



Visual and Contextual Cues for Distinguishing Skits from Real-Life Videos on Digital Media: Analysis of Select Mark Angel Comedy Skits and Channels TV Eye Witness Reports

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ABSTRACT

Background: Monetisation of video viewership on digital platforms such as Facebook, Tik-Tok and You-Tube has increased the number of content creators on the digital space. This comes in addition to the traditional motive of persuasive communication. This development comes with the challenge of identifying and differentiating scripted contents from real-life contents in online videos as sometimes, scripted contents have been misunderstood as real-life situations and vice versa, forcing media consumers to take opposite and inappropriate decisions.

Objective: This study investigated the visual and contextual cues that differentiate skits from real contents in online videos to properly equip both content creators and consumers with cues to look out for.

Method: This research involved a content analysis of six digital videos from popular skit makers—Mark Angel Comedy, and authentic real-life content from outlets— Channels TV's "Eye Witness Report." Three videos were selected from each category. The analysis focused on the differences in the visual and contextual cues that signal the scripted or authentic nature of the content, including elements like visual aesthetics, sound design, and audience engagement.

Result: Findings reveal that visual elements create a distinct stylistic difference between skits and real content, and contextual cues significantly influence audience perceptions of authenticity and relatability.

Conclusion: The multimodal cues such as visual, auditory, textual, gestural, contextual, and editing elements are critical in helping audiences differentiate between scripted and real-life content. Polished visual aesthetics, controlled environments, choreographed movements, and carefully designed audio in skits contrast with the raw, unedited, and unpredictable nature of real-life videos.

Unique Contributions: This research enhances the understanding of how multimedia communication operates in the digital landscape, offering insights for media consumers, content creators and marketers aiming to effectively decode or convey intended messages.

Key recommendations: Digital contents consumers should look out for these cues for their safety while enjoy contents on the digital space as there is a relationship between those cues and the meaning in the contents as deeply emphasised by the social semiotics theory.

Key words: Skits, real-time videos, visual cues, contextual cues, digital media



INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube has significantly transformed the media landscape, democratizing content creation and allowing individuals to easily produce and share videos globally. Scripted skits, designed to entertain or inform through humour and dramatization are often misunderstood as genuine events. Conversely, real content, such as eyewitness reports and authentic user-generated content, is sometimes dismissed as scripted or exaggerated. This overlap presents a significant challenge in distinguishing between fabricated and authentic representations, especially in the era of viral misinformation and the proliferation of deepfakes (Buckingham, 2015; Baym, 2010; Okoro, Nwafor, & Odoemelam, 2014). As a result, media consumers are faced with the task of discerning authenticity in online videos, which has direct implications for their decision-making and perceptions of reality. The misinterpretation of scripted content as real-life events, or vice versa, has increasingly led to public confusion and, in some cases, inappropriate or even harmful actions, (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Despite the significance of this issue, little research has systematically examined the visual and contextual cues that signal whether content is scripted or real. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for a structured analytical approach to better understand how audiences differentiate between skits and real content in the digital media space.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore the visual and contextual cues that help distinguish scripted skits from real-life content in online videos such as identifying the key visual elements (e.g., camera angles, colour schemes, sound design, setting, participant behaviour, audience engagement) that differentiate skits from real content. It aims to find out how visual and contextual cues interact to influence the viewer's ability to distinguish between scripted and real content

Research Methodology

The research involved a content analysis of six online videos, three of them selected from popular skit makers—Mark Angel Comedy and the other three from authentic real-life content from outlets—Channels TV's "Eye Witness Report." The thematic analysis focused on the visual and contextual cues that signal the scripted or authentic nature of the content, including elements like visual aesthetics, sound design, and audience engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Social Semiotics Theory, as articulated by Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988). This theory provides a framework for analysing how signs and symbols (such as visual and contextual cues) are used in social communication to convey meaning. Social semiotics emphasizes that meaning-making is a social process shaped by cultural contexts and interactions between content producers and consumers. In this study, Social Semiotics allows for an analysis of how skits and real content use visual and contextual signs to signal their authenticity to viewers. Multimodality, a key concept in social semiotics, enables the exploration of how different modes (e.g., visual, auditory, gestural) interact to create a coherent message that either signals a scripted or real-life narrative.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Scripted Content vs. Real-Life Content

The proliferation of digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook has democratized content creation, leading to a surge in both scripted and real-life content. As online videos have become a dominant form of communication, entertainment, and information dissemination, the lines between scripted and real-life content have increasingly blurred (Baym, 2010). Baym's position echoes what Gaines (2018) notes that understanding how audiences differentiate between these two types of content is crucial in today's media environment, where misinformation, deepfakes, and viral content contribute to public confusion. These positions are agreeable and forms the basis for this review which examines the characteristics and implications of both scripted and real-life content, focusing on their visual, contextual, and multimodal elements.

1. Definition and Characteristics of Scripted Content

Scripted content refers to videos that are pre-planned, rehearsed, and produced for entertainment, education, or informational purposes (Riedl, 2021). Examples of such content include comedy skits, fictional narratives, or instructional videos, where actors perform based on a script. Scripted content often adheres to specific storytelling conventions that guide its structure and delivery (Hagedorn, 2016). Key elements include narrative development, character roles, and audiovisual effects that enhance the intended message or entertainment value (Anderson & Curtin, 2020).

However, scripted content can sometimes blur the line with reality, especially when it mimics real-life events or societal issues. Studies have shown that audiences often confuse fictional skits with real content due to the high degree of realism achieved in production (Livingstone, 2018). This is particularly problematic when content creators intentionally blend humour or satire with current social or political issues, as it becomes difficult for less media-literate viewers to discern the fictional nature of the content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

2. Definition and Characteristics of Real-Life Content

Real-life content refers to unscripted, spontaneous footage that captures actual events as they occur. This can range from news reports and eyewitness videos to live streams of personal experiences or public events (Thorson & Wells, 2015). This is a contrast to what has been described by Livingstone (2018) and Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) as relatable to skits. With the widespread use of smartphones and affordable recording equipment, real-life content has become an essential component of contemporary digital media. Platforms like Facebook's "Live" feature or YouTube's "Eyewitness" content offer users a means of sharing immediate, authentic experiences with a global audience, says Scolari (2018). As scripted videos aim to imitate reality, creators often employ visual and contextual cues that make the content appear authentic. For instance, skits that mimic emergency situations, protests, or public scandals are often mistaken for real events, especially when the production quality is high (Jenkins et al., 2016). These "pseudo-events," as described by Boorstin (1961), are designed to appear real but are fully constructed for the purpose of entertainment or manipulation.



3. Visual and Contextual Cues: Differentiating Between Scripted and Real-Life Content

The ability of audiences to differentiate between scripted and real-life content largely depends on their ability to interpret visual and contextual cues (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Visual elements such as camera angles, lighting, and sound design play a key role in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Scripted content tends to have more polished, cinematic visuals, while real-life content often appears rawer and more unfiltered (Lindgren, 2021).

Contextual cues, such as the behaviour of participants, the setting, and audience reactions, also inform how viewers interpret the authenticity of the content (Kellner & Share, 2019). In scripted content, actors may exhibit exaggerated behaviours or expressions, whereas in real-life footage, participants' reactions are more spontaneous and unpredictable. Furthermore, real-life content often includes elements of unpredictability that are difficult to simulate in scripted videos, such as unplanned interruptions or unexpected outcomes (Burgess & Green, 2018).

4. Media Literacy and Audience Perception

The concept of media literacy is central to the discussion of scripted versus real-life content. Media literacy refers to the skills required to critically analyse, evaluate, and interpret media messages (Livingstone, 2018). As scripted content increasingly resembles real-life events, media consumers must rely on their ability to recognize the cues that signal authenticity or fabrication.

Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of media literacy are better equipped to navigate the complexities of digital media and distinguish between real and fictional content (Jenkins et al., 2016). However, the general public often struggles with these distinctions, leading to widespread confusion and misinformation (Tandoc et al., 2020). Efforts to improve media literacy, especially regarding visual and contextual cues in digital videos, are crucial in empowering audiences to make informed judgments about the content they consume (Kellner & Share, 2019).

5. Implications of Blurring Skits and Real contents boundaries for Digital Media Consumption

The blurred boundaries between scripted and real-life content have significant implications for how audiences consume and interpret digital media. In an era where misinformation and disinformation are rampant, the ability to discern authenticity is more important than ever (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Content creators, platforms, and educators must all play a role in promoting media literacy and providing audiences with the tools needed to navigate the increasingly complex digital landscape.

Multi-modal Modes that Create Meaning in Videos

Below are some examples of key multimodal elements that can play a role in differentiating scripted skits from real-life content:

1. Visual Cues. The following are visual cues recommended, according to Burgess & Green (2018) as well as Kellner & Share (2019):



Camera Angles and Shots: Scripted content often utilises planned, polished camera angles, such as close-ups, wide shots, or aerial shots, which can indicate professionalism. In contrast, real-life content (e.g., eyewitness footage) may involve shaky, unsteady handheld camera movements, indicating spontaneity. Speaking to this, Burgess & Green (2018) agrees that the exhibition of steady camera work, which is carefully framed, often signifies scripted content, while real footage typically carries the hallmark of unpredictability—shaky camera work, sudden zooms, or chaotic framing.

Lighting: Skits often use artificial, controlled lighting to enhance mood or highlight certain characters, whereas real-life content may have inconsistent lighting due to natural environmental factors. (Gaines, 2018). Example: Bright, even lighting in a comedy skit vs. dim, natural light in an impromptu public protest video.

Colour Grading: Scripted content is often colour corrected or graded to create a specific tone, such as warm tones for comedy or cooler tones for drama. Real-life footage usually has raw, unprocessed colours, (Kellner & Share, 2019). Example: A skit with a warm colour palette vs. a spontaneous street video with natural, unfiltered colours.

2. Auditory Cues such as sound design and dialogue are equally necessary for understanding the nature of a content:

In sound design, Nightingale (2020) explains that scripted content frequently includes background music, sound effects, or dubbed dialogue, all of which are carefully edited in post-production. Real-life content often has inconsistent or ambient noise that signals authenticity. He contends that scripted content’s dialogue features rehearsed dialogue with clear enunciation and timing. In real-life content, conversations tend to be more natural, with interruptions, overlaps, or slang. (Baym, 2010).

3. Textual Cues include On-Screen Text. Scolari (2018) argues that scripted videos often include pre-planned subtitles, captions, or title cards that help guide the narrative. Real-life content may have minimal or user-generated captions, or none at all. Also, Scolari (2018) notes that a skit using animated text to introduce characters vs. a livestream video where the audience provides commentary in real-time chat.

Hashtags and User Annotations: Scripted content tends to have pre-planned hashtags for promotion, while real-life content might include spontaneous or trending hashtags created in response to an event, according to Cunningham & Craig, 2019)

4. Gestural Cues: Acting vs. Genuine Reactions: In scripted content, actors often display exaggerated facial expressions or body language to emphasize emotions. In real-life footage, reactions are more subtle and genuine. Jenkins (2016) gave an example as a skit with exaggerated comedic gestures vs. a real person caught on video reacting genuinely to a surprising or stressful event.

Body Movement and Blocking: Scripted skits feature choreographed movements where actors know exactly where to stand. Real-life content shows unplanned movements, often with



participants adjusting naturally to their surroundings, according to Hagedorn (2016). Example: Actors smoothly interacting on a set vs. real people moving unpredictably in a crowd.

5. Contextual Cues has to do with issues such as setting and audience engagement.

Setting: Scripted content is often filmed in controlled environments, such as studios or carefully chosen outdoor locations, while real-life content is captured in less predictable settings. Wardle & Derakhshan, (2017), say a skit shot on a constructed set vs. real-life footage of a protest taken in a public square are good examples.

Audience Engagement: Scripted content may include simulated audience reactions (e.g., laugh tracks), whereas real-life videos feature genuine audience engagement, such as spontaneous applause, comments, or interruptions. Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, (2014) note that the difference between staged and authentic audience reactions often serves as a key indicator of whether the content is real or scripted.

6. Editing and Pacing: Lindgren (2021) notes that Post-Production Editing of a scripted content typically involves heavy editing, with quick cuts, smooth transitions, and added effects. Real-life content often features raw, unedited footage.

Narrative Structure: Scripted content follows a predetermined narrative arc, whereas real-life content lacks this structured storytelling and may feel unresolved, according to Thorson & Wells, 2015. This can be seen in a skit with a comedic setup and punchline vs. raw footage of a protest with no clear resolution.

3. Mark Angel Comedy Skits Vs Channels Eye Witness Reports

Mark Angel Comedy Skits is a popular Nigerian comedy web series created by comedian Mark Angel. The series, which debuted on YouTube in 2013, is known for its humorous sketches that often highlight everyday life scenarios in Nigeria. The series typically consists of short skits, usually ranging from 5 to 10 minutes. The cast primarily includes Mark Angel, as well as a group of talented actors such as Emmanuella Samuel, who gained fame for her child star role, and other recurring characters.

Three MACS for this study are:

MACS Episode 100 (Pot of Soup), February 10, 2017

Narration: Many tenants live in small ‘face-me-i-face-you’ apartment. One of the tenants, is making soup in an open kitchen. She enters inside her room to bring something, by the time she returns, someone has stolen the pot of soup. She starts shouting alerting her neighbours. Everyone denies stealing the soup. One of the neighbours returns holding a wrap of swallow. Another tenant interrogates him, asking why he is buying a wrap of swallow without bringing soup to eat it with. The manner everyone reacted to this scene evokes deafening laughter.



MACS Episode 96 (Who Drove Who), June 12, 2021

Mark Angel and Emmanuella travel to Oyibo country. They book a taxi to take them to a destination they are not familiar with. In a short while, the taxi man has reached the destination, and demands for his fare, which he says is 150USD. Mark Angel and Emmanuella thought that the fare was cheap until they converted the fare to Nigerian currency. That was the time they discovered that they have used 72,000 Naira to take a short ride. Mark Angel's reaction upon this realisation is a source of an intense laughter.

MACS Tax Force (Episode 96), December 12, 2016

Mark Angel is a tax collector. He goes to a slum for a revenue drive. He demonstrates confidence ordering the people he meets to pay their taxes. He continues with this until a hefty giant man, a brutal looking young man emerges from one of the rooms. Immediately, Mark Angel starts leading his team in choruses, implying that they just come to a church service and not for tax collection. The way Mark Angel reacted when he saw the able-bodied man evokes intense laughter.

Analysis of the skits:

Visual Cues

Setting: The "face-me-I-face-you" apartment setting is a common visual representation of communal living in Nigeria, instantly recognizable to the audience. The cramped, informal environment establishes a relatable context for the skit, setting the stage for the unfolding drama. This is also true of Tax Force and the taxi driver episodes.

Character Expressions and Gestures: The exaggerated facial and vocal expressions of the tenants, Mark Angel and others emphasize their comedic reactions to the situation. For example, wide eyes, frantic gestures, and over-the-top body language contribute to the humour and dramatization of the event, indicating that these responses are crafted for comedic effect rather than spontaneous reactions.

Costumes and Props: The characters are typically dressed in casual, everyday clothing that reflects their roles as average tenants. In the Pot of Soup, the **pot of soup** serves as a critical prop, representing not just food but a source of tension and conflict in the skit. The wrap of **swallow** (a type of Nigerian dough) also acts as a prop to heighten the humour, as it's not complete without soup, reinforcing the absurdity of the situation.

Camera Angles and Shots: Close-up shots capture the characters' reactions, allowing viewers to engage with their emotional states and enhancing the comedic impact. The use of wide shots may depict the communal living environment and the interactions among the tenants, highlighting their denials and reactions, which further emphasizes the scripted nature of their responses.

Editing Techniques: Quick cuts between characters' reactions maintain a fast-paced comedic rhythm, a hallmark of scripted content. This editing style adds to the humour, making the interactions feel more exaggerated and staged rather than natural.



Contextual Cues

Cultural References: The premise of cooking soup in a shared environment speaks to cultural practices within Nigerian households, where communal living is common. This setting allows for relatable humour that resonates with the audience, as many can identify with similar scenarios in their own lives.

Dialogue and Interaction: The scripted nature of the skit is evident in the dialogue, which is likely pre-written to enhance comedic timing. The banter among the tenants and their humorous accusations showcases a scripted camaraderie that might not occur in real-life spontaneous interactions. The question about why a tenant would buy a wrap of swallow without soup is a scripted comedic device that highlights the absurdity of the situation and contributes to the overall humour of the skit.

Dramatic Irony: The audience is aware that the soup has been stolen while the characters deny involvement. This creates a sense of dramatic irony, a common element in scripted comedy, as viewers anticipate the eventual reveal or confrontation that will occur.

Conflict Resolution: The skit's structure, which follows a clear narrative arc of conflict (the stolen soup) and rising action (the tenants' denials), indicates a deliberate storytelling approach typical of scripted content. The comedic resolution is likely planned to elicit laughter, further indicating its scripted nature.

Channels Eye Witness Reports

Channels TV is a prominent Nigerian general interest television station known for its comprehensive news coverage, informative programming, and commitment to journalistic integrity. The station was established in 1999 and has gained a reputation for providing reliable news and information on various topics, including politics, business, entertainment, and social issues.

Eye Witness Report

"Eye Witness Report" is one of the flagship programs of Channels TV, focusing on real-life events, eyewitness accounts, and current affairs. Here are some key features of the program. The format typically features reports and interviews with individuals who have firsthand experience of significant events, ranging from accidents and emergencies to social issues and public gatherings. It often includes live coverage, pre-recorded segments, and on-the-ground reporting, providing viewers with an immersive understanding of the events being discussed.

Content: The program covers a wide range of topics, including human interest stories, community issues, and breaking news, aiming to provide a platform for ordinary citizens to share their experiences and perspectives. It emphasizes the importance of firsthand accounts, giving a voice to those directly impacted by events, and fostering community engagement.



Eyewitness Reports

1: 30 Seconds Agidingbi Robbery Caught On Camera, (February 9, 2017)

A 30 second blurry video footage shows cars packed in a location that looks like a bank. Cars coming in and going out. An SUV drives into the compound, and all of a sudden, armed men jump out of the vehicle and invade the bank. The shaky video does not give full picture of the environment.

2. Demolitions In Ipaja & Ijeododo Communities (April 3, 2024)

A short video unclear video shows the rubble of a demolished building. An elderly woman is in tears, unable to express herself as she tells the story of how the house built by his baba was demolished. She calls on the Government, mentioning specific names to come to their rescue because the demolition does not follow due government process.

3. Enugu Govt Demolishes Illegal Structures (January 20, 2024)

A short video taken by an amateur shows the moment some shanties are being demolished. There is commotion as market women are crying and wailing as the caterpillar melts the buildings tearing through the roofs and fences.

Analysis of the Eye Witness Reports

The three stories share several common visual and contextual cues that confirm their authenticity as real-life content. These common elements reflect the spontaneous, unplanned nature of the events and the emotional responses of the people involved. Here's a breakdown of the shared cues:

Common Visual Cues

Poor Video Quality: All three stories feature blurry, shaky, or unclear footage, indicative of amateur recordings typically captured on smartphones during real-life events. This suggests that the videos were recorded in the moment, without preparation or professional equipment.

Unstable Camera Work: The camera work in each case is shaky, implying that the person recording was likely in a rush or caught off-guard, which is common in real-life scenarios where events unfold unexpectedly.

Lack of Professional Lighting or Framing: There is no attention to cinematographic techniques like lighting or framing, which are often found in scripted content. The raw, unfiltered nature of the footage adds to its authenticity.

Spontaneous Actions and Movements: The videos capture chaotic movements, such as people running or reacting emotionally in the heat of the moment. In the bank invasion, tenants in the demolition scenes, and market women during the government action, their actions appear natural and unchoreographed.

Common Contextual Cues in the three reports are:

Immediate and Unplanned Reactions: The emotional responses of the people involved are genuine and spontaneous, such as the elderly woman's tears during the demolition or the market



women's cries during the shanty demolitions. These unfiltered emotional outbursts are not staged but reflect real distress.

Real-Life Situations: All three stories involve factual events: a bank invasion, illegal demolitions, and government action against shanties. These are not fabricated or comedic scenarios but serious, often tragic, events that impact the lives of individuals and communities.

Absence of Scripted Dialogue: The stories feature minimal or no structured dialogue, especially in the case of the elderly woman's pleas and the market women's cries. Any speech comes across as unrehearsed and reflects the individuals' personal reactions to the event.

Community and Public Spaces: Each story occurs in a public or communal setting: a bank, residential communities (Ipaja & Ijeododo), and a marketplace. These spaces are filled with everyday activities and people reacting to disruptions, a common theme in real-life news coverage or eyewitness reports.

Emotional Distress: In all three cases, there are heightened emotional reactions—panic during the bank invasion, sorrow from the elderly woman, and outrage from the market women. This emotional intensity is typical of real-life footage where individuals are personally affected by the events happening around them.

The shared cues in these stories—such as poor video quality, chaotic camera work, unplanned emotional reactions, and public settings—are all hallmarks of real-life content. These elements collectively contribute to the authenticity of the narratives, as they reflect the unstructured, spontaneous, and emotionally charged nature of actual events caught on camera.

Research Findings: Result: Skit makers try to blur the lines between their staged performances and real-time videos. This is done to attract viewership and believability. However, visual and contextual elements create a distinct stylistic difference between skits and real-life contents, and significantly influence audience perceptions of authenticity and relatability.

DISCUSSION

The settings, camera angles, conversations and even the characters featured in skits like the Mark Angel comedies show significant contrasting characteristics when compared with videos from Channel TV's Eye witness report. However, undiscerning media consumers pay less attention to these contrasting features hitherto exposed in this study. In the videos analysed in this study, the use of visual exaggeration, colour schemes, and comedic timing in skits, contrasted with the raw, unfiltered presentation and naturalistic visuals found in real-life contents.

Summary and Conclusion: Visual, auditory, textual, gestural, contextual, and editing elements are critical in helping audiences differentiate between scripted and real-life content. Polished visual aesthetics, controlled environments, choreographed movements, and carefully designed audio in skits contrast with the raw, unedited, and unpredictable nature of real-life videos. Some media audiences, out of naivety or related circumstances overlook these contrasting characteristics, hence the confusion.



Recommendations: Digital contents consumers should look out for visual, auditory, textual, gestural, contextual, and editing elements while they are exposed to contents on the digital space as there is a relationship between those cues and the meaning in the contents as deeply emphasised by the social semiotics theory. This becomes more important as digital media evolves and deepfakes or advanced post-production techniques become more common, and as the boundaries between real and fabricated content gets more blurred, making it more challenging for viewers to discern authenticity.

Limitation of Study

While the study offers an in-depth analysis of the visual and contextual cues in skits and real content, it is limited to a specific subset of digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook). The study also focuses on a relatively small number of case studies, which may not fully capture the diversity of online video content across all digital platforms. Moreover, the subjective nature of audience perception may vary across cultural and social contexts, which the study may not fully address. However, these limitations have been addressed by thorough and objective analysis.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Kelechukwu Okoronkwo conceived and conducted the study including the design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. He also wrote the initial manuscript, and reviewed and approved the final draft. He is solely responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.



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