. From October, with his joining Instagram, TikTok video descriptions also promote his new account, he stops promoting YouTube by year's end, and recipes—absent on TikTok—appear in Instagram descriptions. On Instagram he initially posts photos with Italian hashtags, from February he starts with reels (posting the same TikTok videos a few days later) with a string repeated across posts of hashtags used transnationally in food-related online spaces: #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.

Thus, YouTube and later Instagram function as reference spaces, also for instructional content (through recipes and explanations), while TikTok is primarily for entertainment—consistent with viewers' more ludic preferences of use (Barta et al., 2023; Kaye et al., 2022).

This phase shows his growing awareness of platform affordances and audience practices, experimenting with trends to reach diverse viewers. Food-specific resources include striking or playful shapes, food illusions (e.g., a dessert resembling a hot dog), online controversy-stirring dishes (e.g., carbonara) or unorthodox methods (e.g., boiling basil for pesto). Involving internationally well-known dishes, such choices prompt engagement both by global audiences and Italian viewers—stereotypically known for defending culinary canons (Benasso & Stagi, 2019; Ginanneschi, 2024).

Video-specific resources include trypophobia-triggering shapes and early ASMR-style video attempts, with heightened sound effects

[2] TikTok's algorithm factors in sound when recommending videos (TikTok Newsroom, 2020). Moreover when a video uses a soundtrack from the TikTok Music Library, it is automatically linked in the description; clicking or searching for that soundtrack shows all videos featuring it.

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

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

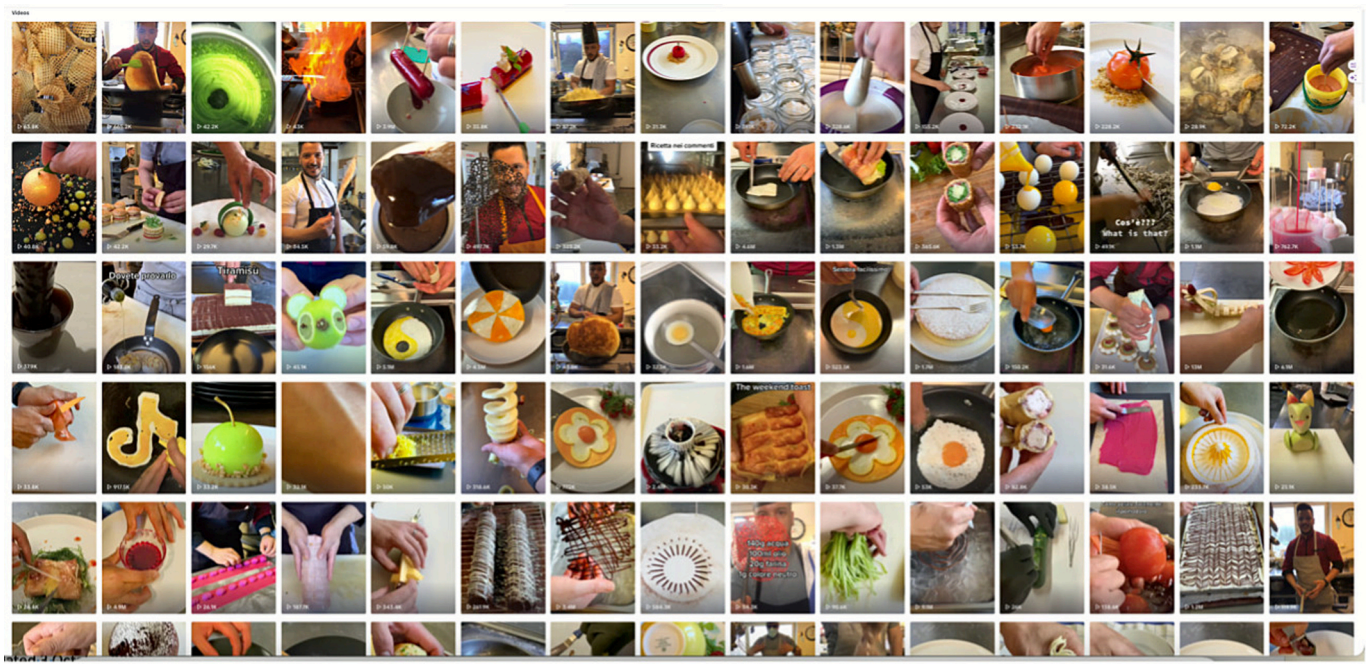

Fig. 1. @foodqood TikTok oldest videos thumbnails (top to bottom) up to 3-Oct-2020: varied multimodal deployment.

triggering the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), appealing to transnational online affinity groups (Gallagher, 2016; Niu et al., 2022; Smith & Snider, 2019).

Within months, his posting frequency increases, restaurant-kitchen videos disappear, giving way to close-shots of his hands on the preparation, with prevalence to egg-based dishes (as an attempt at niche carving) increasing the visual cohesion of his content (observable also from the thumbnails, in Fig. 2).

By March 2021 he has gained major popularity. A video posted on 11 March celebrates 1 million TikTok followers: instead of cooking, he writes "1M♥" with ketchup on a bun, blowing a kiss to the camera. Hashtags are widely known and TikTok-specific (#thankyou #1M #loveyou #follower #♥), with a themed soundtrack (thank you–Lena). By then the comment section is entirely multilingual.

Thus, in this first phase he reaches his first milestone by experimenting with resources of transnational circulation, combining space-specific (viral TikTok soundtracks), global (food genres), and niche online affinities (ASMR) provenances. The absence of speech and limited writing (mainly space-specific English hashtags) enhanced accessibility to global audiences, while Italian hashtags still cultivate his local base, reinforced by TikTok's geolocation algorithm.

6.2. *Second Phase (end March-October 2021): Image branding, translocally-marked identity performance, audiovisual cohesion towards professionalism*

This phase marks the creator's self-branding, combining transnational appeal with a translocally-marked identity. It is characterised by:

- broadening beyond the earlier egg-focused niche while keeping simple preparations that yield visually-appealing dishes with widely available ingredients;
- foregrounding his persona: videos open and close with mid-to-close shot of him smiling, showing the dish at the camera and tasting it (also used as thumbnails, Fig. 3);
- greater cohesion through consistent multimodal composition, with the earlier-introduced close-shots of preparation framed by the tasting shot, foregrounded ASMR-style sounds, and background music;
- gradual adoption of professional aesthetics of his chef identity, wearing a black chef uniform embroidered with his name, and of filming style and visual composition, using depth-of-focus (associated through provenance to professional cameras), and a black backdrop highlighting the dish through contrast (Fig. 4).

This multimodal orchestration becomes a permanent marker in his videos to the end of data collection.

Fig. 2. @foodqood TikTok videos thumbnails 7-Nov-2020 to 17-Dec-2020: close-shot on dish.

Fig. 3. @foodqood TikTok video thumbnails 8-Apr-2021 to 26-Jul-2121. Persona foregrounded and Arabic-Muslim identity performance.

Such resources, appealing transnationally to lifestyle-/sensory-specific cultures-of-use (ASMR) and professionalism as source of reliable, replicable, visually-effective dishes, now combine with markers of Arabic and Muslim identity.

A 14 April 2021 video of spice-seasoned deep-fried pasta opens with the (by now) usual shot of him smiling, taking a piece of pasta towards his mouth to taste it, but stopping, widening his eyes, replacing the piece on the plate, gesturing "no" with his finger, and saiying "no no no, Ramadan", followed by the usual preparation close-shots. The video closes with the dish presented in a plate topped with a cone-shaped lid resembling a *tajine*, historically Moroccan now broadly associated with Middle Eastern/North African cuisine. This is his first spoken TikTok utterance and the last video to use a dish (rather than his face) as thumbnail (10th, first row, Fig. 3).

The next day, 15 April 2020, a video for strawberry jellies resembling Turkish delights opens with him saying "*Bismillah*" for the first time, picking up a jelly, dropping it, shaking his finger, and saying "*Nein, Ramadan*". From then on, including after Ramadan (12 April–14 May

Fig. 4. @foodqood TikTok video thumbnails 27-Jul-2021 to 21-Oct-2021: Professional aesthetics.

2021), *Bismillah* features in all video as his sole spoken word, uttered when presenting the dish at the start and/or end. Ramadan-period videos show him either refusing to taste—smiling with a "no" gesture, saying "respect Ramadan" or "nein, es ist Ramadan"—or tasting in darker-lit settings, suggesting the ending of fasting after sunset (e.g., last thumbnail second row, first thumbnail third row, Fig. 3).

Up to 14 April—including three Ramadan posts—his videos still use viral TikTok soundtracks of global provenance, recognisable as space-specific TikTok resources (e.g., *Breakfast Challenge Song*–SPENCE on 12 April, *Hello*–OMFG on 13 April, and *SugarCrash!*–ElyOtto later that day). The 15 April video, with his first *Bismillah*, uses the Arabic track *Aaja Bahon Me* (Aamir Kangda). From then until June, soundtracks related to the Muslim world or Middle Eastern provenance (Arabic/Turkish lyrics, or stylistically regional) dominate, before he returns to the narrow set of viral TikTok tracks of pre-*Bismillah* videos. Hashtags also shift, with #ramadan appearing in all videos from 14 April, replaced by #halal when Ramadan ends.

On 13 May, marking the end of Ramadan, he opens his video saying "*Eid Mubarak*" then *Bismillah*, preparing a chocolate salami with dates, to the translanguaged Arabic and English refrain of *Eidu Saeed* by Mesut Kurtis & Maher Zain:

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

After Ramadan, Arab and/or Muslim world-related references continue: the hashtag #halal replaces #ramadan, and, e.g., on 30 May he picks up food with his left hand, stops, smiles, waves his right hand saying *hahdih* ("this one"), and switches hands to taste. While the stopping is a suspense-device for fans familiar with his earlier 'no Ramadan' shot, many comments refer this to the Muslim custom of eating only with the right hand.

This is his first explicit Muslim and Arabic identity performance. Earlier videos contained no references (beyond his name as hashtag), and some even included pork (e.g., *speck*, a regional cured pork meat of Trentino Alto Adige, where he lives, 3 Nov 2020).

The interaction dimension provides grounds to explain the motivations of this translocally-marked shift. Comments on pre-*Bismillah* videos since 12 April (start of Ramadan) include humorous and serious remarks, often in English, Arabic or Turkish, about his videos being hard to watch during Ramadan or that he should be fasting. The 14 April "no Ramadan" video suggests him taking up these prompts and explicitly cater to/affiliate with his Muslim followers.

If soundtracks and #ramadan/#halal hashtags cohere with spoken *Bismillah* and his Muslim identity performance, the dishes do not and continue the transnational trend in food provenances—except for the tajine-style serving and dates, both globally available but traceable to Middle Eastern provenance. Thus, the creator combines Arabic (spoken *Bismillah*), Muslim (refusal to taste, hashtags), and broadly Middle Eastern provenances (soundtracks) with transnational food resources.

During this period, the *Bismillah* catchphrase and ASMR-style preparation sounds become his auditory signature, paired by visual cohesion in multimodal deployment and, from late July the resources indexing professionalism in filming and chef identity.

The catchphrase contributes to self-branding, while the refusal-to-taste adds unexpected variation to his established pattern of tasting shots, as an engaging surprise-effect for followers. Both innovations explicitly address- Arabic-speaking and Muslim viewers, already present in his audience as evidenced by comments in earlier videos.

This phase records his fastest follower growth, reaching 12 million on TikTok. Instagram overtakes YouTube, where posting ceases. During Ramadan, in all spaces hashtags begin with #ramadan, later replaced by #halal. On YouTube, captions and recipes already included Arabic; on Instagram, Arabic appears from 16 April, when he reposts his first *Bismillah* TikTok video. Thereafter, captions and recipes always feature Arabic in combination with either Italian, or English, or both, and occasionally Turkish. Rather than systematic translations, the language combinations alternate and vary across videos, in presence, pairing and functional elements of posts, giving multiple access points to viewers with different linguistic profiles.

His Instagram activity continues with descriptions including Arabic, until 6 October, when the recipe is only in Italian and the description directs viewers to @giallozafferano, signalling the start of his collaboration with the media brand.

6.3. Third phase (November-onwards): Abandonment of translocal-specific identity markers towards dominant transnational institutionalization under the media brand

In this phase (further distinguishable into two sub-phases, before and after *GialloZafferano's* acquisition of the profiles), the creator adopts dominant semiotic practices, abandons his Muslim identity performance, replaces the *Bismillah* catchphrase with a dominant transnationally recognisable gesture, and returns to space-specific viral soundtracks, while maintaining the ASMR style and professional visual aesthetics. These innovations coincide with his initial collaboration with *GialloZafferano*, become permanent after their acquisition of his profiles, and persist despite repeated follower comments pleading for the return of *Bismillah* or accusing him of betraying the audience segment that made him popular. Arabic decreases in Instagram captions and disappears after the acquisition.

Bismillah remains in all videos until 3 November 2021 (except on 26 July, when he says *Mashallah* and followers ask "*no bismillah?*"). On 3 November, he says *ciao* instead, while still including the hashtag #maroc alongside #italian. Comments notice and and plead him to say *Bismillah* again. In the following days, videos alternate with and without *Bismillah* (and with and without soundtrack). The last *Bismillah* appears on 7 November, with him wearing a white rather than black uniform (3rd thumbnail top row in Fig. 5).

On 12 November, only three videos later, he introduces what becomes his closing signature gesture: *al bacio* (6th thumbnail, top row, Fig. 5). The gesture—bringing closed fingertips to the mouth, kissing them, then opening fingers outward—is widely known in Italy to emphatically mean "perfect!". From this video onwards, the gesture recurs with increasing frequency and then becomes his permanent closing shot, even as comments continue asking why he no longer says *Bismillah* (including in September 2023, nearly two years later).

The professional aesthetics introduced in the *Bismillah* phase continues after its abandonment in favour of Italian provenance, capitalising on the transnational value of Italian food and Italian celebrity chefs worldwide often adopting exaggerated gestures to perform Italianness (e.g., Gino D'Acampo). This stereotypical national provenance later converges with the *GialloZafferano* brand image marketed internationally, suggesting the brand collaboration might have played a role.

On Instagram, during November, captions alternate between Italian only, and Italian and Arabic; on 26 November one appears in English only. On 1 December, he posts the last Instagram recipe including Arabic (featuring last, after Italian and English).

His abandonment of a Muslim identity does not pass unnoticed. On 8 December, he posts a video with Michael Bublé's *Holly Jolly Christmas* and hashtags #christmas #dinner #idea #tiktokitaly. Comments include: "how do you celebrate Christmas?", "bro became atheist this winter", "aren't you Muslim?", and "he forgot how he became famous". Similar remarks appear days later when he uses Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas* (he had used the same soundtrack the year before, 25 Dec 2020, without any objections in the comments).

The interactional dimension shows his abandonment of Muslim performance in favour of 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 it coincides with collaboration and later acquisition of his profiles (and extensive follower base) by *GialloZafferano*, comments achieve "selling out" undertones (e.g., '*he forgot how he became famous*')—framing his Muslim identity performance as utilitarian, exploited for growth then discarded (e.g., 'bro became atheist this winter') once its purpose was served.

After *GialloZafferano's* acquisition, the earlier innovations become permanent, but his persona is backgrounded—appearing only in closing shots and gradually disappearing from thumbnails (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). Ingredients and cooking methods broaden in international provenance (also to Asian inspired dishes), while ASMR style remains a key marker. Arabic disappears from Instagram, while English overtakes Italian in salience, consistent with the *GialloZafferano*'s international expansion strategy leveraging the transnational appeal of Italian chefs. He publishes a cookbook with the brand publisher, and @foodqood profiles, renamed @gzfoodqood, begin hosting *GialloZafferano* promotional content and sponsored collaborations with McDonald's Italy. Later renamed @giallolovesitaly (after date of data collection), the profiles become the brand's international accounts featuring multiple chefs alongside Foodqood/El Mahi. Even in his recent videos, comments still ask why he stopped saying *Bismillah*.

On TikTok, his follower growth slows after abandoning *Bismillah*,

Fig. 5.. @foodqood TikTok video thumbnails 5-Nov-2021 to 27-Jan-2022: 'Al bacio' gesture.

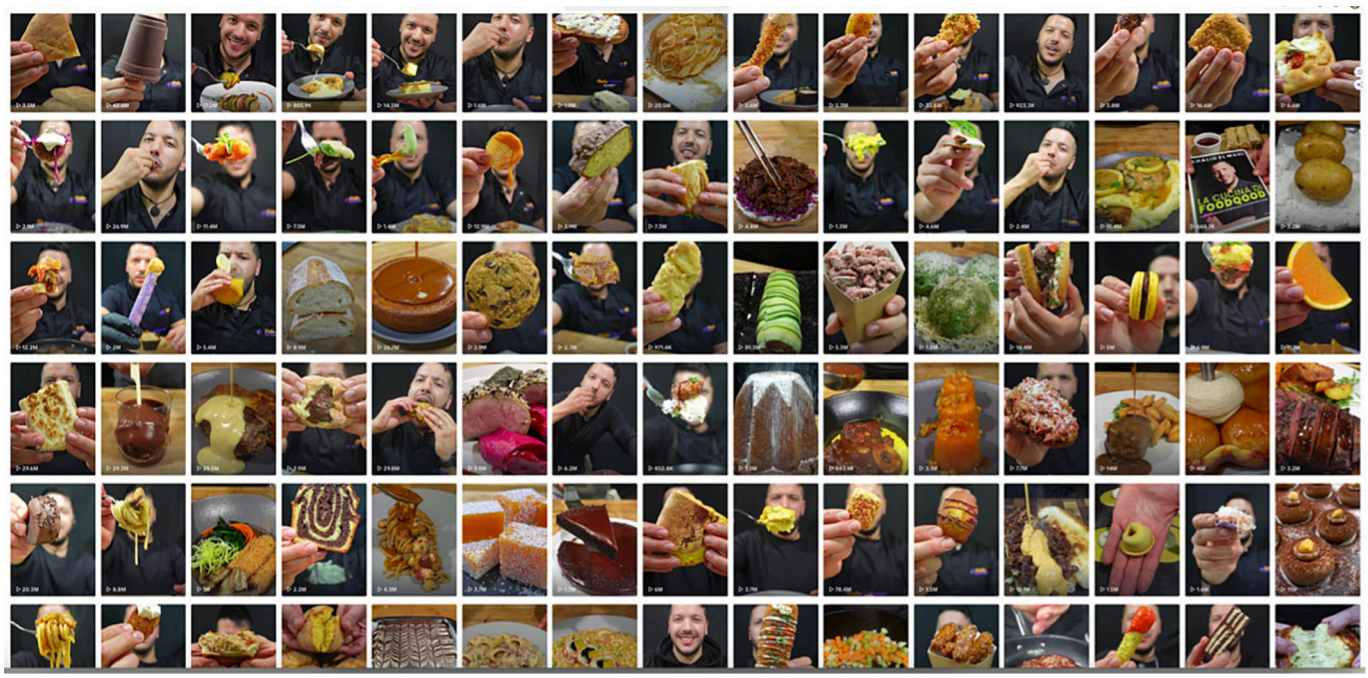

Fig. 6. @foodqood TikTok video thumbnails 23-Jul-2022 to 18-Jan-2023: Dish taking over the creator's face.

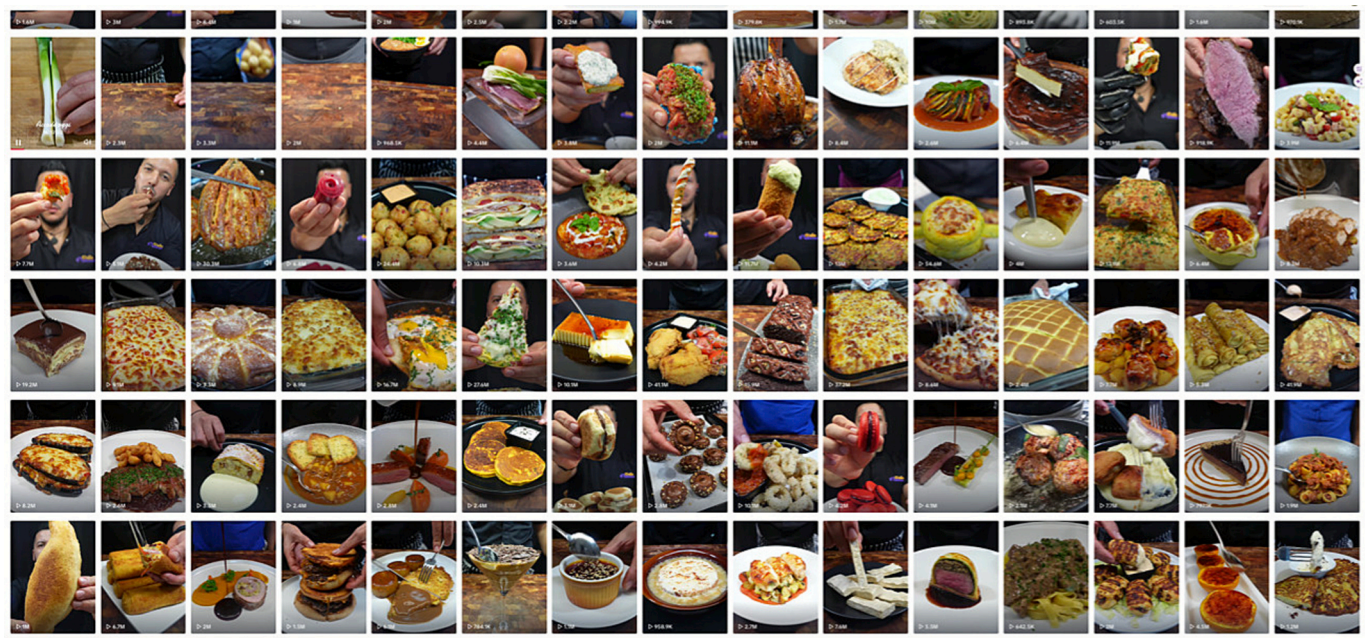

Fig. 7. @foodqood TikTok video thumbnails 16-Jul-2023 to 11-Sep-2023: His face disappears.

despite introducing the *al bacio* gesture. While in the *Bismillah* phase he gains 11 million followers in 8 months (March–November 2021), he needs nearly twice as long to gain the next 9 million (January 2023, his last milestone video). His choice not to reintroduce the Arabic catch-phrase, despite slower growth and persistent follower requests, signals a shift in priorities (and/or pressures) to align with *GialloZafferano*'s institutional preferences rather than those of the audience segment that fuelled his earlier popularity.

6.4. Discussion of findings

Across his posting activity in the three spaces, the creator's content shows high variation in linguistic resources. Italian is constant, English appears in the first phase, Arabic and Turkish dominate in the second, then fade in the institutionalisation phase, when English overtakes Italian; French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese appear occasionally. When Instagram and YouTube recipes are given in two or three languages, these rarely match those used in titles, utterances, or captions. Rather than systematic multilingual translation, this seems a special case of translanguaging, as not all content is presented in all named languages. Yet rather than indicative of the creator's linguistic repertoire crossing named language boundaries, as shown in translanguaging research (e.g., Wei, 2018), and/or situatedly emerging in the specific space, as in the case of spatial repertoires (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014),

this is oriented to address viewers with different (named) language profiles, often prompted by those in comments. Different content elements are accessible to viewers with different repertoires, while alternating languages across posts expands reach over time. This allows the creator to address different speakers at the same time in parts of the linguistic resources of a single post and also throughout time, by varying the language mix across posts. In this sense, the content offers multiple access points, with some audiences prioritised in specific phases.

Analysis of layered semiotic resources shows that focusing on language would provide a skewed picture. Named language use explicitly addresses that speaking audiences, making its disappearance salient, so with the media brand acquisition, Arabic speaking audiences markedly stop being addressed, while English foregrounded over Italian signals a prioritised international reach over Italian-speaking audiences, with Italian possibly achieving authenticity values, in line with the brand's strategy. Yet non-verbal resources address lifestyle- and space-specific audiences, like ASMR viewers, regardless their linguistic repertoire. The foregrounded nonverbal resources, and backgrounded role of language, absent in the videos (except on YouTube) combined with varied named language distribution in paratextual elements broadens accessibility for diverse audiences worldwide. Non-verbal multimodal orchestration effectively supports entertainment uses, while for instructional uses automated translation of recipes provides support for identification of displayed ingredients and preparations.

@foodqood's trajectory evidences strategic use of viral TikTok soundtracks and translanguaged resources and hashtags across spaces to enhance international visibility. However, a time–space-interaction analysis of semiotic layers reveals more complex shifts in the mix of provenances, extending beyond language.

Overall, changes in practices can be interpreted as shifts in orientation and positioning toward dominant/niche semiotic regimes, and dominant/minoritised linguistic ideologies, contextualised within power dynamics and minoritised group identity issues.

@foodqood achieves megainfluencer status by combining:

- multimodal cohesion and professional aesthetics (chef uniform, expertly-executed striking preparations), appealing to viewers relying on expertise for cooking tutorials;
- simple, accessible food quickly turned (through TikTok-style fast-pacing editing effects) into visually-appealing dishes appealing to viewers browsing for easy-and-effective inspiration in their daily cooking;
- resources appealing to influential global online niches (e.g., ASMR), and, crucially,
- explicit identification with Arabic-speaking and Muslim viewers.

This assemblage of online-specific dominant transnational practices with translocal identification with groups racialised and minoritised for their language, ethnicity, global south nationalities, and/or religion proves successful in attracting new followers. Minoritised viewers could feel represented in mainstream social media food practices, while his content still appealing also to audiences beyond these groups, engaged through accessible dishes, appealing aesthetics, and affinity niches transcending sociodemographic variables.

His later abandonment of Arabic and Muslim markers aligns with dominant ethnoracialised power dynamics and linguistic ideologies of the global north. Occurring after his popularity rise, it is perceivable as betrayal of this follower base, leading to retrospective interpretations of his Arabic and Muslim identity performance as an exploitative strategy to gain following and trust among these minoritised groups, discarded when no longer needed, as comments indicate.

The shift, coinciding with collaboration and later acquisition by *GialloZafferano*, signals corporatisation and institutionalisation. It suggests a concerted strategy towards realignment with dominant semiotic regimes and linguistic ideologies, and with the brand's international strategy centred on Italianness.

The analysis cannot ascertain the creator's degree of agency. Possibilities range from intentional strategic exploitation of his identity performance, to later-decided change, as selling out or mere self-censoring, to cohesive rebranding as influential ASMR chef, or genuine personal sensitivity shift towards, identifying himself more as a *GialloZafferano* Italian chef than with his heritage country/ethnicity/language/religion, up to an equally plausible scenario of falling victim of the media brand persuasive power, or bound to conform by contractual obligations. He may also have chosen to scale back his social media activity, delegating content curation, promotion and growth management to the brand, given the highly (self-)exploitative pressures on creators as digital workers (Ahmad et al., 2021; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2024). The time–space-interaction analysis provides evidence-based support to inform interview work for data triangulation.

In closing, it seems sensible to add a further contextualization element. By September 2023, @foodqood had a considerable 23.4 million TikTok following. Yet searches returned only a handful of media reports, mostly in Italian. The latest (Fontana, 2023) repeats outdated details such as the *Bismillah* catchphrase and Arabic subtitles, suggesting little fact-checking. Only one Australia-based report in English (de Graaf, 2021), focuses on a viral dish, and a Saudi one in Arabic (المرصد, Al Marsad, 2023), about another dish, with @foodqood labelled as "أشهر شيف على "التيك توك" ('the most famous chef on TikTok'). He neither features in any influencer rankings, despite follower numbers placing him among the top worldwide in 2021–2023, nor independent sources corroborate *GialloZafferano's* press release on his profile acquisition declaring him the world's fourth most-followed food TikToker (Gruppo Mondadori, 2021).

His content focuses strictly on food preparation, avoiding personal life disclosures or controversial statements that typically draw media attention. Still, the lack of coverage for a megainfluencer with that level of following is striking, against soft news' wide attention to influencers (Anđelić, 2021). Academic research too overlooks him, while US-based @emilymariko, is widely cited, even labelled as "arguably the most important food influencer on TikTok" (Schröer, 2023, p. 224) by virtue of her then 12.5 million followers, nearly half of @gzfoodqood's at that time. This invites reflections on the geopolitics of celebrification, with disproportionate media attention to US-based and Anglophone personalities, layering onto ethnoracialised factors—unless the achievement is undeniable, as with @khaby.lame, who received global coverage after becoming TikTok's most-followed account, though born in Senegal, Muslim, and based in Italy.

7. Conclusions

The case study of @foodqood showcases strategically combined use of semiotic resources to attract and engage diverse audiences. The creator first experimented with styles, before developing a professional aesthetic incorporating ASMR, a global online phenomenon. His Arabic and Muslim identity performance during Ramadan proved especially effective in gaining followers; its abandonment after partnering with *GialloZafferano* raises questions about agency and influence of institutional power. The shift suggests alignment with the media brand's image sacrificing representation of the minoritised identities that contributed to his rise, pointing to the (self-)erasure of such identities in mainstream content to appeal to global markets, simultaneously shaped by and fuelling dominant ethnoracialised linguistic ideologies. The case underlines the interplay of individual agency, institutional influence, and semiotic choices in shaping social media identity performance.

The integrated time–space-interaction analysis proves valuable for examining complex translocal trajectories. It traces how creators adapt strategies across time and spaces, adjusting provenances to engage varied audiences, selectively responding to feedback, platform affordances, and corporate interests. Provenance, in its multiple dimensions, proves useful in mapping the social values and identities indexed by

resources, revealing axes of identification and cultural affiliation beyond simplistic associations of culture with nation, ethnicity, or language. It provides a nuanced picture of translocal practices and positions them within power dynamics.

In @foodqood's case, shifts in provenance dimensions and identity performances resonate successfully with varied audiences but also reveal tensions and porous boundaries between agency and institutional control. These raise ethical concerns about the (self-)exploitation and (self-)censoring of minoritised identities to sustain mainstream appeal.

Addressing a methodological gap in research on social media content creation, time–space-interaction analysis provides robust and nuanced evidence of development in practices, which could also offer stronger supporting-bases for triangulation with interviews.

Responding to the aim of the special issue in advancing current understandings and explorations of translanguaging, findings identify a special case of translanguaging in the creator's use of named languages.

More generally, the study shows the value of examining multimodal and translanguaging repertoires as trajectories through time, rather than solely synchronically – and approaching analysis by considering interrelations across the three dimensions, of time, space(s) and interaction. They also demonstrate the usefulness of a social semiotic lens on translocal phenomena that incorporates languaging within a holistic consideration of the overall semiosis. Considering languaging as part of all sign-making helps calibrate the relative role and weight of language, for a more holistic understanding of translocal complexities – this calibration and rebalancing seems even more necessary when dealing with video-based content on social media platforms: to be engaged with, video posts are primarily watched, hence the centrality of embodied performances and semiotic representations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Elisabetta Adami: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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