

# HOW TO CONSTRUCT CORPORATE IDENTITY AND REPUTATION

## Is the ‘About Us’ page a micro-genre?

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**Abstract** – Multimodal resources and digital multimedia technologies have been modifying and remodelling social practices in any field over the last decades. In business communication, histories of business, corporate vision and mission are today instantiated by the ‘About Us’ webpage, a sort of multimodal self-portrait or short autobiography created by the company itself. From a discursive perspective, this webpage typology has always been disregarded if compared with the crucial role played by the homepage that, according to the Usability guidelines, is to present the company, its business and market value. Only recently, web marketers have focused on the strategic function the undervalued ‘About Us’ page fulfils. It has revealed itself to be a goal-oriented sales page which focuses on highlighting the most relevant credentials of a company, its brand, and on making a strong impression on potential customers. Its aim is to remodel practices of Self presentation into practices of Self branding and this process takes place thanks to the co-deployment of different semiotic resources which, in turn, make use of different digital media technologies. This contribution will show how the specialized discourses of marketing and branding are translated, or rather transduced, into multimodal artefacts, the corporate ‘About Us’ pages, and how persuasive discursive strategies are embedded in a well-defined digital text pattern. Through the analysis of a small sample of corporate ‘About Us’ pages, we will demonstrate that these pages are the *loci* where business reputation and corporate identity can be constructed more effectively.

**Keywords:** About Us page; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Usability; Self Presentation; Self Branding.

## 1. Introduction

Multimodal resources and digital multimedia technologies have been modifying and remodelling social practices in every field over the last decades. Nowadays, in business communication, corporate branding, values, vision and mission are instantiated by the ‘About Us’ webpage, a sort of multimodal self-portrait or short autobiography created by the company itself. From a discursive perspective, this webpage typology has always been

disregarded when compared with the crucial role played by the homepage (Nielsen 2000; Caiazzo 2014). According to Usability guidelines (Nielsen 2000; Nielsen, Pernice 2010), the function of the homepage is to present the company, its business and market value. Only recently, web marketers have focused on the strategic function which the undervalued ‘About Us’ page fulfils. This is a goal-oriented sales page which focuses on highlighting the most relevant credentials of a company and its brand, and on making a strong impression on potential customers (Kaley, Nielsen 2019). Therefore, the aim of this webpage is to remodel practices of Self presentation (Goffman 1959) into practices of Self branding (Labrecque *et al.* 2011; Page 2102).

This process takes place thanks to the co-deployment of different semiotic resources which, in turn, make use of different digital media technologies. For this reason, it is significant to investigate the ‘About Us’ page as a multimodal specialized digital text and this contribution<sup>1</sup> will show how the specialized discourses of corporation, marketing and branding are translated, or rather transduced (Kress 1997), into multimodal digital artefacts, the corporate ‘About Us’ pages.

Thanks to this investigation, we will demonstrate that considering an ‘About Us’ page as a sub-genre of the website genre, or rather as a micro-genre, is misleading since several meaning-making processes and practices take place simultaneously and different genres are hence present within this webpage – e.g. Annual reports, CVs, job applications etc. This mechanism of genre proliferation makes the ‘About Us’ page a sort of corporate *genres hub*<sup>2</sup> that is regulated mainly by hyperlinks and usability conventions.

Thus, we have decided to tackle the semiotic complexity of the ‘About Us’ page by combining different approaches and frameworks. First of all, we will investigate the topic in terms of corporate discourse, discursive practices and rhetorical strategies. Genre analysis theories with a particular focus on genre evolution in digital contexts (Askehave, Swales 2001; Swales 2004; Bhatia 2004; Santini 2007; Orlikowski, Yates 2002) will provide the basis of our analysis. Inevitably, in order to identify and interpret how different meaning-making resources and their meaning potential contribute to the

<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a wider project funded by the European commission, Erasmus+ project key Action 2, agreement number 2016-1-IT02-KA203-024087, named EUMADE4LL (European Multimodal and Digital Education for Language Learning) which is designed and implemented to develop multimodal digital literacies in educational and professional contexts using English as the language of international communication. The project explores five digital text types and one of these is the ‘About Us’ page.

<sup>2</sup> The process of genre proliferation is also highlighted in other studies such as: Orlikowski and Yates (2002; “system of genres”), Bhatia (2004; “genre colony”), Catenaccio (2012; “genre network”).

realization of this digital genre, a multimodal approach (Kress, Van Leeuwen 2001, 2006) is necessary.

Finally, along with these two frameworks, we will also explore the webpages according to the most common Usability guidelines. When dealing with digital artefacts, usability always plays a pivotal role. In order to obtain 'usable', i.e. consumable, digital products, web writers and web designers are requested to follow precise usability conventions that are now essential parts of the composition process.

Through the analysis of a small sample, composed of ten corporate 'About Us' pages, we will answer the following research questions:

- 1) Are the 'About Us' pages the *loci* where corporate identity and reputation are constructed?
- 2) To what extent can the 'About Us' page be considered as a genre, or a micro-genre? How can we define and classify it?

In the conclusion, thanks to the analysis of our findings, we claim that although most companies use their own 'About us' page to profile and brand themselves, these pages are not yet well-patterned from a discursive perspective and do not fulfil their communicative purpose exhaustively. In the future, in order to examine the evolution of the multifaceted digital 'About us' pages, we suggest the necessity of adopting an integrated theoretical framework which, apart from including genre studies, also combines different approaches.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Corporate discourses and genre-formation

The 'About Us' page is a representation of how corporate discourse can be reified as digital artefact. Of course, corporate communication is an overarching domain that has given rise to several expressions of business social actions, practices and discourses since the last century, and whose main goal is to build an effective, positive and successful corporate self-presentation. The agentic<sup>3</sup> value of corporations, translated into corporate identity and image, is as strategic as is their capability of growing their revenues, enlarging their company, gaining market shares.

<sup>3</sup> Agentic value refers to human agency. In Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986), agency is "the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions" (Bandura 2009, p. 8). A group of people can exercise its influence through a "collective agency". This type of agency reflects a group's fulfilments that "are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions" (Bandura 2000, pp. 75-76).

Corporate identity (Olins 1995; Van Riel, Balmer 1997; Christensen 2002; Breeze 2013) is the discursive instantiation of a corporation's self-understanding which is corroborated by corporate culture, ethos and values. Corporate culture implies "myths, rituals and stories" (Christensen 2002, p. 164) aimed at making diverse stakeholders share a single reality. Of course, corporate cultures and identities are socially situated entities, strongly grounded in political and economic interests and, therefore, they can be provisional and changeable.

Diversely, corporate image regards social impressions and the perception of a company's outward projection (Bromley, Basil 1993; Hatch, Schultz 2003). Thus, corporations strive to build their images in line with their identities by means of their discursive and social practices. In other words, corporate image refers to the concept of 'face' (Goffman 1959), that is to say how companies want their stakeholders to perceive them and show themselves in order to construct their identity through persuasive communicative resources and strategies. Corporate identity and image take part in the construction of corporate reputation which is externally expressed by its brand. Reputation is a concept extremely close to Self-presentation and at the same time is a highly fluid and fortuitous attribute deriving from the perception, attention, and approval by others. Building a reputation entails a constant process of image-making and impression management and, as such, can be continuously re-negotiated and adapted to the situation.

In any corporate genre, the identification of traditional parameters such as schematic structure, communicative purpose, rhetorical strategies/actions and discourse community (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) has become a crucial and debated issue (Askehave, Swales 2001; Swales 2004; Bhatia 2004; Santini 2007; Orlikowski, Yates 2002) because of the dynamic and multifunctional nature of genres. Yet, there is a common goal that pervades all the corporate genres and affects the multifaceted nature of these parameters: presenting the company with a highly-reputed and well-recognizable agentic value. Promoting corporate identity and image implies the blending of two levels of communication, i.e. informative and argumentative/persuasive, and hence when we study corporate discourses our focus should be on what and how self-branding discursive markers - verbal and nonverbal - are used to build company's reputation<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, investigating digital genres implies many challenges since multimediality and digitality, and their affordances, make their

<sup>4</sup> Corporate web sites are today strategic tools for promoting corporate identities and constructing relationships with their stakeholders. They have been widely investigated in the past few years; see: Robbins, Stylianou (2003); Pollach (2005); Djonov (2005, 2007); Salvi, Turnbull (2007); Garzone (2007, 2009); Samson (2007, 2010); Caiazzo (2009, 2010); Catenaccio (2012); Ferrarotti (2013); Djonov, Knox (2015); Öhman (2018); Cucchi (2019).

boundaries fluid, and the attempt to identify a set of fixed criteria is very complex. These web genres are rather relatively stable phenomena subject to continuous evolution, and the prevalence of rapidly changing technologies has emphasized their dynamic aspect (Askehave, Nielsen 2005; Santini 2007; Petroni 2011).

As a consequence, in order to build a solid reputation via corporate webpages/sites, organizations need to remodel their traditional practices of identity construction and corporate branding by making use of the digital affordances offered by media and by rethinking meaning making processes. These mechanisms then require a precise *locus* where business reputation and corporate identity can be constructed effectively: the 'About Us' page.

## **2.2. The Corporate 'About Us' page**

According to Usability conventions (Nielsen 2000; Kaley, Nielsen 2019), the 'About Us' page is an obligatory section in any website. Corporate websites then always present a section dedicated to information about the company that can be labelled as 'Company information', 'About the Company' or include the company name (e.g. About Apple) or the personal pronoun *we* (About Us, Our Company). This section can be composed of only one page, especially if the company is a small one, but generally it comprises a starting page that provides information on various company-related topics in the form of sub-sections accessible via hyperlinks. Therefore, companies have to pay particular attention to the selection and presentation of information and how to make it persuasive.

Conventionally, the company information page is always accessible from the homepage navigation areas via a direct link, either the main navigation bar or the footer of the webpage. Sometimes, but this is not conventional, company information can be found by searching through the site map. As Öhman (2018) states, an 'About Us' page generally conflates a short description of the company and its field of business, information on management and corporate social responsibility, investor relations, legal information and career opportunities, and contact information. Other conventional information is history, mission statements, news, campaigns, environmental information and financial statements.

A clear-cut definition of the 'About Us' page is the following:

Websites are a shop front for businesses, professionals and individuals. They are a virtual representation of the person or people or products that are featured. Because websites are representations, they need to appeal and reach out to the target audience. Not just through the design and usability of the website, but also to allow the audience to get to know the people it represents and to build that rapport between seller and buyer. This rapport and trust is best built through a website's About Us page. (Lam 2009, n.p.)

How can we translate all these issues into an analytical framework that allows us to analyze effectively corporate ‘About Us’ pages? There are not many studies devoted to the analysis of ‘About Us’ pages<sup>5</sup> seen as new digital genres. Their discursive manifestation has been widely validated (Breeze 2013) not only by the recognition of the main genre analysis parameters - communicative purpose, discourse community membership, schematic structure, rhetorical action (Swales, 1990) and dynamism (Berkenkotter, Huckin 1995; Bhatia 2004) - but also by integrating the co-deployment of other multimodal semiotic resources and usability conventions. Genres, in fact, are “staged and multimodal process[es]” which are given functional labels, they are “templates for doing communicative things” (Van Leeuwen 2005, pp. 127-128).

In order to provide a classification which groups the most common moves/stages present in the ‘About Us’ pages,<sup>6</sup> we will adopt the classification (Table 1) suggested by Casañ-Pitarch (2015), which in turn is based on Lam’s work (2009), and expand the taxonomy with their functional labels (Graham 2013).

	<b>Moves/Stages</b>	<b>Functional Labels</b>
1	Organisational/Personal Profile	<i>presenting the company</i>
2	Contact Information	<i>being approachable for potential customers</i>
3	Disclaimers & Legal Information	<i>showing company’s responsibility and reliability</i>
4	Customers & Partners	<i>establishing a certain status and credibility</i>
5	Employment Opportunities	<i>gathering data, establishing relations and networking</i>
6	Public Relations	<i>providing a good impression via news and/or meta-information, press releases, awards, etc.</i>
7	Annual Report & Investor Relations	<i>building corporate image to attract clients, investors or shareholders</i>
8	Community Relations	<i>enhancing/endorsing the company image in the eyes of the customers and prospective ones</i>
9	Site Credits	<i>giving due credit to those who deserve it</i>
10	Frequently Asked Questions	<i>answering frequent questions</i>

Table 1  
‘About Us’ page moves (Casañ-Pitarch 2015) and their functional labels  
(Graham 2013, *our adaptation*).

<sup>5</sup> See Pollach (2005), Caiazza (2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), Killoran (2012), Breeze (2013), Casañ-Pitarch (2015), Öhman (2018). While Caiazza analyses only University ‘About Us’ pages, the others investigate corporate ‘About Us’ pages. However, all these contributions mainly focus on language, only Pollach integrates usability in her study. At the same time, web engineers and designers, such as Lam (2009), Garcia (2010), Graham (2013), Kaley and Nielsen (2019), have elaborated patterns for designing effective and usable ‘About Us’ pages.

<sup>6</sup> As identified by Lam (2002), Graham (2013) and Casañ-Pitarch (2015).

As a matter of fact, all these moves are not always present or do not provide exactly the same types of information.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, these moves can be shown either on the starting page only or in different sub-moves connected via links and users have to click on a link to see the additional content (Graham 2013).

If we look at these moves, the 'About Us' page seems to be a *genre hub*: within the page there is a proliferation of many other corporate micro-genres provided by each move (e.g. in the move Investor Relations we find links to the Annual Report and CEO letters, or in the Employment Opportunity move we have links to job applications, CVs, etc.)<sup>8</sup> and hence attributing a functional label to each move can be very complex because the moves can fulfil multiple goals.

### 2.3. Usability and interactivity

In 2005, Pollach introduced the concept of website usability to investigate corporate 'About Us' pages and posed the issue on how good usability affects corporate self-presentation and image management. She affirms (2005, p. 286) that "[r]eading hypertexts is cognitively more complex than reading print material, as readers perform two tasks simultaneously – they make meaning of what they read and decide on the sequence of information (Aarseth 1997) [...]. Hyperlinks are capable of providing [...] cohesion by enabling users to access information and indicating rhetorical relationships among contents (Burbules 1998)." Analysing fluidity as a rhetorical strategy, Djonov claims that

[a] defining characteristic of websites as hypermedia texts on the Web is their fluidity, the quality resulting from a website's capacity for expandability and change and the ability of hyperlinks to obscure its structure and transcend its boundaries. Website fluidity grants users freedom of movement and is therefore indispensable to the Web's attractiveness. It also, however, carries the risk of disorienting users. The question of how this risk can be minimized while website fluidity is retained or increased is thus of central importance in website design. (2007, p. 144)

<sup>7</sup> According to Graham (2013), within the 'personal profile' move, the functional label *presenting the company* can include several sub-functions, such as: introducing and explaining how the company started; stating the origin of the business; telling the story behind the products/services: how they are made and designed/offered; sharing creative inspiration for the company's products and management; presenting the company's or owner's background experience with the aim of establishing instant credibility; discovering the companies' vision, dreams, and aspirations; and linking work, values and beliefs with motivation.

<sup>8</sup> See Breeze (2013).

Website fluidity means usability and relies mainly on hyperlinking processes which in turn imply interactivity. However, the necessity to resolve the ambiguity between the terms *interaction* and *interactivity* is urgent. In CMC, following Goffman's studies (1959), interpersonal communication is conceived as the *interaction* among users via the mediation of technology, the so called human-to-human interaction (Yun 2007; McMillan 2009; Adami 2015) and that is at the basis of the main processes of meaning production and human exchanges in digital contexts. When communication takes place in terms of "human-to-system" interaction (McMillan 2009; Adami 2015), we should talk of *interactivity* and identify it with the affordance of the medium which shapes, on the one hand, how its intended receivers can relate to it, and to any other subject involved in the process, and, on the other hand, their agency in terms of agentic value, identity and social positioning. Interaction and interactivity are carried out through usable interfaces which mediate the relationship users establish with the medium and its interactive tools. The interface then is a semiotic space in which all forms of interaction and interactivity are mediated by linking processes.

Interaction and interactivity on the website also depend on the semantic connections among contents, or rather, how content organization, webpage layout and navigation design interact in order to facilitate (or hinder) user orientation and interactivity. Website hierarchy (Djonov 2007) is a crucial aspect in the meaning making processes of sites to such an extent that the co-deployment of different modes such as visual, verbal and audio within and across web pages, on the one hand, and the presence of hyperlinks on the other become responsible for the coherence and cohesion of the hierarchical structure of contents. Similarly, in his analysis of hypermedia texts, Lemke (2002) coined the term "hypermodality" to better represent the interaction between the hypertextual and multimodal nature of hypermedia texts.

According to the professional web design and usability literature that is supported by empirical research of website usability,<sup>9</sup> effective orientation depends strongly on the users' awareness of how information and content are organized within hypermedia texts. In order to create usable and effective 'About Us' pages, in their guidelines Kaley and Nielsen (2019) identify four levels of detail that are necessary to promote corporate image. These are:

1. **Tagline:** A few words or a brief sentence summarizing what the organization does, its mission.
2. **Summary:** 1-2 paragraphs at the top of the main 'About Us' page that offer a bit more detail about the organization's goal and main accomplishments.

<sup>9</sup> See Otter and Johnson (2000), Krug (2000), Pearrow (2000), Veen (2000), Nielsen (2000), Badre (2002), Djonov (2007, 2015), Nielsen and Pernice (2010), just to mention a few.



3. **Fact sheet:** A section following the summary that elaborates on its key points and other essential facts about the organization and including an effective use of bulleted lists supplemented by clean and useful visuals (e.g. business graphics). For large companies, this section can be constituted by subcategories pages which include topics such as Mission and Values, Company History, Leadership and Team, Investor Relations, News, Careers, Environmental Sustainability, Diversity and Inclusion, etc..
4. **Detailed information:** Subsidiary sections or hyperlinked pages with more depth for people who want to learn more about the organization (hyperlinks in the footer).

In our analysis, these four levels of details will be integrated within the parameter of schematic structure mentioned above.

## 2.4. Multimodality

When analyzing websites, if we constrain the analysis to a single mode, the writing one, we run the risk of underestimating the meaning potential of their hypermedia and hypermodal nature. Websites and webpages are multi-semiotic and in the majority of these artefacts visual and digital resources (layout, colours, images, photos, but also interactive links) are more prominent than writing and contribute to meaning production substantially, in particular in the 'About Us' starting pages. It is therefore necessary to integrate our analysis with a further framework provided by the multimodal approach.

Multimodality is rooted in the Systemic Functional Linguistics, a social semiotic theory of language developed by Halliday (1978, 1994), Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985), and later by Martin (1992), Matthiessen (1995), Thompson (2004), Halliday and Matthiessen (1999, 2004), whose assumption is that meaning in language is a dynamic social process with precise functions according to the social context where it is realised. Meaning-making therefore derives from the interplay of three metafunctions:

1. the *ideational metafunction* refers to how we represent through language our experience of the world (outer and inner) and how we connect these models of experience logically.
2. the *interpersonal metafunction* refers to how we establish and maintain social relationships, attitudes and feelings.
3. the *textual metafunction* refers to how we organize messages into socially situated texts.

This conceptualization of meaning has been applied to other semiotic objects, in particular to still images, in the works of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, 2006). In their multimodal framework, they label the three metafunctions as *representational*, *interactive* and *compositional*. In our study, instead, we will

adopt the labels given by Iedema (2001) in his analysis of moving images since today webpages can also contain videos. They are named as *representational*, *orientational* and *organizational*.

Through the lenses of these three metafunctions we will investigate how corporate branding and reputation are represented multimodally in the ‘About Us’ pages and how the agentic value of the companies is projected (representational metafunction). In the orientational metafunction, the focus is on the interaction between the company and the users of the webpage and this relation involves two kinds of participants (Kress, Van Leeuwen 2006), the “represented participants” (the people, the places and things depicted in images/pictures on the webpages) and the “interactive participants” (the people who communicate with each other through images, the company and the viewers of the images). Represented participants can be depicted either through “demand images” (represented participants look at the viewers as in a kind of symbolic interaction) or through “offer images” (represented participants do not look at the viewers, there is no interaction). In the organizational metafunction, the three interrelated systems, namely information value (the placement of elements, i.e. centreVsmargin; topVsbottom; leftVsright, etc.), salience (how the elements - participants, objects, facts/situations - are realised to attract the user’s attention to different degrees, i.e foregroundingVsbackgrounding) and framing (the presence or absence of framing devices for disconnecting or connecting parts of the page) interact with the semiotic resources used and with hyperlinks.

We will take inspiration from the multimodal social semiotic framework elaborated by Djonov and Knox (2015) for the analysis of the three metafunctions within homepages. The authors have posed several micro research questions in relation to the sections of the homepage, namely the banner zone at the top of the page, the content zone, i.e. the core/central area, and the navigation zone/s, i.e. where interactivity takes place. We will apply and adapt this model to the ‘About Us’ pages and integrate it with the genre analysis and usability tools. By combining all the descriptors identified in the three separate approaches, we have obtained an integrated analytical framework, or rather a meta-framework, that we have found useful for exploring corporate ‘About Us’ pages in terms of identity construction and reputation building. Furthermore, the micro-research questions have been reconsidered and expanded for our research purpose focusing on concepts such as user-friendliness,<sup>10</sup> affiliation<sup>11</sup> and binding navigation<sup>12</sup> (see Table 3).

<sup>10</sup> As Coombs states, the terms user-friendly and user-friendliness are “generally associated with well-designed IT solutions that the user can easily interact with. Indeed, user-friendly software implies that the human computer interface (HCI) and interactability of the IT system have been designed in such a way so as to allow immediate and meaningful participation” (2000, p. 19).

### 3. Data and method

The web pages used in the sample are described and analysed in the form they take on a certain date, i.e. December 2018. Our sample is based on the list of LinkedIn Top Companies 2018<sup>13</sup> and this list is composed of the first 25 out of 50 companies where people want to work. LinkedIn's data team has created this list analyzing billions of searches by the site's more than 500 million members. It has also considered views of and applications to job postings, engagement with the company on LinkedIn and the number of employees that have worked for the company for at least one year. For the analysis we have taken into consideration the first 10 Companies only (Table 2), due to the complexity of the hypertextual structure.

	Company	URL	'About Us' link position	Direct accessibility
1	Amazon Internet	<a href="https://www.aboutamazon.com/">https://www.aboutamazon.com/</a>	Footer	yes
2	Alphabet IT & Services	<a href="https://www.alphabet.com/en-ww/company">https://www.alphabet.com/en-ww/company</a>	Footer	
3	Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pg/facebook/about/">https://www.facebook.com/pg/facebook/about/</a>	Navigation bar	
4	Salesforce Internet	<a href="https://www.salesforce.com/company/about-us/">https://www.salesforce.com/company/about-us/</a>	Footer	
5	Tesla auto motive	<a href="https://www.tesla.com/about">https://www.tesla.com/about</a>	Footer	yes
6	Apple consumer electronics	<a href="https://www.apple.com/">https://www.apple.com/</a>	Footer	
7	Comcast NBC Universal Media production	<a href="http://www.nbcuniversal.com/who-we-are">http://www.nbcuniversal.com/who-we-are</a>	Navigation bar	
8	The Walt Disney Company entertainment	<a href="https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/about/">https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/about/</a>	Navigation bar	yes
9	Oracle IT & Services	<a href="https://www.oracle.com/corporate/#info">https://www.oracle.com/corporate/#info</a>	Navigation bar	
10	Netflix Entertainment	<a href="https://media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix">https://media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix</a>	Navigation bar	yes

Table 2  
LinkedIn Top 10 Companies 2018.

At this stage of the research, we have narrowed the unit of analysis further. In fact, the sample compiled includes the starting pages of the 'About Us' sections only and not all the pages of their subsections, since from a multimodal social semiotic perspective the starting pages already mirror what the company wants to show at a first glance and these choices reflect a precise self-branding strategy. Only 4 companies are directly accessible by 1-click action, i.e. by googling about + the Company's name. To find the other

<sup>11</sup> Affiliation is the process by which people involve themselves in social bonds (Knight 2008). To construe affiliation users produce and/or interpret meanings that represent what ties them together as members of particular communities. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, and in particular in the theory of appraisal developed within the SFL paradigm (Martin, White 2005), affiliation occurs in both the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions.

<sup>12</sup> Stenglin (2008) uses the terms 'binding' for navigation design. When navigation simultaneously supports user orientation and freedom of navigation (un-bound), it creates a sense of comfort. Conversely, when navigation causes a sense of disorientation or entrapment into a single navigation path (bound) it can provoke frustration (Djonov, Knox 2015, p. 184).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-top-companies-2018-where-us-wants-work-now-daniel-roth/>

companies' 'About Us' pages from the browser, users have to enter the homepage first, find the link on the navigation zones (50% in the top navigation bar and 50% in the footer) and then click on it to reach the page.

We have considered the webpage as a visual unit and looked at its components in terms of number of screenfuls, number of image frames and text frame, number of moves, including those hyperlinked. We have decided not to carry out any computational linguistic analysis to quantify the occurrences of promotional lexical markers, including their collocations. The number of writings is not statistically significant and most of the company information pages do not prioritize writings on the starting pages to construct their identity and build their reputation but mainly exploit visual resources and hyperlinks to organize contents, with the exception of only one company, Tesla, which has no visuals. However, some narratives will be under investigation when utilised along with other resources. In fact, we will focus on some rhetorical discursive strategies such as agentic value, factual statements, numbers as evidence, size and scope, leadership, and agents of change (Pollach 2005), in order to analyse how the 'About Us' pages promote a company's reputation verbally.

The analysis has been conducted using the tools offered by the meta-framework we have elaborated (Table 3).

INTERACTIVITY	REPRESENTATIONAL	ORIENTATIONAL	ORGANISATIONAL
	What content is included on or excluded from the page? > Hyperlinked contents Is the way the content has been classified via links user-friendly (e.g. binding/not binding navigation, user-friendliness, freedom of interactivity, affiliation (bonding))? Does it corroborate user orientation?		
<b>Semiotic Resources</b>			
<b>TAGLINE</b>	What do they represent? Do they provide the idea of what the company does? If present, does writing corroborate visuals and how? Does the tagline mirror the identity and mission of the website?	What kind of relationships do they establish with users? If present, what kind of relationships does writing establish with users? Does the tagline affect how users perceive company values?	Is the tagline embedded in the logo area? Or is it framed differently? (Information value/Position > e.g. the whole screenshot, sliding gallery, different frames, given/new, etc.) If present, how is the narrative constructed (e.g., key words, key sentence, repetitions, metaphors, slogans, etc.)?
<b>SUMMARY SECTION: - COMPANY PROFILE</b>	Do they provide a fuller understanding of what the company does? Do they summarize and emphasize the main impressive facts?	Do they construct credibility and reliability? How? Are they appealing for users? How? Do they provide context and reduce the amount of cognitive effort required to read through layers of content? How do they align users attitudinally towards the website and its content?	How are visual elements co-deployed to produce meaning in combination with writing? What kind of visuals are used to edit this section (images, video, framing, fonts, bullets, etc.)? Do they construe a taxonomy/hierarchy of information in accordance with the function fulfilled by the section? Is informativity in terms of brevity, scannability, clarity, efficacy (words chosen) well balanced?
<b>FACT SHEET: -DISCLAIMER &amp; LEGAL INFO - CUSTOMERS &amp; PARTNERS - PUBLIC RELATIONS - INVESTOR RELATIONS</b>	What kind of evidence is used to support the facts mentioned in the summary (numbers, graphs, short narratives, pictures, etc.)? Is there consistency among modes?	Does it build up trust in the company and create affiliation?	Is its rhetorical value clearly expressed? How How is salience and information value organized among modes?
<b>DETAILED INFORMATION: - CONTACT INFO - EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES - COMMUNITY RELATIONS - SITE CREDITS - FAQs</b>	Is the distinction between the procedural function of links (icons/labels) and their informative value clearly expressed?	Do they it say more about the company/institution/person? Do they further endorse the brand value of the company/institution/person?	Are procedural and content links (icons/labels) clearly separated in the page organisation?

Table 3  
The meta-framework for the 'About Us' page analysis  
(Djonov and Knox 2015, *our adaptation*).

It cross-matches first the three metafunctions with hyperlinking processes in order to identify the amount of content that has been shown either on the starting page or on the hyperlinked subsections. Then the meta-framework describes how the schematic structure, in accordance with the usability macro-categories and the semiotic resources utilised, constructs meaning within the co-deployment of the three metafunctions.

#### 4. Analysis of findings

Usability guidelines (Nielsen 2000) recommend that web designers provide access to content in a very few clicks in order to keep users always connected with the webpage. Fast interaction and interactivity endorse long connection and attract visitors' attention (Nielsen, Pernice 2010). The fact that only four companies have direct access to the 'About Us' page by googling 'about + the Company's name' means that direct accessibility to the 'About Us' page is still not taken into proper consideration. Of course, for many years the home page has played the role of the company's 'business card', the *locus* where identity and mission of the website is shown (Nielsen 2000), and thus search engine optimization tools always retrieve the homepage as soon as the company's name is googled.

Interactivity cuts across the three metafunctions. It is mainly exploited to foreground or background information and depends on whether the moves are present and accessible directly from the starting page or have been transformed into hyperlinked sub-sections. Table 4 (see Appendix) shows how many stages are embedded in the starting page and how many of them are hyperlinked. Hyperlinked moves are indicated by the letter 'H'.

We will start the analysis of web contents by looking at the Organisational metafunction since the exploration of the 'About Us' pages' composition and their schematic structure helps us interpret better the interconnections with the other two metafunctions. In the tagline section, interactivity is not present since there are no hyperlinks. Our sample presents only three companies (Facebook, Tesla, and Netflix) which make use of a tagline in order to reinforce each company's mission.

These taglines include a short narrative (a key-sentence) and are positioned close to the top brand area, but they are not embedded in the image:

e.g.

**Bringing the world closer together** (FACEBOOK)

**Netflix has been leading the way for digital content since 1997** (NETFLIX)

Facebook's tagline corroborates the visual embedded in the top brand area, a world map in the background, better than Netflix whose brand area shows a picture of its offices. Tesla's 'About Us' page is the only page without any images. Most of the writings regarding the mission of the companies are part of the Organisational Profile move.

If we analyse the schematic structure in combination with the other three sections recommended by Usability guidelines, such as summary, fact sheet and detailed information sections, we notice (Table. 4) that there are only three moves – Organisational profile, Contact information and Public relations – that are always present in our sample, but only the first two are directly accessible from the starting pages. Organisational profile location is always prioritised, i.e. it always appears on the first two screenfuls since, with its sub-sections, it represents the core part of the Summary section. Public relations, Disclaimer and Legal information, Customer and partners, the Annual report and Investor relations are components of the Fact Sheet section, which generally comes immediately after the Summary in the webpage hierarchy. The Fact Sheet section offers the opportunity to show evidence of what the company has declared in its organisational profile and has an incredible persuasive power since we can find graphs/tables, statistics, videos, brand logos of investors/partners, etc. Therefore, it is crucial in building the company's reputation. However, Investor relations and Public relations, although broadly present, are mostly hyperlinked and then backgrounded into sub-pages.

Contact information, Employment opportunities, Community relations, Site credits and FAQs pertain to the Detailed information section but they are perceived differently since only Employment opportunities and Contact information (including the social media area) are *de facto* mandatory, while the others have a low percentage of occurrence.

What emerges from Table 4 (see Appendix) is also the different length of each page measured in number of screenfuls. There are only three companies (Facebook, Tesla and Netflix) whose 'About Us' page is composed of only three screenfuls and two companies with very long pages (Amazon with eighteen screenfuls and Walt Disney with thirty-four). The others have an average of seven screenfuls. Both very long and very short pages imply a lower number of hyperlinked sections and hence less interactivity and users' engagement. Furthermore, long pages in particular do not corroborate users' orientation.

The presence of visuals and writings has been measured in terms of number of images and text frames. If we look at Table 4 (see Appendix), we can see that half of the sample favours text frames over image frames (Amazon, Facebook, Tesla, Apple and Netflix). Yet, in those webpages with the highest number of text pages, writings refer mostly to captions and long

content link labels. Tesla Automotive does not use any visual but only the writing mode with a very low level of informativity.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, Facebook uses only one image and a very few writings with a high level of informativity. Meaning potential hence resides primarily in the image frames on the starting pages. Visuals, in fact, are foregrounded in most moves and sub-moves, e.g. history, management, products, community relations, making pictures and images more attractive and salient (Degano 2017).

The visual layout, in particular, affects how the other two metafunctions work in order to build a good and reliable reputation. As for the Representational one, images evoke mainly professionalism, corporate settings (modern building and offices), western global world, modernity, multicultural relations among stakeholders, although they are all depicted according to Western aesthetics (Brumberger 2014). What emerges in our corpus is the absence of gender and racial discrimination, men and women and racial groups are depicted equally. Most pages use these visuals in the summary and fact sheet section (images and hyperlinked members' picture) whereas the detailed info section is mainly composed of the footer where interactivity is clearly reified through a list of procedural and content links<sup>15</sup>.

In terms of writing, narratives tend to promote the organisation and to make its profile appealing and credible by using different rhetorical strategies. For example, the taglines, when present, are coherent with the mission expressed via narratives and visuals in the summary sections. Other rhetorical discursive strategies are (Pollach 2005):

AGENTIC VALUE. A linguistic strategy for self-presentation and impression management is agent presentation. In our sample there are mainly two kinds of agency. One is related to the use of the first person pronoun to suggest that the companies are responsible for their assertions, actions, and beliefs but with different values:

e.g.

- 1) **We** [inclusive] believe everyone can be a Trailblazer, and **we**'re building the technology to make it happen (SALESFORCE INTERNET)
- 2) **We** [exclusive] create a Business Mobility solution tailor-made for your needs (ALPHABET)

<sup>14</sup> According to de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, p. 9), informativity indicates the extent to which content is known Vs unknown or expected Vs unexpected for the receiver. Of course, the processing of highly informative representations is more demanding in terms of inferences but correspondingly more attractive and interesting, whereas a low degree of informativity occurs when a self-evident truth is presented.

<sup>15</sup> In Usability studies, procedural links are those links that allow users to navigate within a site (e.g. buttons, menu links, navigation bar links), whereas content links are those links that lead users to extensive contents (e.g. blurb links).

The other kind of agency is related to the use of the third person, mainly the company name, in order to identify the company and provide more objectivity.

e.g.

- 3) **Tesla continues** to make products accessible and affordable to more and more people (TESLA)
- 4) **Netflix is** the world's leading internet entertainment service with 139 million paid memberships in over 190 countries enjoying TV series, documentaries and feature films across a wide variety of genres and languages (NETFLIX)

FACTUAL STATEMENTS. The use of verbs of continuity increases credibility in the messages to the extent to which action undertaken in the past will continue also in the future

e.g.

- 5) Oracle **is again revolutionizing** how data is managed (ORACLE)
- 6) Netflix **has been leading** the way for digital content since 1997 (NETFLIX)

NUMBERS AS EVIDENCE: companies provide numerical evidence to obtain consensus about their assertions

e.g.

- 7) At Amazon, we're able to innovate and delight customers thanks to our incredible workforce—the **more than 250,000** full-time associates behind our global network of fulfilment centres (AMAZON)
- 8) **For over 90 years**, The Walt Disney Studios has been the foundation on which The Walt Disney Company was built (WALT DISNEY)

The evidence provided by large numbers in these two pages goes in parallel with their length, the high number of moves and images. Large numbers seem to identify a large company, as Amazon and Walt Disney' websites show.

As for the Orientational metafunction, the sample shows how the companies present themselves in terms of relationships established with users. While 90% of the visuals are offering images with represented participants, only 10% are demanding images and are mainly used in the section where teams, management, partners, investors are presented as interactive participants with the aim to 'humanize the organisation', build up trust and create affiliation. CEOs, management teams and board members are identified with their names and curricula. In this regard, the company is no longer a faceless organization but a community of human beings which strive to appeal to users' emotions.

Another facet of this metafunction regards the expression of attitudes towards the participants in the discourse and their evaluations. They have been also classified as rhetorical discursive strategies (Pollach 2005):

SIZE AND SCOPE:

e.g.

- 9) **Oracle is the #1 provider** of business software, with a broad portfolio of solutions for companies of all sizes (ORACLE)



AGENTS OF CHANGE (companies showing themselves as agents of social and economic change):

e.g.

- 10) [...] **give people the power to build community and bringing the world closer** together (FACEBOOK)

LEADERSHIP (mainly expressed via adjectival scalability):

e.g.

- 11) **Netflix is the world's leading internet entertainment service** with 139 million paid memberships in over 190 countries enjoying TV series, documentaries and feature films across a wide variety of genres and languages (NETFLIX)

Relationships created via first person pronouns (we, us, our) typically suggest that the company communicates beliefs rather than facts, and this helps establish relationships with users. However, 70% of narratives of the sample uses the third person, in particular at the level of the fact sheet section where more objectivity is required in order to build up trust and reliability. In some cases, when the third person is mainly used, the presence of **we** or **our** also emerges (12). Only 30% of writings makes use of the imperative tense (I-you relation) and it is present mainly in the captions when soliciting interactivity (13).

e.g.

- 12) **Oracle** has embedded innovative technologies in every aspect of **our** cloud, enabling companies to re-imagine their businesses, processes, and experiences (ORACLE)
- 13) **Discover** how easy and magical it is to just about everything on iPad (APPLE)

## 5. Concluding remarks

Analysing websites and webpages is very complex due to the fluidity of their hypertextual and hypermedial nature. In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the semiotic complexity of meaning-making in a webpage and to identify the criticalities that can emerge during these processes, we have proposed a meta-framework which draws on different frameworks simultaneously. Web communication, in fact, is rooted both in studies such as discourse analysis, multimodal analysis and social semiotics but also in usability, interface design, web architecture, and web-technology. Our proposal combines then genre studies with multimodality and usability.

This meta-framework has allowed us to answer the two research questions posed at the beginning of this contribution. The first one asks if the 'About Us' pages can be considered the *loci* where corporate identity and reputation are constructed. What has been demonstrated is that the 'About Us' pages can potentially play this role, however our analysis indicates an

underestimation of this potentiality. Although the sample is very small, the companies included, however, represent the first top 10 companies people would like to work for. Thus, they are perceived as the most attractive in terms of image and reputation, but the way they convey their attractiveness via web communication on their ‘About Us’ pages is still confusing. These pages are not yet entirely standardised and recognisable.

Branding corporate identity and reputation relies on the co-deployment of different semiotic resources. At the representational and orientational levels the sample shows coherence, cohesion and corroboration among modes. Also the rhetorical discursive markers used to promote the company (promotional images, pictures and narratives) fulfil the communicative purpose of these webpages. However, some criticalities have been pointed out at the level of the organisational metafunction. In fact, a well-defined schematic structure in terms of information value has not been identified in our sample. Web designers seem to consider the Summary as the only mandatory, highly conventional, section to put on the starting page along with Contact info. Instead, the other sections are very fluid, in particular when hyperlinked contents are present, and do not seem to reflect conventional patterns which genres or micro-genres generally require. There are no fixed norms regarding what needs to be included in or excluded from the starting page. Furthermore, hyperlinked contents are not necessarily less important. In fact, many strategic and rhetorical moves are not present on the starting pages, but this should not imply a loss in salience if hyperlinking processes are effective and attract users’ attention. In some cases (Alphabet, Facebook, Tesla, Apple and Netflix) the migration of some moves to sub-pages causes a loss in salience since they seem to disappear and users are not engaged in clicking on those links, and this is also a damage for the companies in terms of identity and reputation.

The way a web designer transforms contents into sub-nodes is crucial from a semantic and rhetorical perspective. Interactivity, to be effective and successful, should be binding, i.e. by pushing users to click on the links, but at the same time guarantee user-friendliness and freedom in users’ navigation. This is why hyperlinks are not simple shortcuts but rhetorical “traversals” (Lemke 2002) apt to engage users in the navigation paths.

Our findings allow us to answer the second question, i.e. to what extent these webpages can be considered as genres, or micro-genres, and how we can define and classify them. If, on the one hand, the digital nature of a webpage impedes the identification of well-defined patterned structures (genres), on the other hand some conventions are emerging in order to make these artefacts recognisable models. We have suggested defining the ‘About Us’ page as a *genre hub* since it contains and connects different corporate genres. Within these pages we can find Annual reports, Financial news, Job applications, CVs and many other genres that have a common goal: presenting and promoting the

company identity and image. As stated above, the analysis has shown that only the Organisational profile move along with its sub-sections, such as a company's history, products/services, and mission, are always present on the starting page. The other moves vary randomly and this is why fixing the 'About Us' page within conventional criteria, i.e. classifying it as a genre or a micro-genre, is still problematic.

Apart from the presence or absence of conventions and users and web-designers' awareness of these conventions, there are two other facets to consider. As van Leeuwen (2005, p. 128) claims, genres are "culturally and historically specific forms of communication [that] realize culturally and historically specific power relations between the communicating parties". If we analyse the issue from the company's viewpoint we may ask ourselves why the Company wants to include or exclude some contents from the starting landing page. "Ideological mechanisms" (Breeze 2013) rooted in socio-economic and political interests represent the driving force to push corporations to act as they actually do.

At the same time, we could also analyse this issue from the point of view of technology. Today, many digital artefacts like websites are content management systems, that is to say pre-packaged templates to be filled in with contents. Their pre-defined architecture thus affects and to some extent constrains how meaning is made and shaped. In both cases, there is a crucial ideological issue that arises and for these reasons we should adopt a critical approach for future research.

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## Appendix

Company		Resources			Tagline section	Summary section	Fact Sheet section					Detailed information section				
		Nb. of screenshots	Nb. of text frames	Nb. of image frames	Tagline	Organisational profile	Customer & Partners	Investor Relations	Disclaimer & Legal Info	Public Relations	Employment Opportunities	Community Relations	Contact info	Site Credits	FAQs	Nb. of Moves
1	Amazon Internet	18	34 <sup>a</sup>	29		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Social media		√	9
2	Alphabet IT & Services	8	6	6		√H			√H	√H	√H		Social media			5
3	Facebook	3	3	1	yes	√		√H		√H			Social media			4
4	Salesforce Internet	8	9	19		√	√	√H	√	√	√	√	Social media	√H	√	10
5	Tesla auto motive	3	Only text		yes	√		√H	√	√H	√H		Social media			6
6	Apple consumer electronics	7	10 <sup>b</sup>	9		√H		√H		√H	√H	√H	√H			6
7	Comcast NBC Universal Media production	6	1	24		√		√H	√	√H	√H		√			6
8	The Walt Disney Company entertainment	34	20	98		√	√	√H	√	√H	√H	√	Social media	√		9
9	Oracle IT & Services	6	1	18		√	√H	√H	√H	√H	√H	√H	Social media	√H		9
10	Netflix Entertainment	3	4 <sup>c</sup>	1	yes	√		√H	√H	√H			Social media			5

a) 20 are captions or content link labels; b) They are captions only; c) 2 are captions

Table 4  
A synoptic view.