The Changing Discourse of YouTube's *About Us* Page
Stepping Away from the Californian Ideology

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Abstract

The paper examines the evolving discourse of YouTube's *About Us* page through a multimodal linguistic lens. It analyzes two iterations of the page (2019-2021 and 2021-present) in comparison with TikTok's corresponding section, tracing how corporate self-representation is linguistically and visually constructed across time. The *About Us* page is approached as a multimodal genre (Garzone and Catenaccio 2021; Petroni 2020) in which linguistic, visual and compositional resources combine to construct corporate ethos and discursive identity. Grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 2007 [1975]; 1978), Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), and Multimodal Ideational Mapping (Moschini 2022), the study focuses on the ideational metafunction as the axis through which experience is represented and specific worldviews are naturalized. Multimodal Ideational Mapping (MIM) is employed as an interpretive framework to trace how ideational meanings are distributed across language, image and layout, and how recurrent conceptual nuclei emerge through their intersemiotic alignment. By reinstating Halliday's notion of context of culture as a historical and ideational environment, the analysis connects local semiotic choices to broader cultural scripts that inform platform self-representation. The findings suggest that YouTube's corporate discourse underwent a partial reorientation after the global diffusion of TikTok in 2020: from a participatory and civic-oriented rhetoric associated with the Californian Ideology (Turner 2006; Barbrook and Cameron 1996) toward a mode of self-presentation increasingly grounded in aesthetic pleasure and emotional engagement.

1. Introduction

The study examines how YouTube's corporate self-representation is linguistically and multimodally constructed across two iterations of its *About Us* page (2019-2021 and 2021-present) in comparison with TikTok's corresponding section, following the global diffusion of the Chinese app in 2020. YouTube LLC – the American video-sharing platform owned by Google and the world's second most visited website (Dixon 2024) – offers a particularly significant case for analyzing how corporate discourse constructs and redefines institutional ethos and legitimacy within platform-specific communication.

The analysis focuses on the linguistic and visual resources through which YouTube negotiates identity and stance, investigating how these semiotic strategies have been reformulated in response to shifting communicative, technological and ideological conditions. The *About Us* section is conceived as a goal-oriented and self-referential genre through which companies strategically articulate and negotiate ethos and legitimacy. As Petroni (2020, 268) defines it, the *About Us* page constitutes a "multimodal specialized digital text" integrating linguistic, visual and design resources in the construction of meaning. In Garzone and Catenaccio's (2021) terms, it also performs a strategic identity-building function, allowing corporations to legitimize their moral and institutional positioning within the digital sphere.

The paper addresses a gap in multimodal discourse studies by examining how corporate self-representation develops across platform contexts through linguistic, visual and intersemiotic strategies. Specifically, it examines how linguistic and multimodal resources are strategically reconfigured to sustain institutional ethos within evolving digital environments. The comparison is thus both diachronic and cross-platform, tracing how YouTube's institutional discourse evolves under shifting technological, economic and ideological conditions. Such a twofold perspective captures how temporal reconfigurations of ethos intersect with cross-platform alignments in the multimodal encoding of institutional legitimacy. The study contributes to a finer understanding of how platform communication translates ideological orientations into multimodal meaning structures, offering insights into the linguistic and semiotic dynamics that sustain corporate legitimacy in digital environments.

The research is guided by two main questions:

R1) What linguistic and multimodal strategies are employed to construct practices of self-presentation and self-branding?

R2) Do the two versions of the *About Us* page display a discursive shift in the underlying worldviews and ideological assumptions they convey?

Preliminary observations indicate a reorientation from participatory (Jenkins 1992) and civic-oriented rhetoric – rooted in the moral narratives of the early digital revolution – to a lifestyle discourse centred on creativity, affect and emotional engagement. It is a transformation that suggests a gradual departure from the so-called Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), which historically associated digital technologies with freedom, empowerment and community, toward a more aestheticized and affect-driven discourse celebrating self-expression and entertainment. In detail, the Californian Ideology is an ideational framework that merged American countercultural idealism, cybernetic rationalism and neoliberal individualism. Emerging in the early 1990s from Silicon Valley's libertarian milieu, the Californian Ideology framed digital technology as a force of personal liberation and social progress. It drew ideological energy from the utopian experiments of the 1960s and 1970s – notably Stewart 's *Whole Earth*

Catalog (1968-1972), the New Communalist movement and the techno-optimism of early computer culture – and translated these narratives into a rhetoric of personal empowerment and liberation (Turner 2006).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical foundations of the study. Section 3 details the methodological design and the analytical categories adopted. Section 4 presents the analyses of YouTube's and TikTok's *About Us* pages, tracing their discursive and semiotic reconfigurations. Section 5 draws together the main findings and discusses their implications for the ways digital platforms construct and communicate institutional ethos. Finally, Section 6 offers the conclusions, summarizing the study's contributions and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

The study adopts a multimodal and critical linguistic framework rooted in the Hallidayan tradition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and developed through Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Machin 2013; Machin and van Leeuwen 2016). Meaning is approached as a socially and culturally shaped semiotic practice, not as an abstract formal system. In this view, linguistic and visual resources jointly realize communicative intent through patterned configurations of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings.

SFL (Halliday 2007 [1975]; 1978) provides the foundational view of language as a social semiotic system organized around three metafunctions: the ideational, which represents experience and constructs worldviews; the interpersonal, which enacts social relations and evaluative stance; and the textual, which organizes discourse into coherent messages. These metafunctions extend beyond verbal language and operate across semiotic modes each contributing to the overall meaning potential of a text.

Although the SFL framework conceives the three metafunctions as interdependent and simultaneously instantiated, within this framework, the analysis foregrounds the ideational metafunction, understood as the semiotic dimension through which language encodes experience and naturalizes culturally specific worldviews. Halliday (2007 [1975], 183-184) defined it as "the component through which the language encodes the cultural experience, and the speaker encodes his own individual experience as a member of the culture." This perspective grounds the study's interpretive orientation: the linguistic and multimodal construction of meaning is examined as a reflection of broader cultural scripts and ideological worldviews.

To operationalize this approach, the study draws on Multimodal Ideational Mapping (MIM) (Moschini 2022), a model that builds on SFL and Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis but reintroduces Halliday's notion of context of culture as an analytical dimension. It is an

interpretive orientation that resonates with Hodge and Kress's (1993 [1979], 14) view of critical linguistics as "a heuristic instrument for the study of culture," where criticality is not conceived as ideological denunciation but as an analytical practice capable of uncovering how language and other semiotic resources articulate and legitimate particular worldviews. Following Foucault (1989 [1969]), the ideational configurations revealed through MIM are treated as discursive formations – patterned regularities through which (multimodal) discourse constructs historically situated systems of meaning.

In this respect, MIM reclaims Halliday's distinction between the context of situation and the context of culture. While the former accounts for the immediate conditions of discourse – the participants, processes and settings that shape interaction – the latter encompasses the semiotic environment in which meaning is culturally generated and historically stabilized. The context of culture thus functions as a higher-order interpretive layer that connects multimodal expressions to the worldviews it presupposes. By restoring this dimension, MIM complements existing multimodal frameworks through the reintroduction of the Malinowskian concept of "context of culture," understood as the historical and ideational environment in which semiotic forms are shaped by, and in turn shape, circulating systems of value and belief. In this sense, culture operates as an active semiotic order rather than a descriptive background, framing the conditions under which meanings are produced and legitimized. MIM extends multimodal analysis beyond contextual interpretation toward a genealogical understanding of how linguistic, visual, and compositional choices materialize and perpetuate broader cultural ideologies.

Within this framework, MIM traces how ideational meanings are distributed and interconnected across semiotic modes – verbal, visual and compositional – and how they coalesce into recurrent conceptual patterns. These configurations, or 'ideational nuclei,' function as condensed representations of experience (e.g., freedom, community, creativity, joy) that express culturally shared perspectives. The mapping process thus connects semiotic configurations to their underlying cultural formations, restoring the link between multimodal discourse and its historical and ideological grounding.

A complementary analytical lens is provided by Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), which refines the interpersonal dimension of meaning by examining how texts express evaluation, stance and alignment. Appraisal distinguishes three subsystems: Attitude, encoding affect, judgement and appreciation; Engagement, regulating dialogic positioning and intersubjectivity; and Graduation, modulating the intensity or focus of evaluation. These categories illuminate how institutional discourses construct ethos and authority – how they manage proximity with audiences, frame moral orientation, and project certainty or openness.

Within the present study, Appraisal Theory operates in continuity with MIM. While Appraisal Theory accounts for the interpersonal realization of values – how evaluation, affect and stance are enacted linguistically – MIM extends the analysis to the ideational realization of cultural meaning, tracing how these evaluative configurations converge across modes into coherent multimodal worldviews. Integrated together, they allow for a fine-grained exploration of how linguistic and visual resources co-articulate corporate ethos and ideological positioning.

Finally, the framework incorporates insights from Genre Theory (Garzone and Catenaccio 2021; Petroni 2020; Swales 2004; 1990; Bhatia 2004; 1993), which conceptualizes genres as communicative realizations of social action, shaped by institutional purposes and audience expectations. In this perspective, the *About Us* page is treated as a specialized digital genre devoted to the construction of ethos, legitimacy and moral identity (Garzone and Catenaccio 2021). Genres are understood not as static forms but as dynamic discursive structures where language, image and design converge to materialize social and ideological meanings.

While systemic approaches such as Bateman's (2008; Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala 2017) have advanced the formal modelling of multimodal genres, this study aligns with the critical-interpretive strand of multimodal discourse analysis (Machin and van Leeuwen 2016; Machin 2013), which prioritizes functional coherence and interpretive transparency over exhaustive formalization. From this critical multimodal perspective, genres are viewed as sites where semiotic choices instantiate broader communicative intentions and ideological orientations.

Taken together, these frameworks – SFL, MIM, Appraisal and Genre Analysis – form a coherent analytical model. They enable the investigation of corporate self-representation as a multimodal process that fuses linguistic and, more broadly, semiotic resources into patterned configurations of ethos, value and worldview. The study thus situates the *About Us* page at the intersection of linguistic form, semiotic orchestration and cultural discourse. Building on this theoretical foundation, the following section translates these analytical principles into practice, outlining how multimodal and linguistic categories are applied to the empirical exploration of YouTube's *About Us* page.

3. Methodology

The dataset comprises two versions of YouTube's *About Us* page (2019-2021 and 2021-present) and TikTok's corresponding section, approached as instances of a specialized digital genre (Garzone and Catenaccio 2021; Petroni 2020) devoted to the construction of discursive identity, ethos and legitimacy. These pages were selected because they articulate institutional identity through multimodal strategies that combine text, image, layout and design, and because they

reflect evolving platform ideologies in response to shifting technological and cultural conditions. Structurally, an *About Us* page typically consists of several key elements that contribute to its communicative purpose. According to Kalye and Nielsen (2019), it begins with a "tagline" – a few words or a brief sentence summarizing what the organization does – followed by a "summary" or "overview," generally comprising one or two paragraphs outlining the organization's activities, goals, and main achievements. Many *About Us* pages also include subcategory content or additional sections, often accessible through hyperlinks, which provide more detailed insights into various aspects of the company's identity and vision. These components form a recognizable schematic pattern that enables the systematic comparison of linguistic and multimodal strategies across platforms and temporal stages.

The analytical process adopted in this paper is recursive and interpretive, moving from the linguistic and multimodal description of genre-based discourse to its ideational and cultural mapping. At the linguistic level, the analysis draws on SFL to examine transitivity structures, participant roles and process types (material, relational and mental), which define agency and perspective within the discourse. Lexical patterns, nominalizations and modality are analyzed to identify abstraction, stance and epistemic commitment. Appraisal analysis (Martin and White 2005) is applied to trace evaluative resources across the texts, focusing on Attitude (affect, judgement, appreciation), Engagement (dialogic openness or closure), and Graduation (force and focus). These categories reveal how the platforms linguistically construct ethos – positioning themselves as Actor, Senser, or Sayer in the representation of their mission and values.

At the multimodal level, the study adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006 [1996]) grammar of visual design to analyze composition, salience, framing, color and information value. The relationship between verbal and visual components is interpreted through intersemiotic complementarity (Royce 2007), identifying additive, elaborative or contrastive relations that reinforce or nuance the overall communicative intent. This stage provides a systematic account of how textual and visual resources cooperate to construct coherent multimodal meanings.

The interpretive phase integrates these findings within the Multimodal Ideational Mapping framework (Moschini 2022). Here, the linguistic and visual patterns identified earlier are grouped into ideational units – clusters of meaning that instantiate recurring conceptual themes such as freedom, community, creativity or joy. These units are mapped across semiotic modes by tracing convergence, amplification or transformation. The resulting configurations reveal how meanings stabilize through multimodal reinforcement and how they contribute to constructing culturally embedded worldviews. MIM thus operates as an interpretive heuristic rather than a coding tool: it visualizes the semiotic architecture of discourse and relates it to the cultural logics that sustain it. The ideational configurations identified in this stage are then interpreted as instances of discursive formations (Foucault 1989 [1969]) – that is, as said in the

previous section, like patterned arrangements through which platform discourse reproduces shared cultural assumptions about creativity, freedom and belonging.

Given its qualitative and interpretive orientation, the study does not rely on quantification or inter-rater reliability but ensures methodological transparency through the explicit articulation of procedures, analytical categories and interpretive rationale. The analytical emphasis is on functional salience rather than frequency and on semiotic coherence rather than formal completeness.

By combining SFL-based textual analysis, Appraisal Theory, multimodal analysis and MIM, the methodology provides an integrated model for exploring how linguistic and visual resources co-articulate evaluation, identity, and ideology in platform communication. The following section applies these theoretical and methodological principles to the selected dataset, examining how the multimodal construction of meaning on YouTube's and TikTok's *About Us* pages materialize each platform's ethos and discursive worldview.

4. The analysis

4.1 YouTube's About Us page (2019–2021)

The first version of YouTube's *About Us* page taken into account (see Figures 1, 2, and 3) features a tagline and an extensive overview focused on the company's mission and values. The tagline recites "[o]ur mission is to give everyone a voice and to show them the world." This is a declarative complex clause that delivers an empowering message: YouTube's mission is to enable people to express themselves and engage with the world. Indeed, the metaphorical expression "to give everyone a voice" figuratively represents the ability for all individuals to participate in discourse, express their opinions but also be heard in decision-making processes. This articulation positions YouTube not merely as a medium of expression but as a moral agent that mediates civic participation and belonging. In particular, it conveys the stance for the platform to position itself as an enabler of civic rights.

At the level of Appraisal, the linguistic construction of YouTube's 2019-2021 *About Us* page is deeply evaluative and reveals a high concentration of positive Appraisal resources (Martin and White 2005), through which the platform articulates an ethos of inclusion, equality and moral responsibility. Across the page, the Attitude system is primarily realized through Judgement and Appreciation, while Affect is invoked rather than explicitly expressed. In detail, the tagline "[o]ur mission is to give everyone a voice and show them the world" functions as an emblematic instance of positive Judgement, where the material process "give" and the inclusive pronoun "everyone" encode an ethical stance grounded in fairness and empowerment. The clause presupposes the right to self-expression as a universal value, thereby construing

YouTube as a benevolent agent of democratic participation. Similarly, the statement "[w]e believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share, and build community through our stories" reinforces this moral positioning through the verbs "deserve" and "believe," both signaling evaluative commitment and moral certainty. These expressions instantiate what Martin and White (2005, 52) define as Judgement of propriety – positive evaluations of ethical behavior – thus presenting YouTube not merely as a service provider but as a socially responsible moral actor.
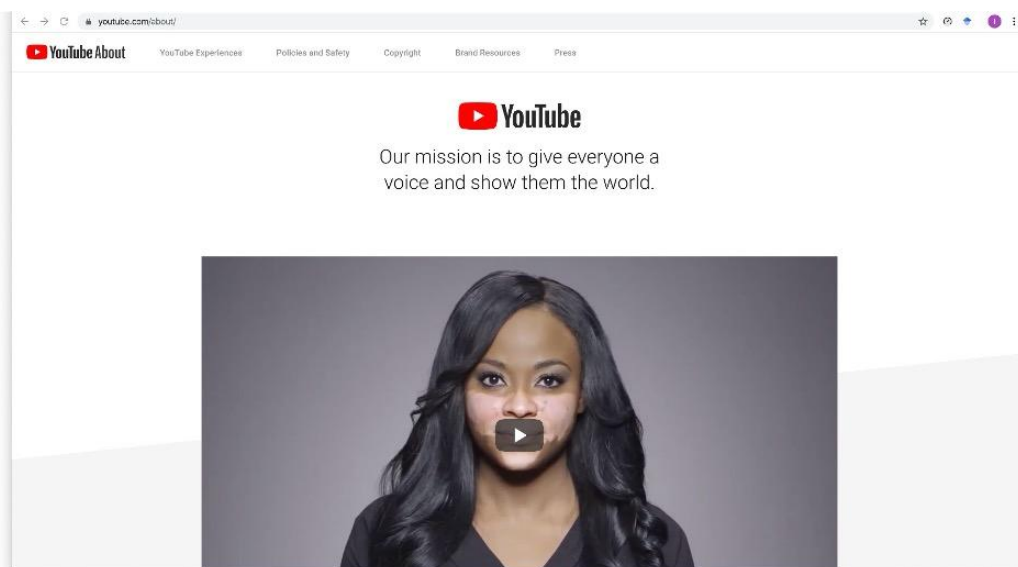

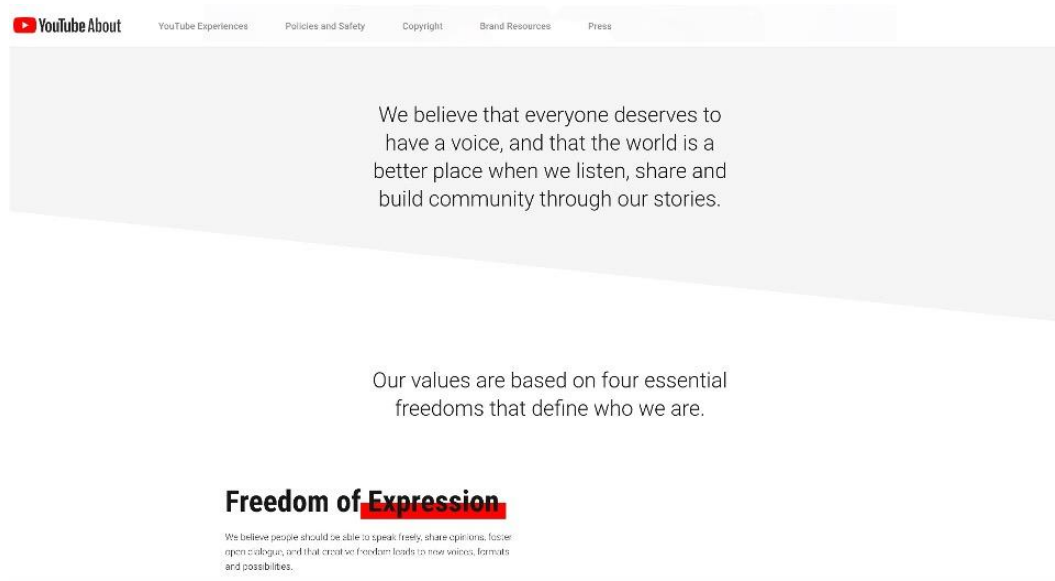**Fig. 1:** Youtube.com/about/, September 2019 – December 2021, first scroll retrieved at https://web.archive.org/web/20190903194513/YouTube.com/about

Fig. 2: Youtube.com/about/, September 2019 – December 2021, second scroll retrieved at https://web.archive.org/web/20190903194513/YouTube.com/about
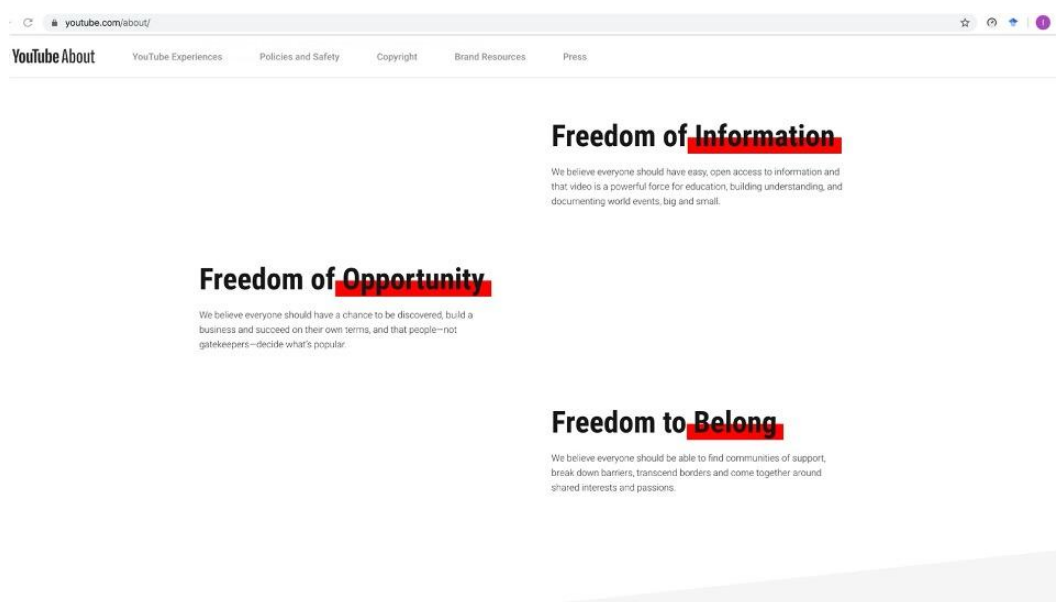
Fig. 3: Youtube.com/about/, September 2019 – December 2021, third scroll retrieved at https://web.archive.org/web/20190903194513/YouTube.com/about

At the level of Appreciation, the clause "[o]ur values are based on four essential freedoms that define who we are" attributes intrinsic worth and necessity to the company's guiding principles. The use of the adjective "essential" and the verb "define" amplifies institutional self-legitimation, transforming corporate values into ontological markers of identity. Each of the four freedoms (freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity and freedom to belong) is formulated through parallel syntactic structures and nominalization, which both elevate and stabilize meaning. The patterning of these phrases exemplifies Graduation through Force (Martin and White 2005, 136): repetition, parallelism and typographic emphasis (bold font and red highlighting) amplify evaluation and contribute to the sense of universality and moral urgency.

From an Engagement perspective, the text displays an overwhelmingly monoglossic orientation. Statements are presented as unchallenged truths rather than dialogically negotiable claims. The absence of modal auxiliaries and the dominance of declarative clauses create a tone of institutional authority. Such a monologic stance reinforces what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [1996], 118) describe as a hierarchical voice typical of corporate and governmental discourses, where certainty operates as a rhetorical substitute for consensus.

Overall, the *About Us* page constructs a discourse of moral legitimacy through positive Judgement and high Graduation, while avoiding overt Affect and dialogic openness. The consistent use of declaratives, the lexicalization of moral values (freedom, community, opportunity), and the carefully orchestrated visual layout, together, produce what can be described as an ideationally moralized voice. In this configuration, YouTube's corporate identity is built through the linguistic encoding of civic virtue and ethical purpose, aligning the

company's communicative ethos with the participatory idealism characteristic of the Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996).

From a multimodal perspective, the most salient element of the text is the video, from which a still image was chosen as an indicator of its main communicative scope, that is to foster inclusivity. The selected still image depicts a woman, who is centrally positioned in an almost black-and-white setting. This serves as a conceptual representation, with the woman acting as the Carrier of attributes such as gender, race and signs of vitiligo, making her a metonymic representation of potential social exclusion – here reframed as a process of inclusion. The YouTube logo, placed on her lips, further reinforces this transformation by allowing her to become a technology-enabled Sayer, via a visual sign representing a button that can be acted upon (Askehave and Ellerup Nielsen 2004).

The visual and linguistic modes thus enter into an intersemiotic elaboration (Royce 2007), whereby the image provides an iconic instantiation of the verbal claim, reinforcing the ethos of empowerment. Specifically, the verbal process 'to give everyone a voice' triggers what Liu and O'Halloran (2009, 379) define as an "intersemiotic additive relation," a reciprocal logical connection between the visual and the linguistic components. Through this interplay, the image functions as a reformulation of the concepts conveyed by the tagline at a lower level of abstraction.

In the overview, the statement "[w]e believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share, and build community through our stories" establishes the company's ethos. The exclusive first-person plural pronoun "we" positions YouTube as the Senser of a cognitive mental process, attributing truth value to the subordinate clauses, all of which present the highest degree of modality. At the semantic level, the message defines empowerment and inclusivity as central to the company's mission – an inclusivity expressed by the second person plural pronoun "we;" from a pragmatic perspective, this conveys commitment and dedication to these ethical goals. From a cultural standpoint, the term "community" functions, in Partington and Taylor's terms (2018), as a "hooray word" in US political discourse, merging as it does two key connotations: the reference to associational life, which de Tocqueville (2000 [1835]) regarded as the foundation of social equality, solidarity and active citizenship in America, and Howard Rheingold's (2000) conceptualization of "virtual communities" as spaces for civic participation.

The notion of freedom is similarly framed as a fundamental corporate value. The statement "our values are based on four essential freedoms that define who we are" introduces a set of core principles that reinforce the company's identity through yet another "hooray word" in US political rhetoric ("freedom"). The rest of the overview visually emphasizes these values through layout, typography and color, structuring them into four distinct sections that highlight the

company's guiding principles: "freedom of expression/freedom of information/freedom of opportunity/ freedom to belong." The four blocks follow parallel syntactic structures, employing both declarative and imperative sentences. Through a combination of epistemic and deontic modality, they convey messages that are simultaneously authoritative and persuasive.

From a genre-based perspective, the articulation of the four freedoms resembles a manifesto, a written declaration of beliefs, objectives and values, that implicitly calls for adherence to the organization's guiding principles. The manifesto intertextually evokes Theodore Roosevelt's famous *Four Freedoms* speech (1941), the *State of the Union Address* in which the President, while presenting to the Congress and to the American citizens the necessity of entering World War II, appealed to Americans most profound beliefs about freedom and democracy. In terms of content, YouTube's vision of a global platform for sharing, learning and connecting with others outlines a model of community building driven by user engagement. This vision reflects key markers of a cybernetic conception of society, that is one of today's dominant intellectual paradigms in Western societies. According to Norbert Wiener's theory of cybernetics and his vision of society (1950; 1948), social life can be understood as a system in which media act as regulatory mechanisms. In this ideational context, "freedom of information" serves as the means through which society can measure and adjust its performance, working toward equilibrium, like any other cybernetic system. In the case of society, equilibrium is conceptualized by Wiener as its level of democracy.

The analysis of YouTube's 2019-2021 *About Us* page can be further operationalized through the lens of Multimodal Ideational Mapping to identify how verbal, visual and compositional resources converge to represent experiential and conceptual meanings. In this case, MIM enables a systematic identification of the transmodal correspondences that materialize YouTube's institutional ethos. The verbal mode articulates civic participation and inclusivity through lexicogrammatical realizations of high-modality Judgement and Appreciation ("everyone deserves to have a voice," "four essential freedoms"), while the visual mode metaphorically realizes these meanings through composition (central positioning), salience (contrast between monochrome and red accents), and symbolization (the logo as a speech-enabling device).

The resulting ideational configuration can be represented as a cross-modal semantic network in which inclusivity, freedom and voice emerge as nodal concepts recurrently mapped across linguistic and visual layers. The MIM procedure highlights how verbal declaratives of mission and belief are visually instantiated through representational and interactive structures, generating a cohesive semiotic architecture. Such a multimodal congruence effectively consolidates YouTube's institutional legitimacy by naturalizing its ethical stance through mutually reinforcing modes.

In summary, the 2019-2021 version of YouTube's *About Us* page reveals a systematic orchestration of linguistic and visual resources aimed at constructing an ethos of inclusion and civic participation. The alignment between declarative syntax, high-modality evaluation and ideational coherence across modes sustains a discourse of moral legitimacy rooted in the participatory narratives of early platform culture. The following section examines how the 2021 redesign reconfigures this balance, as linguistic explicitness gives way to visual condensation and affective tonality, signaling a shift in the multimodal realization of corporate ethos.

4.2 YouTube's About Us *page (2021–present)*

In its 2021 iteration (see Figures 4 and 5), YouTube's *About Us* page rearticulates the balance between verbal and visual modes, with a notable reduction in linguistic elaboration and a corresponding increase in visual salience, thereby limiting the extent to which linguistic features can be analytically foregrounded. The redesign marks a shift in the semiotic realization of ethos, as the platform's self-representation becomes less propositional and more affectively oriented. Indeed, the verbal component is drastically reduced, with the manifesto-like section erased completely, while the visual mode becomes predominant, with a collage of brightly colored images depicting leisure, creativity and diversity. This version, therefore, provides insight into how the platform's self-representation evolves from explicit moral positioning to implicit emotional engagement.

From a systemic-functional perspective, the 2021 *About Us* page displays a reduction in clause complexity and a shift in process types. Relational and verbal processes – central to the earlier version's construction of moral stance ("is," "believe," "give") are replaced by material and mental processes that foreground experience and emotion ("share," "enjoy," "feel"). The textual organization moves from extended declaratives to short, paratactic clauses, which, together with ellipsis and nominalization, produce a compressed linguistic texture. Modality is minimized with certainty and moral obligation that give way to descriptive assertion, resulting in a lower degree of epistemic engagement. The overall tone is thus more experiential than argumentative, privileging immediacy and affect over ideological positioning.

The reduction of verbal text coincides with a reorientation of evaluative patterns. Explicit Judgement and Appreciation, central to the previous version's ethos construction, are replaced by indirect Affect and implicit Appreciation. The emotional lexis ("creativity," "joy") and the frequent use of pronouns ("we," "our") frame the platform as a space of shared feelings rather than moral commitment. Graduation is achieved not through repetition or modality, but through intensifying adjectives and visual amplification. The resulting evaluative stance is one of positive affective alignment – pleasant, inclusive and emotionally charged – yet linguistically

minimal and ideologically neutral. This appraisal configuration supports the shift from moral authority to emotional resonance in YouTube's self-presentation.

At the genre level, the 2021 page departs from the manifesto-like structure of the earlier version and aligns more closely with what can be described as a corporate showcase genre. This genre foregrounds visual branding and audience engagement over ideological or argumentative development. The move structure condenses into two primary communicative goals: to assert brand continuity ("Our mission is to give everyone a voice and show them the world") and to visualize diversity and creativity as aspirational values. Intertextuality is minimized, while the 2019-2021 version evoked political and civic discourses (e.g., Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms Speech*), the newer one draws instead on marketing tropes of authenticity and connection. As a result, the function of genre shifts from ideological persuasion to experiential display.
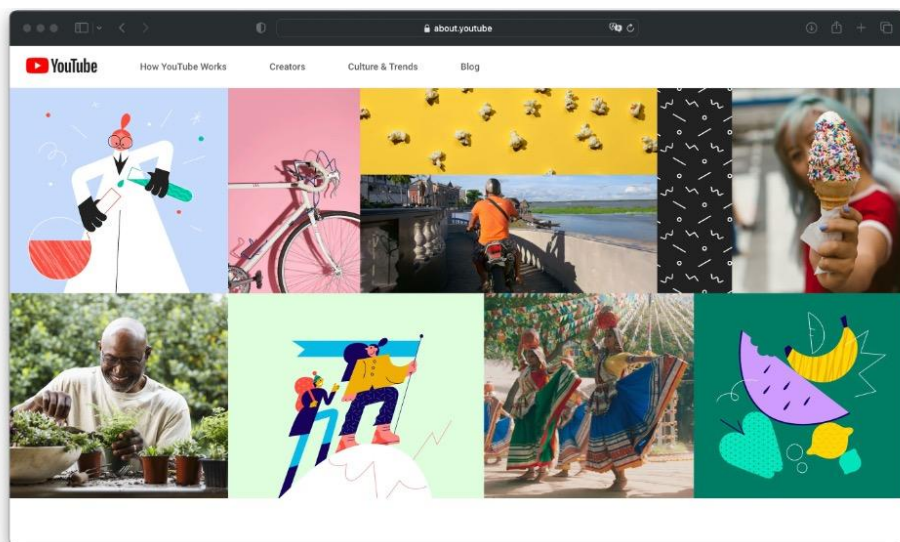

Fig. 4: https://about.youtube/, December 2021 – December 2024, first scroll
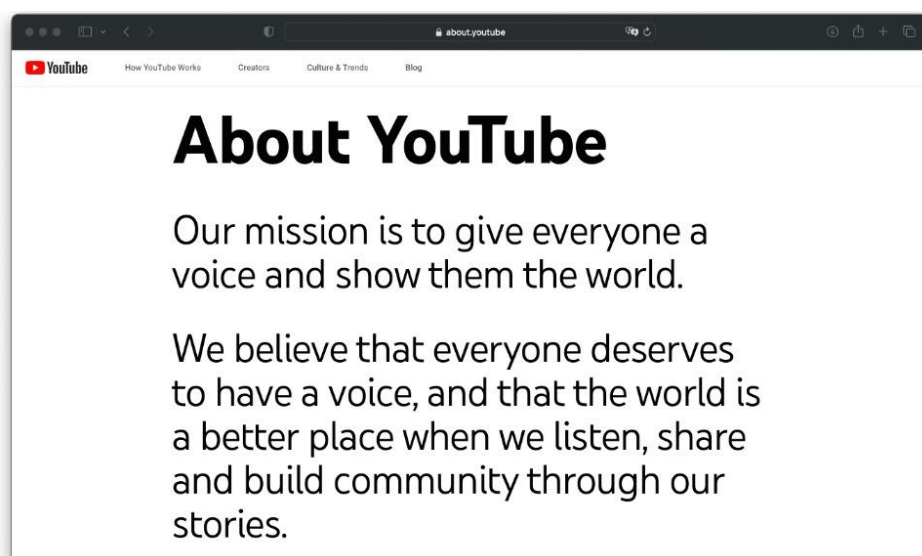

Fig. 5: https://about.youtube/, December 2021 – December 2024, second scroll

The visual layout dominates the multimodal orchestration of meaning. The collage format juxtaposes colorful photographs and stylized illustrations that symbolize cultural variety, leisure and creative action. From Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006 [1996]) perspective, this composition realizes a conceptual structure of diversity-as-harmony where participants are represented as joyful, active and socially connected. Bright saturation, high luminosity and frontal angles produce immediacy and emotional engagement. The interplay between modes reveals a strong intersemiotic complementarity (Royce 2007): while the verbal text provides minimal informational anchoring, the images expand its attitudinal force through visual Affect. This multimodal rebalancing shifts the communicative center of gravity from propositional meaning to affective perception.

When mapped ideationally, the 2021 *About Us* page reveals a condensed network of recurring conceptual nuclei: creativity, joy, belonging and diversity. These concepts replace the earlier triad of freedom, community and voice, signaling a semantic transition from civic agency to emotional participation. Through the lens of MIM, these ideational patterns emerge not as isolated lexical items, but as cross-modal clusters distributed across linguistic and visual strata. The cultural script underpinning the page is no longer grounded in empowerment and public discourse, but in aesthetic experience and emotional sharing. The page thus performs a reframing of ethos, where legitimacy is established through affective proximity rather than ideological commitment.

Overall, the 2021 *About Us* page enacts a multimodal reconfiguration: verbal elaboration yields to visual intensification and civic alignment is replaced by aesthetic appeal. The following section examines whether this reconfiguration aligns with broader platform discourses by comparing YouTube's newer self-representation with TikTok's *About Us* page, where emotional engagement and creativity constitute the core of corporate ethos.

4.3 TikTok's About Us *page*

In its *About Us* page (see Figure 6), TikTok presents a markedly concise yet rhetorically dense self-description. The verbal text, that recites "TikTok is the leading destination for short-form mobile video. Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy," embodies a minimalistic semiotic design where verbal brevity and visual saturation co-construct a discourse of affective immediacy. Such a reconfiguration privileges experiential and emotional appeal over argumentative elaboration, reflecting what appears to be a broader transformation in platform discourse from civic participation to hedonic engagement.

At the ideational level, the text relies on relational and material process types ("is," "to inspire," "to bring") to establish identity and purpose through assertive clauses. The absence of modality and the declarative mood signal high epistemic certainty, reinforcing the brand's

authority. The thematic progression follows a corporate logic of definition, then purpose and, finally, outcome, with each clause contributing to the construction of TikTok's ethos as both competent and benevolent. The nominal group "short-form mobile video" compresses multiple experiential meanings – technological form, accessibility and mobility – into a single composite unit that encodes the contemporary communicative logic of immediacy.
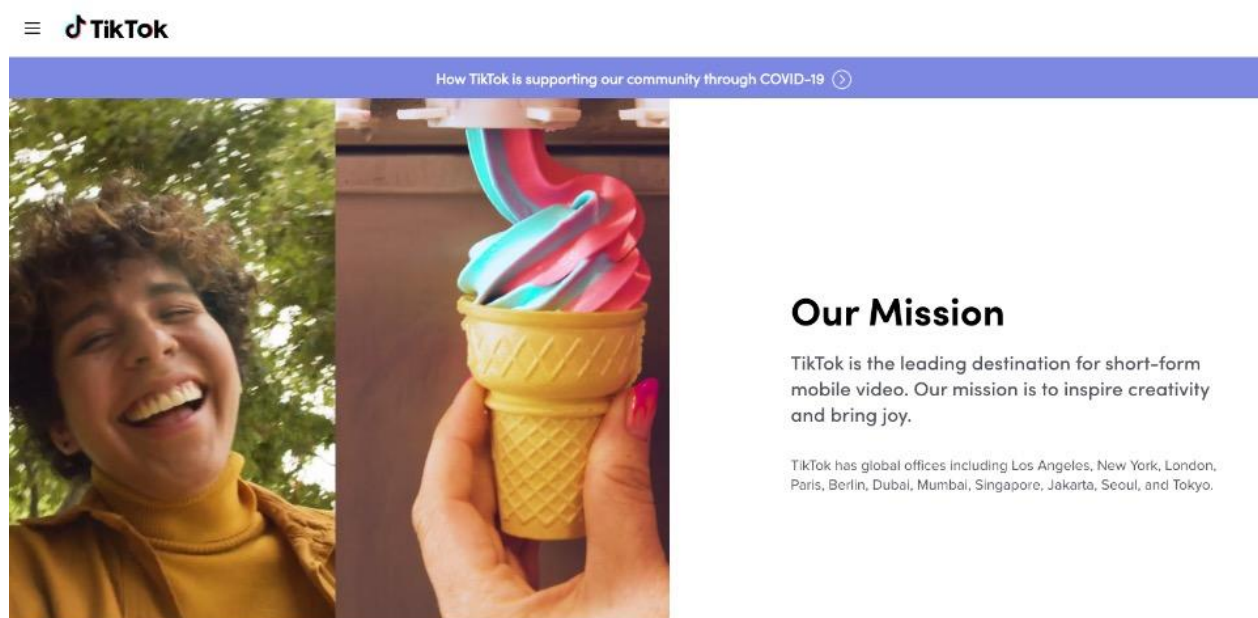

Fig. 6: https://www.tiktok.com/about, October 2019 – June 2025, first scroll (collected in April 2020)

From the perspective of the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005), the text displays a strong concentration of positive Judgement and Affect. The evaluative adjective "leading" encodes Judgement of capacity, presenting TikTok as an undisputed innovator and implicitly asserting social esteem. The mission clause activates Affect, as "inspire creativity and bring joy" foregrounds emotional fulfilment and aesthetic pleasure as corporate goals. Here, creativity is reframed as affective stimulation rather than agency or critique, marking a shift from empowerment to enjoyment. Implicit Appreciation also emerges in "short-form mobile video," which indexes cultural value through association with efficiency, immediacy and digital fluency.

The genre structure is highly compressed since the page operates as a minimalist corporate 'credo', merging the promotional register of branding with the rhetorical pattern of mission statements. Its simplicity and self-containment typify a text that privileges memorability and visual reinforcement over propositional depth. The text's parallelism constructs a cohesive rhythm that enhances recall while consolidating a univocal ethos.

Visually, the page juxtaposes bright colors, close-up imagery and smiling faces with objects of sensory appeal (e.g. ice cream, vivid light, expressive gestures). These semiotic choices reinforce the verbal focus on positivity and emotional satisfaction. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006 [1996]) visual grammar, the high color saturation, frontal angle and

interpersonal gaze invite affective involvement and immediacy, creating what van Leeuwen (2008) terms an "aestheticization" of discourse. The multimodal orchestration thus performs the same evaluative function as the verbal mode, translating emotional engagement into a visual key.

Applying MIM, the page can be read as a mapping of affective values across modes. Verbal minimalism aligns with dense visual semiosis: affect (joy), process (inspire), and identity (leading platform) are recontextualized through color, composition and embodied expressivity. The mapping reveals that the ideational nucleus – creativity as joy – is realized intersemiotically: verbally as purpose, visually as experience. The resulting configuration privileges affective coherence over propositional elaboration, indexing a cultural script of platform capitalism, where emotional resonance functions as corporate legitimacy.

To provide a concise synthesis of the comparative findings, the table in Appendix 1 outlines how the two *About Us* pages – YouTube's (2019-2021 and 2021-present) and TikTok's – articulate their corporate ethos across five complementary analytical dimensions: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Appraisal Theory, Genre, Multimodality and Multimodal Ideational Mapping (MIM). The overview highlights the distinctive semiotic configurations and evaluative orientations through which each platform constructs its communicative identity and discursive stance.

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis of YouTube's *About Us* pages shows how corporate self-representation evolves through changes in multimodal configuration rather than through explicit ideological declarations. This transformation can be fully interpreted through the lens of MIM, a framework that, as said above, systematically traces how key ideational nuclei circulate across linguistic, visual and compositional modes. MIM highlights continuities and discontinuities in meaning construction, showing how shifts in linguistic, visual and compositional strategies correspond to broader redefinitions of corporate ethos.

In the 2019-2021 iteration, MIM identifies a dense network of ideational nuclei centred on freedom, community, and voice. These concepts formed a cohesive semiotic architecture rooted in the Californian Ideology (Turner 2006; Barbrook and Cameron 1996). YouTube's first *About Us* page clearly resonates with this historical discourse. The mission statement "to give everyone a voice and show them the world" reformulates the Californian promise of empowerment through participation, while the visual grammar of inclusivity reproduces the countercultural ideal of diversity represented through technology. The four freedoms ("expression, information, opportunity, belonging") function as semiotic condensations of civic virtue, structurally echoing

Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms speech* (1941) – a foundational reference in American political rhetoric – and cybernetic discourse. Through MIM, these verbal and visual signs align into a coherent map in which moral legitimacy derives from participatory rhetoric and the invocation of universal rights. The 2019 page, therefore, operates as a manifesto of digital citizenship: its genre structure, multimodal density and evaluative stance articulate YouTube's institutional identity as a civic enabler rather than a mere content distributor.

In contrast, the 2021 redesign reveals a profound semiotic realignment. MIM analysis shows that the ideational configuration now gravitates around creativity, joy, connection and belonging – a cluster of affective rather than ideological values. The reduction of verbal text and the rise of image-driven composition result in what can be termed a compression of ideational density: meanings are no longer elaborated propositionally but expressed through multimodal affect. Where the earlier mapping displayed strong intersemiotic complementarity between verbal declarations and visual elaborations, the later one relies on saturation, rhythm and chromatic intensity to evoke emotion. The transition is not simply aesthetic: it indexes a deeper epistemic change from telling to showing, from moral articulation to sensory persuasion.

Within this new configuration, ethos is maintained through aesthetic coherence rather than argumentative coherence. The platform's legitimacy is established through affective alignment – the impression of joy, diversity and creativity – which substitutes for explicit ethical commitment. MIM enables this process to be seen as a shift in semiotic architecture: the nodes of the map remain stable (voice and connection persist), but their multimodal realization moves from ideological to experiential domains. The voice once conceptualized as democratic participation becomes now a metaphor for self-expression; community turns into togetherness; freedom 'dissolves' into enjoyment. The same lexemes circulate, but their semantic load and semiotic framing have been redefined through visual and evaluative strategies.

This transformation mirrors the rise of TikTok's discourse, the *About Us* page of which crystallizes the affective orientation of late-platform communication. Its mission – "to inspire creativity and bring joy" – epitomizes a language of immediacy and pleasure, where emotion functions as both content and ideology. When mapped through MIM, TikTok's page reveals a minimal linguistic architecture but a high degree of visual and intersemiotic saturation. The ideational nucleus "creativity equals joy" recurs across modes: linguistically as purpose and visually as experience. This structure provides the cultural script that YouTube's redesign partially adopts, signaling a redefinition of ethos along affective rather than civic coordinates.

From a linguistic perspective, this shift can be described as a move from ideational elaboration to interpersonal intensification. The earlier page was dominated by declarative syntax, high-modality statements, and Judgement-based evaluation – a register that foregrounded moral stance and institutional authority. The newer one minimizes grammatical

complexity, suppresses modality and amplifies Affect and Appreciation through lexis and images. Appraisal resources are redistributed: Judgement of propriety ("freedom," "fairness") gives way to Affect ("joy," "creativity"), while Graduation is achieved through visual rather than lexical intensity. The multimodal texture thus performs the same ideological work through different semiotic means: persuasion shifts from propositional to perceptual.

Interpreted through MIM, these findings suggest that corporate discourse may have entered a new phase of multimodal legitimation. In the early Web 2.0 era, legitimacy was discursively grounded in the moral narratives of participation and freedom, inherited from the Californian Ideology and its cybernetic optimism. In the post-TikTok environment, legitimacy appears to be sustained through affective coherence – the capacity to generate positive emotional identification across modes. Platforms more than declaring their values, aestheticize them. Meaning operates less through explicit propositions and more through the orchestration of color and composition, which evoke inclusion and creativity as affective experiences rather than civic ideals.

This evolution is not merely stylistic but structural since it reflects a reorganization of the ideational map underpinning platform discourse. The semiotic shift from declarative to experiential, from civic to affective, corresponds to a re-anchoring of ethos within the sensory economy of digital media. Ultimately, the analysis suggests that platform ethos today is built less on the rhetoric of liberation than on the aesthetics of belonging – a transformation that MIM enables us to document not only as a discursive phenomenon but as a multimodal reconfiguration of meaning itself.

6. Conclusions

The analysis has traced the multimodal evolution of YouTube's *About Us* page examining how its linguistic and visual resources have been reconfigured to project changing forms of corporate ethos. The comparison between the 2019-2021 and 2021-present versions has revealed a gradual departure from a discursive framework informed by the Californian Ideology (Turner 2006; Barbrook and Cameron 1996) towards a more affective and aestheticized mode of corporate self-representation. Within the earlier version, YouTube's institutional discourse was grounded in an explicitly civic and participatory ethos, drawing on moral narratives of freedom, inclusion and community. These values, linguistically realized through declarative syntax, high-modality statement, and metaphors of voice and visibility, were ideologically anchored in the liberal and techno-utopian imaginaries that accompanied the digital revolution.

The later redesign, introduced in December 2021, signals a significant rearticulation of this semiotic configuration. The verbal mode becomes minimal and visually embedded, while

affective and sensory cues replace propositional elaboration. The discursive center of gravity shifts from argumentation to perception and from civic ideals to experiential gratification. It is a movement that reflects a broader transformation in the semiotic economy of corporate discourse since ethos is no longer articulated through explicit moral commitments but through affective alignment. From a linguistic perspective, this entails a reduction in relational and verbal processes in favor of material and mental ones, a simplification of clause structures and a move from high to low modality. From a multimodal standpoint, the saturation of color, brightness and composition functions as a compensatory mechanism, translating what was once ideational and ethical meaning into a sensory and aesthetic appeal.

Within this broader evolution, the Multimodal Ideational Mapping framework offers a productive lens for identifying and interpreting these shifts. By integrating systemic-functional, appraisal and multimodal parameters, MIM allows for a layered reconstruction of how values are redistributed across linguistic and visual strata. It highlights how freedom, participation and community – the core ideational nuclei of the 2019- 2021 version – are gradually replaced by creativity, belonging and joy in the 2021 iteration. These concepts, while semantically distinct, perform equivalent legitimizing functions within the changing semiotic articulation of the platform. In other words, the ethical vocabulary of participation is resemanticized into an affective vocabulary of connection, as the language of civic engagement gives way to that of emotional experience.

At this stage, the role of MIM becomes particularly crucial. It conceives multimodal artefacts as cultural mappings of meaning in which linguistic, visual and compositional elements interact to encode shared worldviews. Drawing on Halliday's systemic-functional notion of ideational meaning (1978) and Foucault's (1989 [1969]) concept of discourse formations, the MIM framework enables the visualization of the cultural scripts that sustain a text's coherence. It reveals how subtle variations in design, lexis, or transitivity correspond to deeper conceptual realignments – from moral assertion to emotional affiliation, from ideology to affect. This interpretive orientation reinstates Halliday and Hasan's (1985) conception of the "context of culture" as the semiotic environment in which meaning systems originate and interrelate. In this view, culture constitutes not an external background but a network of semiotic systems that shape the production and interpretation of discourse. Yet, this dimension has often been overshadowed by the more situationally bound context of situation since, as van Leeuwen notes, "very few people either in Systemic Linguistics or in Multimodality actually do something with it" (in Moschini 2014, 209).

Applied to YouTube's corporate discourse, this interpretive lens clarifies how multimodal design not only reflects but also reshapes the semiotic realization of ethos. The early version of the *About Us* page positioned YouTube as a facilitator of civic voice – a digital space where users

could "speak" and "be heard." This construction drew its legitimacy from the cultural repertoire of American participatory democracy and from the ideological optimism that characterized early internet discourse. In the later version, however, legitimacy is secured through aesthetic coherence and emotional proximity rather than through explicit ideological identification. Creativity and joy function as condensed signifiers of engagement, indexing an ethos based on feeling rather than deliberation.

The comparative inclusion of TikTok's *About Us* page further situates this shift within a wider semiotic trend. TikTok's discourse, centered on hedonic and affective values, operates as a minimalist prototype for contemporary platform communication. Its verbal structure – concise, declarative and emotionally charged – is mirrored in YouTube's subsequent redesign, suggesting a cross-platform convergence towards affective ethos.

Within the MIM framework, this convergence can be visualized as a progressive remapping of ideational configurations: the triad freedom / community / expression gradually collapses into creativity / joy / connection. The first triad belongs to the discursive universe of the Californian Ideology, where technology is conceptualized as an instrument of emancipation and civic progress; the second reflects a techno-cultural shift toward pleasure, visibility, and emotional circulation.

While this study provides a detailed multimodal and linguistic account of YouTube's corporate discourse, its scope remains limited to two iterations of the *About Us* page and a comparative reference to TikTok. The findings should therefore be regarded as indicative rather than exhaustive, inviting further cross-platform and diachronic analyses to test the broader applicability of the MIM approach.

By linking linguistic texture to cultural meaning, MIM reveals how multimodal discourse encodes worldviews through systematic correspondences of language, image, and design. Applied to platform communication, it enables a more precise understanding of how ethos is linguistically and visually enacted, how moral stance becomes affective tone, and how corporate identity is remade through the grammar of contemporary digital media.

Bionote

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Appendix 1

Analytical dimension	YouTube (2019–2021)	YouTube (2021–2025)	TikTok (2020–2025)
Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)	Predominance of relational and verbal processes; declarative, high-modality clauses that assert moral commitment ("Our mission is to give everyone a voice…"). Dense lexicalization of civic and ethical values.	Reduced verbal density; lower modality and more implicit stance. Shift toward material and mental processes emphasizing experience and enjoyment ("celebrating stories that connect us").	Dominance of relational clauses expressing categorical identity ("TikTok is the leading destination…"). Minimal syntactic elaboration and high modality through monoglossic assertions.
Appraisal Theory	Positive Judgement (propriety, capacity) and Appreciation (value of freedom, opportunity). Affect invoked indirectly via moral inclusivity.	Affect becomes central: emphasis on joy, color and emotional engagement replaces civic ethos. Judgement and Appreciation are residual and aestheticized.	Affect-driven evaluation through "joy" and "creativity." Judgement of capacity via "leading." Limited lexis, but strong evaluative intensity through superlatives and compact syntax.
Genre Analysis	Genre realization: a blending of the informative and legitimizing functions of corporate self-presentation with the manifesto's declarative and evaluative orientation.	Genre realization: compressed hybrid of corporate self-presentation and manifesto discourse; the genre shifts from ideological declaration to affective display, privileging emotional resonance and accessibility over argumentative development.	Condensed realization of the corporate mission genre, combining elements of the mission statement and tagline. Lexical compression and evaluative salience to enhance memorability and reinforce brand identity.
Multimodality	Balanced intersemiotic configuration. Verbal text foregrounds values; visual mode reinforces inclusivity (e.g. central female figure as SAYER). High coherence between modes.	Shift toward visual salience, where saturation, color, and emotive imagery realize interpersonal meaning. The multimodal ensemble prioritizes experiential immediacy and affective engagement over explicit verbal positioning.	Reduced verbal density and high visual salience: bright palette, minimalist layout, and focus on logo and affective cues. Visual elements operate as interpersonal resources, fostering emotional alignment rather than conveying explicit ideational content.
Multimodal Ideational Mapping (MIM)	Ideational nuclei: freedom, community, participation. The verbal and visual modes jointly articulate a civic worldview grounded in democratic participation and belonging. Through MIM, the analysis identifies how recurrent lexical and visual choices coalesce into ideational patterns that reproduce the Californian Ideology's discourse of empowerment and openness.	Ideational nuclei: creativity, connection, joy. Through MIM, the analysis traces how linguistic and visual resources converge around affective meanings, indicating a reconfiguration of ethos from civic empowerment to experiential gratification and aesthetic engagement.	Ideational nuclei: creativity, joy, leadership. Through MIM, the analysis reveals how verbal and visual choices converge to commodify affect and recast creativity as a leisure-oriented value. The mapping thus exposes a shift in ideational meaning from innovation and agency to aestheticized self-expression.