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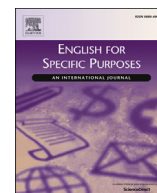
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But then something happened: A critical multimodal genre analysis of corporate image repair videos

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ABSTRACT

This study explores an emergent genre of corporate image repair videos that were produced and disseminated on YouTube by three large corporations Facebook, Uber and Wells Fargo following major corporate scandals and mismanagement. Utilising a critical multimodal genre analysis, the generic and semiotic features of this new corporate multimodal 'product' are investigated focusing on meanings, values and beliefs that they interactively produce. The analysis shows how the corporations appropriate the generic structure of the canonical narrative, narrative positionality, narrative frames and audio-visual resources in fresh and creative ways to do repair work and diminish their responsibility for wrongdoings. The analysis raises critical awareness of the 'dark side' of generic creativity and innovation in the service of corporate interests and public manipulation. This study is intended as a case study showcasing to the community of ESP students, teachers and researchers a workable approach to explore multimodal practices of professional communication mediated online.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the novel digital genre of corporate image repair videos. This particular practice began to attract the attention of the business world in 2018, when three global corporations Facebook, Uber and Wells Fargo released such videos on YouTube in attempts to restore a positive image following major scandals. Taking as the point of departure the notion of genre as a form of social practice (Bhatia, 2019), this study explores this emergent multimodal and digitally mediated generic 'product' as an example of a new corporate practice. It is particularly interested in identifying the kind of semiotic and generic resources corporations appropriate to do image repair in a video format and what kind of meanings, values and beliefs this practice mediates. This is important because corporate practices and cultures are powerful with their values and ideologies increasingly influencing the ways in which people behave, what they believe is right or wrong, and how they relate to others. Since the genre in question is a complex multimodal aggregate, this study necessitated the development of a new analytical framework to systematically approach this complexity. This framework incorporates elements of multimodality (Machin, 2013), in particular methods adopted to study moving images (Baldry & Thibault, 2006) and critical genre analysis as advocated for ESP (Bhatia, 2019). In their extensive overview of ESP research on English for Business Communication (EBC), Bhatia and Bremner (2012: 27) conclude that:

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“Business and corporate practices, and the culture within which such practices are embedded, are undergoing rapid and dynamic changes. In the academic world, our frameworks [...] of business communication are becoming outdated and are fast losing touch with the changing world of work, which is becoming increasingly intercultural, multimodal, virtual and strategic”.

By exploring the emergent genre of image repair videos, which are part of the key strategic corporate practice of reputation management (e.g., [Aula & Mantere, 2008](#)), this study endeavours to alleviate some of this ‘outdatedness’ and contribute fresh insights into the dynamic changes that communicative business practices undergo. By revealing how powerful corporate actors exploit multimodality and multimedia in fresh and creative ways to produce versions of reality that suit them and their corporate interests, this study also endeavours to contribute to the expanding body of research in critical ESP.

Since the early 1990s, ESP has experienced a ‘critical turn’ prompted by the critique of the role of English as a global language in serving the interests of linguistically privileged groups and in perpetuating inequalities ([Phillipson, 1992](#)). This led to a heightened research interest in what happens within organisations, specifically in beliefs, values and ideologies underpinning the specialized discourses and genres that they produce, and how these specialised discourses and genres control access to resources and reward systems, and influence belief systems ([Bhatia, 2019](#)). The turn has also prompted calls for a more critically orientated ESP pedagogy, which should aim at equipping teachers and students with concepts and tools to help them understand, and if necessary, question organisational assumptions and practices ([Benesch, 2001](#); [Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002](#)). The methodological framework developed in this study hopes to contribute to critical ESP pedagogy by offering ESP students, teachers and researchers a hands-on model, which they can apply in their own critical and systematic explorations of increasingly pervasive and digitally mediated ‘moving’ genres produced in business or other professional contexts.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews some of the relevant research on multimodal corporate practices, while Section 3 sets the three videos within the context of reputation and crisis management. Section 4 discusses the video data and the analytical framework developed to analyse them, while Section 5 summarises the main results. Section 6 concludes with a general summary of the main results and discusses the limitations of the study offering avenues for future research and applications to the ESP pedagogy.

2. Multimodality of corporate practices

Multimodality is an approach to discourse which explores how various semiotic modes are employed and combined to create meanings; it is based on the understanding that each mode is an organized set of resources and as such can be studied systematically ([Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996](#)). Each mode makes available different ways of meaning making, that is, has certain affordances and constraints. These are exploited by text/genre producers often in deliberate ways, for example, when certain resources are chosen over others to convey particular meanings. In business contexts in particular, semiotic choices are not arbitrary but carefully selected, checked and monitored at various levels of organisational hierarchy to ensure that they align with organisational agendas, values and priorities ([de Groot et al., 2016](#)); they can therefore be considered indexicals of corporate values and ideologies.

Although the majority of studies in ESP have to date been predominantly concerned with the linguistic mode of diverse genres, over the last 10 years increased attention has been paid to multimodality reflecting the fact that communication in specialised contexts is an outcome of diverse and intertwined multimodal practices ([Prior, 2013](#)). Most ESP research concerned with multimodality has overwhelmingly focused on academic settings ([Hafner & Pun, 2020](#); [Prior, 2013](#)). Lesser attention has been paid to other professional contexts, specifically workplace or business settings despite the large body of ESP research on English for Business Communication (EBC) ([Bhatia & Bremner, 2012](#)). Work by [Cheng and Mok \(2008\)](#), [de Groot et al. \(2016\)](#), [Fraiberg \(2018\)](#), and [Cucchi and Seracini \(2022\)](#) make here important new contributions. Relevant perspectives into multimodal corporate practices have also been offered in related areas such as that of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) and social semiotics (e.g. [Chen & Eriksson, 2019](#); [Maier, 2012, 2014](#)).

Broadly speaking, research on multimodality of corporate practices can be divided into three main strands: the first strand examines genres with relatively static multimodal features such as still visual displays, while the second explores multimedia-genres that intersect language with visual displays, sound, music, cinematic movements etc; the third strand is process- and practice-orientated and studies the ways in which multimodal objects ‘travel’ across space and time in workplace settings (see [Fraiberg, 2018](#)). For reasons of space, only the first two strands are discussed here, also because of their relevance to the current study.

Given the growing importance of visual communication in official business documents, [de Groot et al. \(2016\)](#) compare visual rhetoric in annual reports produced by Dutch and British companies. The focus is on the visual metadiscourse and the ways in which documentary images are used to interact with audiences to influence their interpretation of the texts. The analysis shows that many images act as attitude markers boosting companies’ self-presentations and highlighting values with which they wanted to be associated. Differences were observed in the ways in which images were used across English and Dutch texts. For example, the Dutch statements showed a preference for demonstrating the identity of the company through images showing the management collective, whereas the British documents tended to employ visuals of individuals. Also, the British statements included more images of other countries and diverse people symbolising the values of inclusion, diversity and global outlook. [Chen and Eriksson \(2019\)](#) turn to websites of healthy snack companies and examine the ways in which

they construct the idea of healthiness. The analysis shows that texts and images jointly construct larger narratives—that of a happy farmer or a young entrepreneur working from his own kitchen. In narrating stories of care, compassion and authenticity, the companies of healthy snacks position themselves as ‘do-gooders’ constructing their business as an antidote to unhealthy foods mass produced in modern capitalism. [Cucchi and Seracini \(2022\)](#) too explore corporate websites but focus on career sections and the ways in which companies construct themselves as attractive places to work. Similar to [Chen and Eriksson \(2019\)](#), their analysis shows that the visual material is mostly narrative in nature, that is, shows groups of employees engaged in a variety of activities associated with work but also social life outside work. Together with texts, images narrate stories of workplaces in which positive interpersonal relationships, opportunities to learn, and creativity are the dominant themes.

Corporations constantly harness semiotic resources in new and fresh ways to produce discourses that serve their strategic purposes ([Machin, 2013](#)). Social media with their affordances of multimodality and multimedia as well as access to large audiences offer new opportunities for self-presentations and communication with diverse groups of consumers. Naturally, businesses have seized this opportunity motivated by two major reasons: firstly, the opportunity to choose and combine semiotic resources to produce meanings that they can fully control and disseminate to mass audiences without the usual gate keepers; and secondly, because they need to keep up with the expectations and enhanced digital practices of existing and prospective consumers.

Using a social semiotic approach, [Maier \(2014\)](#) shows how global car companies appropriate the documentary genre of ‘Making of’ and distribute ‘Making of’ videos on YouTube to provide digital audiences with insights into the ways in which their TV commercials were made. Features associated with a documentary (e.g. live shooting, close-ups, authoritative tone of the voice over) are exploited to create a sense of authenticity and objectivity, while simultaneously enhancing the value of the products originally advertised. Maier’s detailed analysis of the video sequences shows how the combination of verbal and visual ‘cleverly’ works to disguise and at the same time intensify the commercial intent. In her earlier work on the corporate video *Closer to Nature* produced by the Swedish company Arla, [Maier \(2012\)](#) explores visual strategies employed to create a connection between nature, the viewers and Arla’s products. The analysis shows how a strategic use of imagery and particular shots (panning, tilting, rhythmic alternation of close up and aerial shots) conjoins time and space to create a visual discourse of belonging in an ideal world, in which Arla’s products bring the viewer-consumer closer to nature.

Research concerned with multimodality of corporate practices demonstrates strategic, dynamic and creative ways in which corporate actors exploit semiotic and generic resources to present themselves in favourable ways and to attract consumers. Increasingly, the feel-good factors, positive emotions, relationships and authenticity are more important than the actual products or services. Multimodality comes in handy as it enables a re-creation of these kinds of positive feelings in ways that are more instantaneous and impactful than through the use of language alone. Yet, this is not unproblematic, since for the purpose of business interests multimodal re-presentations can simplify and disguise the complexities of social life and the far-from-ideal conditions behind the real scenes ([Goodman & Jaworska, 2020](#)). These need to be examined and critically evaluated for at least two reasons: first, to expose the multimodal tactics of corporations that aim to re-present social life in ways that suit them and their interests, and in doing so, confirm and even extend their power; and secondly, to raise ESP students’ and practitioners’ awareness of such tactics with the purpose of fostering critical multimodal and multimedia literacy. This is where the tools of critical multimodal analysis in combination with genre analysis can be helpful. Before the methods adopted in this study are discussed, the next section offers a contextual background within which the multimodal material analysed here was produced.

3. The context: corporate strategies of image repair

This study explores semiotic and generic features of three videos that were released by three major corporations Facebook, Uber and Wells Fargo following major scandals in which the companies were involved – Facebook and Wells Fargo in illegal data breaches on a massive scale, and Uber in sexual harassment and toxic management culture. The misconducts affected millions of users globally and in the case of Uber resulted in physical harm and death. The reputation of the companies was damaged and all three of them engaged in wider image repair campaigns, of which the videos were part. The videos attracted quite an attention of the business world, where they were sometimes sarcastically described as a new type of mea-culpa-ads, yet other businesses began following suit including Domino’s, Toyota and GM ([Beer, 2018](#); [Wiener-Bronner, 2018](#)). The novelty of this multimodal corporate practice and its uptake by businesses warrants the attention of critical ESP research ([Bhatia & Bremner, 2012](#)).

Initiated by [Benoit \(1995\)](#) and [Coombs \(2012\)](#), there is now a large body of research on the ways in which organizations attempt to repair their image. This can include a gamut of communicative practices ranging from public statements in writing and speech to larger PR campaigns involving multi- and social media (cf. [Glozer, et al., 2019](#); [Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018](#)). And while this work offers insights into organisational strategies of image repair and their effects, we know little about the specific discursive devices that the strategies employ. This is partly because most research on image repair has been conducted in the field of management and organisation studies, and linguistic discourse analysis has to date paid less attention to image restoration despite its discursivity. Exceptions are studies by [Breeze \(2012\)](#), [Page \(2014\)](#) and [Zhang and Vásquez \(2014\)](#) that focus on textual practices of business responses to criticism.

One of the frequently employed discursive and generic devices of image repair seems to be the narrative. For example, [Breeze’s \(2012\)](#) research on letters to stakeholders produced by oil companies following the catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico

identifies a larger narrative frame of survival and survivor that the companies adopted to restore their image and trust. Breeze (2012) concludes that such narrative positioning was strategically employed to appeal to stakeholders' emotions and solidarity, while it subsequently minimised the responsibility of the companies for the disaster.

Narratives are indeed effective tools of persuasion and corporations often rely on narratives to strengthen their brands (e.g. Chen & Eriksson, 2019; Cucchi & Seracini, 2022). The persuasive power of narratives has to do with the fact that they can interact dialogically with consumers. They activate imagination and transport them to a different world away from reality; this 'new' world often promises fresh experiences and a fulfilment of specific cultural needs, such as the need for status, community or authenticity (Jones et al., 2020). But it is not only the transposition that makes narratives effective tools of persuasion. Narratives are powerful because they open up possibilities for taking up different positions for both the narrator and the listeners that give them specific roles and frames the relationship between them. For example, a narrator taking up the position of a survivor constructs the audience as a witness and an empathiser (Jones, 2015). Thus, narratives are not just accounts of what happened on a particular occasion, but are also performances of particular social practices and identities (Bhatia, 2019).

Given the power of narratives, it is perhaps not surprising that the three videos analysed in this study use the genre to tell what happened and to re-construct the companies' image as trustworthy and good. Whereas previous research on narratives in corporate discourse has almost exclusively focused on language properties, the narratives employed in the videos studied here are told in multimodal ways. Therefore, this necessitated a development of a new analytical framework, which is discussed in Section 4.

4. Data and methods

The data under study includes three videos that were released by Facebook, Uber and Wells Fargo in the same year and around the same time (see Table 1). Since the videos tell corporate stories in multimodal ways, tools for the analysis of multimodality needed to be employed.

There are several examples of systematic analysis of static images in corporate contexts (e.g. Harvey, 2013; Koller, 2009); analysis of moving images is not so well served. Because these kinds of 'products' employs diverse and dynamic semiotic features, they pose several challenges for the analyst, one of which relates to how to effectively capture this diversity and dynamism in a transcript. In general, multimodal transcriptions can be extremely time consuming and there is often a need to take some pragmatic steps, that is, decide to transcribe features that are prominent or relevant to the analysis (Maier, 2014).

A useful model for transcriptions of short filmic entities is offered by Baldry and Thibault (2006); it has been adopted in recent studies of corporate videos by Maier (2012, 2014). This study draws on Maier's (2012) adapted framework, but extends it considerably to account for the specificities of the studied material, especially the use of the canonical narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) and the importance of the speech of the narrators, sounds and soundtracks.

In the first instance, the videos were divided into visual frames using the VLC media player and its scene filter option. 1 s per frame was chosen as the initial cut-off point, which produced a large number of frames, many of which were showing the same shots. Subsequently, a careful analysis was undertaken to include only those frames, in which there was a noticeable change, for example, in a body posture, image or scenery. This reduced the analysis to slightly smaller samples of static frames (41 for the Facebook, 21 for the Uber and 49 for the Wells Fargo video). Since this study is interested in generic features of this new corporate video type and how the features interact with semiotic resources to construct meanings, the following dimensions were considered when transcribing each frame:

- 1) *description of the frame* including objects, actions, participants, their gaze, and the dominant colour scheme of the frame; this part was largely influenced by MCDA and work by Machin (2013) and Maier (2012);
- 2) *narrative moves* including introduction, orientation, complicating action, resolution and coda; the canonical structure was identified by rewatching the videos multiple times and paying careful attention to semiotic cues including a change in frame, scenery, narration, soundtrack and colour; evaluation, which is an essential part of any narrative, is normally embedded in each move and was not analysed separately;
- 3) *time and speech*; time was recorded using the VLC media player and speech transcribed employing established conventions of conversation analysis; as commonly with discourse-analytical transcriptions features such as pauses, rising and falling intonation, extra emphasis and elongated sounds were noted down;
- 4) *sound and soundtracks* focusing on the tempo, volume and character of the sounds as identified by Baldry and Thibault (2006).

Table 1
Details of the three videos.

Company	Video title with URL	Duration	Release Date	No. of viewers on YouTube ¹
Facebook	<i>Here Together</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4zd7X98eOs	1 min	25 April 2018	278,789
Uber	<i>Moving Forward</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMZyw5IPKGE	1 min	14 May 2018	867,204
Wells Fargo	<i>Earning Back Your Trust</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxExqOiCkPU	1 min	Early May 2018	16,362

¹ As of 8 February 2022.

Appendix I includes examples of the multimodal transcripts and the transcription conventions adopted in this study. The division of the videos into narrative sequences allowed for a more detailed and systematic analysis of how semiotic features interplay with functions of each narrative segment and helped identify the ways in which the multimodal choices construct the corporate stories.

5. Results

This section discusses the major results of the analysis. It focuses on how the affordances of multimodality are employed to create the narrative genre of image repair videos and how the interplay of semiotic choices construct specific meanings, and what kind of values and ideologies these meanings promote. The section proceeds with an examination of the video titles and is followed by detailed analysis of the semiotic features employed in each narrative move.

5.1. Titles

The main purpose of titles is to attract attention; they also function as cognitive macro-structures condensing the story to its key points priming the reader or viewer to read the subsequent pieces of discourse in a particular way. Because they tend to be short and often catchy, they can also be easily remembered. News producers and advertisers are well aware of the cognitive powers of headlines and titles in attracting attention and utilise a gamut of semiotic resources to increase these effects (Jaworska, 2020; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013).

The three titles *Here Together*, *Moving Forward* and *Earning Back Your Trust* are short; two of them use verbs in the present continuous tense suggesting immediacy and nowness. In 'moving' and 'earning', both Uber and Wells Fargo position the companies as responsive and acting now. Whereas through the use of 'moving forward' Uber signals a focus on the future and indirectly an image repair, Wells Fargo with 'earning back your trust' clearly emphasises the theme of trust re-building. The FB slogan is slightly different in that it does not use a verb; it is an example of an adverbial phrase containing a deictic 'here' and the adverb 'together'. The deictic is an indexical resource signalling a spatial proximity, while 'together' reinforces the idea of community. In using these two devices, FB primes the viewer to think of physical closeness, relationships and community – the qualities that are emphasised throughout the video. The three titles appear on the bottom of the screen and are prominently displayed on the screen at the end of each video. In this way, they act as macro-structural devices that highlight the dominant messages to 'take home' and remember.

5.2. Storying the corporate image repair

When segmenting the videos into their generic structure, it immediately emerged that all of them adopt the form of the canonical narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Yet, the classic structure of the narrative is not always rigorously followed; it has been 'bent' or appropriated to fulfil specific functions. This is shown by discussing first the FB video *Here Together*.

5.2.1. Facebook: *Here Together*

The video starts with an off-white screen and the 'Add as Friend' button in its original design, which appears in the middle and can quickly be recognised as a FB tool. The colours employed are off-white and grey with low saturation emphasising simplicity and minimalism; the use of the original button with faded colours also evokes a feeling of nostalgia. This is reinforced through the soundtrack, which is just one note played slowly and repeatedly on a classical guitar. There is nothing else on the screen to see or hear as to not distract the viewer from the message that FB has always been really just about friends. At the end of the intro, an arrow appears on the screen pointing at the 'Add as Friend' button and the sound of a mouse click can be heard indicating that there is a FB user who performs this action behind the scenes (see Figure 1).

In the canonical narrative, an introduction or abstract are followed by a short orientation, whose task is to provide background details of the story. All three videos include an orientation (Move 2), but in contrast to the canonical narrative, the orientation constitutes quite a long part of the corporate story (see Table 2). In the case of *Here Together*, this is the longest move lasting 29 s and exploited for corporate self-presentations. This is emphasised by a male narrator who then starts



Figure 1. Visual frame from the introduction to *Here Together*.

Table 2Generic moves in *Here Together*.

<i>Here Together</i>				
Moves structure	No. of frames	Time in secs	Speech	Text on screen
Move 1: Introduction	2	2	(0.2)	
Move 2: Orientation	18	29	we came here for the friends↓ (0.1) and we got to know the <u>friends</u> of our friends (0.1) <u>then</u> our old friends from middle school our mu:m (0.1) our ex and our boss (0.1) joined forces to wish us happy birthday (0.1) then we discovered our uncle used to play in a band and realised he was young once too (0.1) and we found others <u>just</u> like us and just like that↑ (0.1) we felt a little less alone↓ (0.1)	
Move 3: Complicating Action	7	8	but then something happened we had to deal with spam clickbait fake news and data misuse (0.1) that's going to <u>change</u> (0.1)	
Move 4: Resolution (Corrective Action)	10	15	from now on (0.1) Facebook will do more to keep you safe and protect your privacy so we can all go back to what made Facebook good in the first place friends because when this place does what it was built for (0.1) we all get a little closer	
Move 5: Coda	3	6	(0.6)	here together FB logo

talking stating that: 'we came here for the friends↓ (0.1) and we got to know the friends of our friends'. The narrator uses the inclusive pronoun 'we', which indicates that he speaks on behalf of all FB users, some of whom might be in the viewing audience. Then, the narrator takes the viewer through a FB profile showing images and videos of people engaging in fun activities such as dancing, cheering, partying (see Figure 2). There are also some intimate moments shared when, for example, a video of a woman, probably a mother, is shown kissing her small child. A bit of seriousness is thrown into the mix when a portrait of a female boss appears on the screen, but it is immediately toned down when the boss sends a happy birthday message. This all emphasises the point that FB is inclusive and really about fun and happy moments completely erasing the seriousness of some of the actions that communicating and sharing on FB might involve.

In the middle of the orientation, a black and white image of a young man appears. The camera zooms out and the image turns out to be a photograph of a group of young people from the front page of a magazine. Subsequently, a video of an older looking man is shown sitting in an armchair. He shows some resemblance with the young boy from the black and white front page. The narrator makes the link between the sets of images and provides more details to help the viewers interpret them as a story: 'then we discovered our uncle used to play in a band and realised he was young once too (0.1)'. The use of black and white images reinforces the nostalgic tone created at the beginning. Throughout the orientation, the simple tune develops into a melody played on a piano. The tempo is slow and the character of the tune can be described as relaxing and happy. This is emphasised with the use of other sounds such as cheering, clapping or singing that can also be heard in the background.

In the classical narrative, a complication or complicating action is the core and essential component of storytelling; its purpose is to tell the problem of the story. In the case of the videos studied here, this move is the shortest or non-existent. In *Here Together*, the complication lasts 8 s and is introduced with the narrator stating: 'but then something happened'. There is a distinctive change in the atmosphere; the happy and somewhat nostalgic character of the video is disturbed by a high pitch sound of metallic clicks that get louder creating tension. The narrator continues saying in a slightly faster voice: 'we had to deal with spam clickbait fake news and data misuse (0.1)'. Whereas the orientation was dominated by images of real people and events, now the viewer is confronted with emojis, icons and static images taken from online news, for example, a face of a woman in a before-and-after image as often used in ads of facial cosmetics. They all start appearing fast on the screen creating a sense of chaos intensified by fast metallic clicks. The message in capital letters 'Don't Allow' is then superimposed on the visual chaos (see Figure 3) instructing the users (in the imperative voice) to stop the bad things from happening by simply paying attention to the FB settings. Rather audaciously, this implies that users are complicit if things go wrong, because they allow for certain practices to occur in the first place. This part is immediately followed by a short silence and a blank screen erasing the previous multimodal mess, which signals an end to the problem, as if the issues have been dealt with.

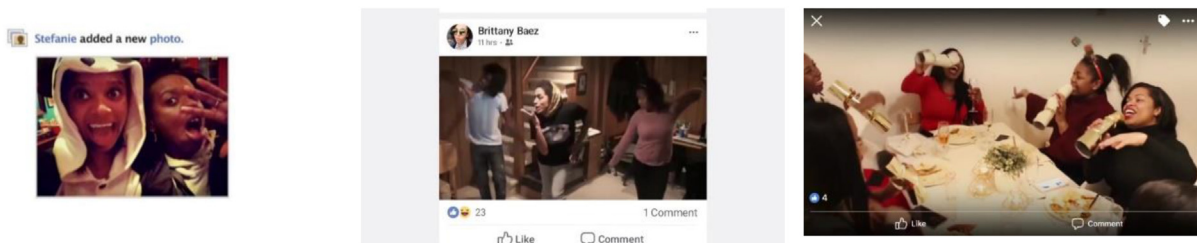
**Figure 2.** Visual frames from the orientation in the FB video.



Figure 3. Visual frame from the compilation in the FB video.

Following the silence and the blank screen, FB returns to the atmosphere of happiness and intimacy indicated in the orientation move. Video footages of dads with newborn babies, an image of a returning soldier being hugged or people announcing their engagement are displayed. The return to the previous feel-good mood is achieved through the soundtrack, which is the same melody used in the orientation bringing back the original sense of happiness and relaxation. A change is announced verbally too, when the narrator asserts that: 'from now on (0.1) Facebook will do more to keep you safe and protect your privacy'. The promise is short and vague, as it does not offer any detail of how the serious breaches have been or will be remedied. The narrator then swiftly returns to the key values emphasised in the orientation, that of connection and communities and the good work that FB does so that 'we all get a little closer'. The video finishes with a coda, which displays the title *Here Together* followed by the FB logo.

Overall, FB takes the position of one of its users to tell the story about the work that FB does to foster connections and reduce loneliness. The company self-presents as a moral 'do-gooder' which acquires credibility and authenticity because it is told through the perspective of an ordinary user. The status of FB as a corporate giant with corporate interests and its responsibility for illegal breaches are erased. The narrator presents FB as a space, which is inclusive as emphasised through displaying images of people of all ages and skin colours. The space is also about real people and real events. This realism, simplicity and authenticity are semiotically constructed through the narrator's speech, who comes across as an experienced FB user, but also through the faded colours, the use of black and white images and the simple relaxing melody accompanying the narrator's voice. It is also the narrator-user who tells about the trouble, but instead of a critique, which one might expect given the massive privacy breach, he trivialises it by using the vague expression 'something' and by making references to problems such as clickbait and spam, which are general issues for Internet users and not just for those who use FB. The unlawful act of breaching privacy and data use for elections are brushed over with 'data misuse', with 'misuse' suggesting an inadvertent mistake. The seriousness of the breaches is further downplayed by showing images that are associated with cosmetics adds and food, while responsibility for any wrongdoings is pushed on to the user who simply allows bad things to happen. All in all, FB strategically exploits the resource of narrative structure, narrative positionality and multimodality to 'creatively' distance itself from the wrongdoing and to dismiss it as an unintentional mistake, which should be forgiven because of all the good things that FB does.

5.2.2. Wells Fargo: earning back your trust

While FB uses the narrative frame of connection and community to evoke a feel-good mood and empathy, Wells Fargo draws on larger cultural storylines firmly embedded within the American culture, specifically that of the American frontier and the Californian Gold Rush. The video begins with an image of a cowboy charging alone on a horse through a vast terrain that resembles the American frontier (see Figure 4). This is followed by an image of a lonely coachman driving a fully loaded stagecoach, which symbolises the development of the frontier and is now the emblem of the bank.

In the 19th century, vast resources were discovered in the West, of which gold was the most important. Soon, millions of settlers from the East moved west in the hope of enrichment and better opportunities. This space became a symbol of adventure, exploration, human domination over nature, toughness, individualism and endless opportunities that much shaped the American consciousness and the American belief in its exceptionalism, while conveniently erasing the brutal colonization and exploitation of the areas.

It is precisely this romanticised imaginary in which the video is set. Not just the participants and the landscape but also the dark yellow and brown colours with a sepia effect emphasise the old days in the West. The soundtrack too contributes to this



Figure 4. Visual frame from the introduction to the Wells Fargo video.

Table 3Generic moves in *Earning Back Your Trust*.

<i>Earning Back Your Trust</i>				
Moves structure	No. of frames	Time in secs	Speech	Text on screen
Move 1: Introduction	2	4	we know the value of trust (0.1) we were built on it (0.1)	
Move 2: Orientation	15	15	back when the country went west for gold (0.1) <u>we</u> were the ones who carried it back east ↓ by steam (0.1) by horse (0.2) by iron horse (0.1) over the years (0.1) <u>we</u> built on this trust (0.1) <u>we</u> always found a way (0.2) until (0.1) we lost it ↓	
Move 3: Complicating Action	2	2		
Move 4: Resolution (Corrective Action)	29	35	<u>but</u> that isn't when the story ends it is when it starts again (0.1) with a complete re-commitment to you fixing what went wrong making things right and ending product sales goals for branch bankers (0.1) so we can focus on <u>your</u> satisfaction (0.1) we are holding ourselves accountable to find and fix issues proactively (0.1) because earning back <u>your</u> trust (0.1) is our greatest priority (0.1) it is a new day at Wells Fargo (0.1) but it is a lot like our first day (0.2)	
Move 5: Coda	2	4	Wells Fargo established in 1852 (0.1) re-established in 2018	Wells Fargo logo Established in 1852 Wells Fargo logo Re-Established in 2018

imaginary; the music is based on *Howlin' for you* by the American rock band *The Black Keys*. It starts slowly as a simple country tune played on a guitar to the rhythm of the moving stagecoach. The video starts with a narrator speaking in a soft mid-western American accent on behalf of the company: 'we know the value of trust (0.1) we were built on it (0.1)' (see Table 3). Here, the company utilises its heritage to demonstrate the durability and stability of its businesses and verbally encourages the viewer to think of the company therefore as trustworthy.

Similar to the FB video, the orientation is used extensively to present the company, here specifically its past. It continues with the imaginary of the old West with the narrator reminding the viewers of Wells Fargo's exceptional role during the Californian Gold Rush: 'back when the country went west for gold (0.1) we were the ones who carried it back east ↓' (see Table 4). The scenery then changes to include black and white video clips of an early steam ship, horses and a fast moving train described as an 'iron horse'—a term, which was used in the 19th century to colloquially describe a steam train. The use of authentic black and white footage together with old colloquial terminology highlights the company history and heritage (see Figure 5). There is also an emphasis on innovation and technology with subsequent scenes showing a woman taking money out of an early ATM and people sitting in a bank using Wells

Fargo's mobile app. The orientation finishes with the narrator saying: 'we always found a way (0.2) until', when the country music suddenly stops signalling a change in the narrative and the beginning of the next move. This is the point when Wells Fargo alludes to a wrongdoing but only briefly through a reference to a loss of trust: 'until (0.1) we lost it ↓' without providing any reasons why this might have happened. The loss is emphasised multimodally with images of office blocks with lights being gradually switched off and a computer screen showing a news headline 'What's happening at Wells Fargo?'. Then, the screen goes black and the music stops. Similar to the FB video, the silence and the black screen signal an end to this move (and to the problem) and a transition to the next stage, that of resolution.

Table 4Generic Moves in *Moving Forward*.

<i>Moving Forward</i>				
Moves structure	No. of frames	Time in secs	Speech	Text on screen
Move 1: Introduction	2	2	I'm Dara Khosrowshahi Uber's new CEO (0.1)	
Move 2: Orientation	7	14	since joining nine months ago my priority has been to listen ↑ to you (0.1) to cities and communities a:nd to my own employees I've seen ↑ a lot of good we've changed the way people get around we've <u>provided</u> new opportunities (0.1) but moving forward ↑ (0.1) it's <u>time</u> to move in a new direction ↓ (0.1) and I wanna you to know ↑ <u>just</u> how excited I am to write Uber's next chapter (0.1) with you ↓ this begins with new leadership and a new culture and you're going to see improvements to our service with better pickups and ride quality (0.1) for both riders and drivers (0.1) <u>one</u> of our core value as a company is to <u>always</u> do the right thing and if there are times when we fall short (0.1) we commit to being open taking responsibility for the problem and fixing it you've got my word we're charting an <u>even</u> better road for Uber and for those that rely on us <u>every</u> day (0.6)	
Move 3: Resolution (Corrective Action)	24	38		
Move 4: Coda	3	6		moving forward Uber



Figure 5. Visual black and white frames from the orientation of the Wells Fargo video.

After the short silence, a new beginning is emphasised visually by showing a building being lit up. This draws on the metaphorical association of light with a new life and positivity with the narrator emphasising it verbally: ‘but that isn’t when the story ends it is when it starts again (0.1)’. The soundtrack, which is now the full electric version of *Howlin’ for you*, gets louder and faster adding a sense of energy and dynamism. Images of happy people of different ages and ethnicities looking straight into the camera appear one after the other, while the narrator asserts ‘a complete re-commitment to you’. He continues promising ‘fixing what went wrong making things right and ending product sales goals for branch bankers’, which is the only concrete detail in the promise. The commitment to the promise is emphasised by showing a woman reading on a tablet a news headline stating: ‘Wells Fargo has eliminated product sales goals’. Whether this headline is authentic or has been fabricated for the purpose of the video cannot be confirmed, but using the medium of an online newspaper it gives the statement greater credibility. The scene is followed by people getting excited because their loan was approved, a woman shopping and using the Wells Fargo app to pay, a father who gets his three kids ready for school and then another father who takes his daughter to a Wells Fargo branch, where they are welcomed by a smiling female employee. The latter scenes are examples of images showing a break from traditional gender roles suggesting that the company wants to be associated with progressive messages (see Figure 6). The motif of a re-birth is stressed by the narrator saying: ‘it is a new day at Wells Fargo (0.1)’ but then reconnects it again with the American past by adding ‘but it is a lot like our first day (0.2)’. The video finishes with the emphasis on the re-birth reinforced textually with ‘Established in 1852’, which in the next scene changes to ‘Re-Established in 2018’.

Wells Fargo chooses the narrative of heritage to convince the audience of its integrity and benevolence. By going back to its roots in the old West, it taps into the myths deeply rooted in the American consciousness and self-presents as one of the heroes and pioneers who helped fulfil the American dream. This is mostly achieved visually through the images of the frontier and black and white footage and underpinned by country music. The scenes skilfully utilise visual and sound metaphors to create contrast; darkness and silence are used to indicate a trouble in the end of the complication move, while light and a music with a fast beat symbolise a new beginning and dynamism in the resolution.

5.2.3. Uber: moving forward

Uber chooses a different narrative strategy, that of a personal storytelling, to do an image repair. The introduction begins with Dara Khosrowshahi dressed in black looking directly into the camera. He straightaway engages with the audience introducing himself as Uber’s new CEO (see Table 4). The background is blurred, which places more focus on the CEO (see Figure 7). The intro is short with a fairly fast beat in the soundtrack. This all conveys an idea of a no-nonsense attitude and seriousness but also personalisation, since here is the CEO who speaks personally to the audience.

The orientation carries on with the personal narrative; it focuses on Khosrowshahi’s journey as Uber’s CEO. He is the main protagonist and, at the same time, the narrator, telling his story of being a CEO as emphasised through the use of the pronoun ‘I’. He highlights his priority of listening and learning from both customers and employees to create an impression of a responsible and engaging CEO. This is emphasised in a series of scenes in which he appears with other people who seem to talk, while he visibly nods his head signalling listening (see Figure 7). Here, he clearly goes against the common view of CEOs as distant and detached figures and wants to self-present as interested and connected with his people and the communities that Uber serves. This is subsequently achieved through a change of stance; the personal stance expressed through ‘I’ changes to ‘we’, which shifts the footing from his own story to that of the business. Here, he emphasized the good things that Uber made possible: ‘we’ve changed the way people get around we’ve provided new opportunities’ (see Table 4) as a way to legitimise the business that have come into disrepute. The use of the present perfect signals that the benefits still continue in the present time implying that the business is a viable business.

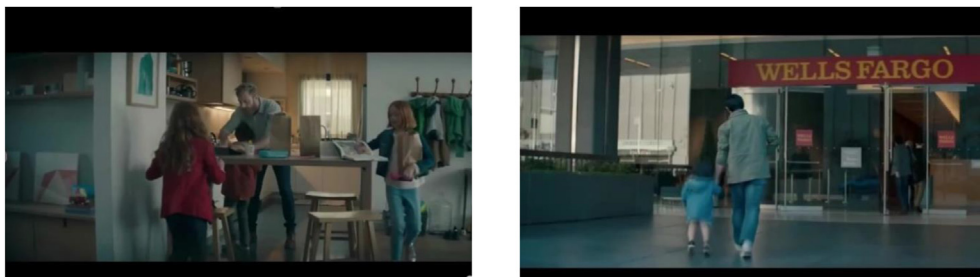


Figure 6. Visual frames from the resolution of the Wells Fargo video.



Figure 7. Personal storytelling in the Uber video.

In contrast to the two other videos, Uber video does not include the move of complicating action, and the narrative moves on directly to the resolution, which begins with the camera zooming out to show a residential street and a moving car on a sunny day. The view of the street getting longer and the moving vehicle reinforce visually the metaphor of a journey, while the brightness of the sun exudes a sense of positivity indicating that the journey is in the right direction. As the camera zooms out, the CEO emphasises the need for a new direction when he says: 'but moving forward ↑ (0.1) it's time to move in a new direction ↓' (see Table 4). The next set of scenes present the CEO smiling; he again engages with the audience by saying: 'I wanna you to know ↑ just how excited I am to write Uber's next chapter (0.1) with you ↓'. At the same time, he looks away from the camera giving visually the floor to others. The personal pronoun 'you' is a form of direct address and a marker of engagement. Although it feels as if the CEO talks directly to us, this is not the kind of involvement, which we would expect if we were in the same room with him. Here, 'you' acts as a synthetic personalisation (Fairclough, 1989), which only simulates personal engagement.

The next scenes show drivers and riders in different urban settings. The music gets faster creating a sense of dynamism and most of the people seem to emanate happiness. Similar to FB and Wells Fargo, this video too sends out a message of Uber endorsing progressive and inclusive attitudes by showing female drivers and people of different skin colours and ages (see Figure 8). The CEO is visually absent from the image but present as the narrator who tells a story of change: 'this begins with new leadership and a new culture and you're going to see improvements to our service with better pickups and ride quality'.

While the scenes up to this point were shown during a day, now the scenery changes to a night time. A young woman taking a seat in the back of an Uber taxi is shown smiling highlighting the message that it is safe for women to use Uber at night. It is also at this point that the CEO hints at some wrongdoing: 'and if there are times when we fall short we commit to being open'. The use of the *if* sentence in the present tense indicates an open condition, in which the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the condition remains unresolved (Quirk, et al., 1985); in other words, there might be a time when things go wrong but this is uncertain and therefore the expressed commitment is also uncertain. Also, 'being open' is a rather vague form of repair given the offences committed by Uber drivers and employees including sexual harassment and rape. The resolution section ends with the CEO appearing on the screen in the same black outfit that he was wearing in the first scene; he again looks into the camera and speaks directly to the audience in a more serious tone. The black outfit, the serious tone and speaking to the camera enhances the credibility of the message, which enhances the sincerity of the promise expressed: 'you've got my word we're charting an even better road for Uber and for those that rely on us every day'. Similar to the two other videos, Uber finishes with the title 'Moving Forward' displayed on the screen against an image of dawn, which signals visually a new day and metaphorically a new beginning reinforcing the journey metaphor displayed textually on the screen.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis has shown several common generic and semiotic features that the corporate videos employ for the purpose of image repair. First, all of them use the genre of the canonical narrative. Yet, the structure of the narrative is not rigidly followed but appropriated to serve the corporate goals. It appears that the introduction, orientation, resolution and coda are the obligatory moves, while complication remains an option. We also see a different level of importance attached to each move. The orientation, which in the canonical narrative has the function of presenting the main protagonists and details of the story and tends to be quite short, is exploited to tell all the 'good' things about the companies in a quite lengthy segment. A complication move, which in the canonical narrative is the gist of the story being sometimes quite long, is here reduced to a



Figure 8. Visual frames from the resolution of the Uber video.

just few seconds or skipped altogether. When mentioned, the ‘trouble’ is re-told as a thing of the past and narratively brushed over with vague expressions such as ‘something’ or downplayed as a ‘misuse’. This might be a deliberate tactic to ensure that the focus on the wrongdoing is minimised and the overall nice and cohesive picture is not too stained.

The videos not only exploit the structure of the canonical narrative, they also select particular narrators and therefore a particular narrative position to tell their stories. For example, FB chooses the perspective of one of its users who speaks collectively on behalf of other users potentially involving members of the audience. This affiliative use of ‘we’ acts as a solidarity-building device and increases the emotional appeal of the video, which is emphasised through the overall narrative frame telling the ‘good story’ of FB as a platform for friendship and sharing happy moments. The Wells Fargo video uses the corporate ‘we’ to tell its story and in doing so, distributes the responsibility for the good and the bad to the whole company. It embeds its story within a larger heritage narrative of American exceptionalism and entrepreneurship to prime the viewers to see Wells Fargo as a trustworthy and legitimate business. Uber selects the personal narrative by letting its CEO speak directly to the audience to personalise the message and to build connections with the people who work for Uber or use its services. This was probably strategically selected to improve Uber’s image tarnished by the former controversial CEO.

The corporate stories told in the videos are supported with a skilful use of various semiotic resources, specifically the soundtracks, colour schemes, visual metaphors, original video footages, participants, their actions and gaze. The mellow tune in the FB video creates a sense of nostalgia but also relaxation and happiness, which matches the overall happy story, while the country melody in *Earning back your trust* supports the narrative of American heritage and the old West. Faster upbeat music, which is employed in the resolution move in the Uber and Wells Fargo videos, evokes dynamism and energy linked with new beginnings. Silence too is strategically employed to signal a break with the past and short pauses are often employed in the narration to give an extra emphasis to the key messages. The use of faded colours, sepia effects, documentary black and white images and original black and white video footage gives a sense of authenticity and realism to construct the stories as authentic, credible and honest accounts that in turn should prompt the viewers to see the companies behind these stories as credible and trustworthy. The stories are also mostly about ordinary people doing ordinary things such as having birthday parties, getting a taxi or going to the bank prompting the view that the companies are inclusive and simply there to support ordinary people and their needs. There is also a focus on progressive ideas, when the videos visually emphasise the value of diversity and a break from traditional gender roles.

The analysis of the three videos has shown an adept use of the affordances of the canonical narrative and audio-visual resources to create feel-good stories of corporate self-endorsements that conveniently diminish the seriousness of the illegal activities that the companies instigated. Textually and visually, the videos emphasise the ‘good’ work that the companies do for people to fulfil the need for connection, friendship, community, stability and freedom, while their status as global organisations with corporate structures and interests is erased. The choice of semiotic resources is carefully crafted telling millions of YouTube users ‘nice’ and progressive stories that are aesthetically pleasing. Yet, this aesthetics is simply exploited by the corporate actors to ‘creatively’ conceal their wrongdoings and diminish their responsibility. The stories are nothing more than a kind of multimodal make-up that ‘boosts’ the corporate image and re-legitimise the business-as-usual models, while faults are carefully brushed off hampering any criticism. In this way, they reveal the ‘dark side’ of generic creativity and innovation in service of corporate ideologies and public manipulation.

This study explored a new corporate genre of image repair video disseminated widely on social media channels to shed light on some of the emerging multimodal practices that businesses employ. This was accomplished using a novel framework that combined analytical insights from multimodality and critical genre analysis to reveal how corporations appropriate and exploit generic and semiotic features in fresh and creative ways not just for marketing purposes but to minimise their responsibility for illegal activities and legitimise established business practices (cf. Bhatia, 2019).

While offering insights into a new generic multimodal practice of corporations, this research is not without its limitations. Firstly, it focuses exclusively on the artefact dimension of this new genre. While this is a first important step, genres do not exist in a vacuum but are always situated and embodied within wider social practices and communicative orders. It is therefore important to analyse not just the semiotic artefacts but their material, spatial, and temporal character and how they interact with other semiotic objects in organisational spaces and places (Prior, 2013). Fraiberg (2018) and Cheng and Mok’s (2008) work on workplace contexts offer here useful directions. When it comes to corporate image repair videos, it might be difficult to get access to sites in which such artefacts are produced. Yet, we have opportunities to examine how such multimodal objects and their key messages are received, recontextualized and even transfigured or resemiotised by (digital) audiences, for example, through studying user responses that are often creative and critical (Jones et al., 2020). Secondly, the canonical narrative is not the only way in which (corporate) stories are told; in fact there is a gamut of different types, some of which are being increasingly influenced and formatted by storytelling facilities of social media (Georgakopoulou, 2019); thus, the methodological framework might need adjusting to the type and format of stories that are used in the multimodal object analysed. Thirdly, the analysis was conducted by one researcher whose subjective views might have influenced the reading of the visual frames. Using inter-raters could elevate some of the problems of singular judgement and ensure better reliability of coding procedures and interpretations.

There is a growing appetite in the ESP community for critical explorations of multimodal practices of the business world, especially those involving moving images and disseminated on social media. Yet, the existing research on English for Business Communication, although large in scope, has privileged the linguistic mode; it is only recently that multimodality began to receive greater attention. It is hoped that this study will benefit ESP researchers of Business Communication who wish to explore systematically and critically the growing multimodal dynamism in business settings. The framework can also be of

value to ESP pedagogy in fostering critical multimedia literacy and preparing students for the multimodal demands of professions. It can assist ESP teachers and students in analysing multimodal genres produced by businesses by showing them how to segment such 'products' into analysable moves and steps, and focus their attention on the key multimodal elements realised in each move, their interplay and functions. Secondly, it can also help students to produce their own multimodal products, for example videos, which is something increasingly required by graduates entering various roles in the PR and business world. Appendix II shows an example of a group assignment which was created by the author of this article for undergraduate students, including international students, attending a *Language for Professional Purposes* course in the context of British Higher Education. It provides examples of videos in which students explored and employed multimodal creativity and criticality to promote good causes (mental health campaigns, sport, sociality during lockdown etc) that are becoming much more relevant to the new generation of students and professionals.

Appendix I. Example of a multimodal transcript

Transcription notation





↓ - falling intonation

↑ - rising intonation

change – underlined, extra emphasis

(0.1) – pauses timed in seconds

: - lengthened sound

Visual Frame	Description of the frame	Time & Speech	Sound and soundtracks	Move
1. 	Participants: none Objects: button recognisable as a FB tool for adding friends Actions: none, still image Colour: white and grey, low saturation	00 00:01	music: just one tone played on a guitar string; tempo: slow; volume: medium character: relaxing, deep sound	Move 1: Introduction
2. 	Participants: none Objects: button recognisable as a FB tool for adding friends; a mouse symbol appears on the screen Actions: movement of the mouse towards the button Colour: white and grey, low saturation	00:02	sound of a mouse click; the sound of the guitar stops; one higher tone hit on a piano; tempo: slow; volume: medium character: relaxing, cheerful	
3. 	Participants: profile images of a child and an adult man; the man looks into the camera Objects: web elements recognisable as facebook tools Actions: profile images added to the screen one by one Colour: FB blue and white	00:03 we came here ↑ 00:04 for the friends ↓ 00:05 (0.1)	the piano sound continues; tempo: slow volume: medium character: relaxing, cheerful	Move 2: Orientation
4. 	Participants: a photo of two happy young men of ethnic backgrounds, smartly dressed probably at a high school party, both looking into the camera Objects: web elements recognisable as FB tools Actions: static image Colour: mostly black	00:06 and we got to know	the piano sound continues tempo: slow volume: medium character: relaxing, cheerful	

Appendix II. Promotional video & critical reflection – an example of a group assignment

Instructions

1. Working in groups of 4 or 5, create a promotional video for a professional setting, service or facility of your choice. It could be a local student facility of which you are members (gym, student union, library, student society, sport team) or a service outside the university campus. You can also come up with your own business idea.
2. Familiarise yourself with your chosen professional setting and identify a purpose or goals that are relevant to the context and the operations of the business/facility/service, and important to be more widely promoted. Consider relevant audiences and their needs.
3. Produce a 3 min promotional video. The video should be interesting, relevant and created in an attention-grabbing way. It should include a range of modes, for example, images, voiceover, sound and soundtrack, pauses and silences, text, narrative structure if applicable, various camera angles and shots, colour and colour schemes that need to be combined in cohesive and effective ways to realise the main aim(s) of the video and target intended audiences.
4. Submit your video with a description specifying the title, the aims and the intended audience(s). You can use a YouTube account or any other video streaming platform of your choice for that purpose.
5. Produce a short critical reflection (approx. 600–800 words), in which you explain the main goal of the video, its structure and the target audience(s), and reflect upon the affordances of the chosen media and modes and how they helped you to fulfil the intended goals.
6. To assist you with the design of your multimodal ‘product’, consider examples of past assignments listed below (**permissions were obtained from the video producers for the dissemination of the videos for educational purposes**):

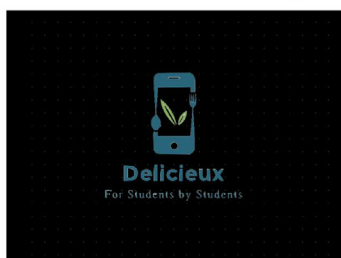
- a. *Rising Nuns: Abbey RFC*, shorturl.at/fIU02



- b. *Sport in Mind*, shorturl.at/bGKMT



- c. *Delicieux: The New Online Cooking Class for Students*, shorturl.at/efhN5



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