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A Psychological Perspective of Stand-up Comedians in the Construction of Political Humor

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the construction of political humor in stand-up comedy from the psychological perspective of comedians. This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach involving three comedians as participants selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that political humor is constructed through the transformation of personal and social concerns into material that can be accepted by the audience. This process involves consideration of the audience, risk perception, and social norms, and is influenced by social factors such as community support and audience responses. These findings indicate that political humor is a form of benign violation constructed through the interaction between individual and social factors and contributes to expanding the study of humor psychology by highlighting humor as a construction process from the creator's perspective.

Keyword: Political Humor, Stand-Up Comedy, Benign Violation Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a universal human activity that appears in various forms of social interaction. From a psychological perspective, humor is not only understood as a form of entertainment, but also has important cognitive, emotional, and social functions in individual life (Martin, 2007). This indicates that humor is not merely a spontaneous response to a stimulus, but rather the result of an individual's evaluative process toward a situation. Therefore, what is considered funny is not only determined by the stimulus itself, but also by how individuals interpret the experience.

In addition, humor is also related to psychological well-being. Studies show that certain types of humor, such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor, are associated with increased psychological well-being (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, 2003). However, not all forms of humor are adaptive, because aggressive humor may be associated with less healthy psychological conditions (Leist & Müller, 2012). This indicates that humor has

diverse dimensions, making it important to understand how humor is used and interpreted in various contexts.

At the social level, humor functions as a medium of communication that enables individuals to convey experiences, criticism, and social realities in a more flexible manner. One growing form of humorous expression is stand-up comedy, which allows comedians to represent social realities through a personal point of view (Mintz, 1985). In this context, humor does not only function as entertainment, but also as a way to reframe social reality so that it can be understood differently by the audience.

Furthermore, humor also functions as a means of criticizing social and political conditions. Humor is often used as a relatively safe way to express criticism of power without being directly confrontational. Research shows that humor can function as a form of resistance against dominant social and political structures (Donian & Hurst, 2025). Thus, political humor does not only serve as entertainment, but also as a tool for reflecting on power dynamics.

The development of modern media has further expanded the role of humor in the political sphere. Political humor has now become part of public communication that can influence how individuals understand political issues. Exposure to political humor is known to affect individuals' evaluations of political actors and increase cynical attitudes toward political institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). In addition, messages delivered through humor tend to be processed with a lower level of critical evaluation (Young, 2008). This indicates that political humor is not only entertaining, but also has the potential to indirectly shape social perceptions.

The phenomenon of political humor can also be observed in modern stand-up comedy practices, which often address social and political issues through a reflective and personal approach. In practice, comedians do not only deliver humor, but also frame issues based on their subjective perspectives. This shows that the construction of political humor involves a process of interpreting social reality as well as strategies for delivering material so that it remains acceptable to the audience.

To understand this process, the Benign Violation Theory (BVT) proposed by McGraw and Warren (2010) serves as a relevant theoretical framework. This theory explains that humor emerges when a situation contains a violation of norms, yet is still perceived as non-threatening. In the context of political humor, comedians need to manage the balance between elements of violation and acceptability so that humor can be received by the audience.

In line with this, research on political humor in the context of digital media is still dominated by a focus on audiences, particularly in understanding how humor is processed and how it influences political attitudes (Widyaningsih et al., 2025; Juliantari et al., 2025). In this context, humor is more often positioned as a stimulus received by audiences, rather than as a process constructed by its creators.

Based on this, there is a gap in the study of humor psychology, particularly regarding the process of humor construction from the perspective of comedians as creators. Therefore, this study aims to explore how comedians construct political humor from a psychological perspective. This study is expected to contribute to expanding the study of humor psychology by highlighting humor as an active construction process that involves interaction between individual and social factors.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of constructing political humor from the perspective of

comedians. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on exploring subjective experiences and individual interpretations of the phenomenon being studied.

The participants in this study consisted of three comedians who were active in stand-up comedy and had experience performing material related to social and political issues. Participant selection was carried out using purposive sampling by considering the relevance of the participants' experiences to the research objectives.

The first participant (BS) was a 36-year-old male comedian living in Jakarta, with an undergraduate educational background, and had been pursuing a career as a comedian since 2013. The second participant (AS) was a 37-year-old male comedian living in Bekasi, with a senior high school educational background, and had been pursuing a career as a comedian since 2011. The third participant (FI) was a 28-year-old female comedian living in Jakarta, with an undergraduate educational background, and had been pursuing a career as a comedian since 2019. All three participants were nationally known comedians and actively performed material related to social and political issues.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for the researchers to explore in-depth information regarding the creative process, considerations, and strategies used by comedians in constructing political humor. The interviews were conducted both offline and online, then recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis by referring to Braun and Clarke (2006), namely through the process of identifying, grouping, and interpreting patterns or themes that emerged from the data. The analysis process was carried out inductively based on the data obtained in the field (Creswell, 2014). The stages of analysis included transcription, repeated reading, data coding, grouping into themes, and interpreting the meaning of the themes found.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing information from several participants to identify consistency in the findings. In addition, the researchers also conducted member checks to ensure that the interpretation of the data was consistent with the experiences conveyed by the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that the construction of political humor carried out by comedians is not a spontaneous process, but rather involves subjective experiences, consideration of the audience, and awareness of social risks. Based on thematic analysis, several main themes were found that describe this process.

The Construction of Political Humor Based on Concerns

The findings show that political humor is rooted in subjective experiences in the form of personal and social concerns. These concerns become the main source in the formation of stand-up comedy material, which is then processed into humorous narratives.

One participant stated that humor material originates from personal experience: "stand-up material must indeed begin with personal concerns" (BS36). This shows that comedians do not merely convey social reality, but first interpret that experience before transforming it into humor.

Adaptation of Political Humor to the Audience

The findings show that comedians make adjustments to the audience when delivering political humor. This adaptation is carried out by considering the characteristics of the audience, the performance situation, and sensitivity toward the issue being presented.

One participant stated, “when we perform material, we have to look at the audience first; not all material can be treated the same way” (AS37). This finding shows that political humor is not static, but is arranged flexibly so that it can still be accepted by the audience.

Risk Perception and Boundaries in Political Humor

The findings show that comedians have awareness of the risks involved in delivering political humor, such as the potential for negative responses or social consequences. Therefore, comedians consider certain boundaries in delivering their material.

One participant stated that there is concern when presenting political issues, but they can still be delivered humorously: “with politics, there is definitely a sense of fear or worry, but it can still be made funny if the delivery is appropriate” (AS37). This indicates that comedians try to maintain a balance between delivering criticism and being accepted by the audience.

Strategies and Processes in Delivering Political Humor

The findings show that comedians use certain strategies in delivering political humor, such as indirect approaches and personal experiences to reduce audience resistance.

One participant stated that personal experience is used as a way to deliver material more lightly: “usually it is brought first into personal experience so that it feels lighter” (AS37). This finding shows that delivery strategy plays an important role in determining the success of political humor.

The Role of Social Factors in the Acceptability of Political Humor

In addition to individual factors, the findings also show that social factors play a role in the process of constructing political humor. Support from the community and audience responses become factors that influence comedians’ confidence in delivering their material.

One participant stated that the existence of a community provides support in the creative process: “having a community is important, so we can support each other” (BS36). This indicates that political humor is not only constructed individually, but is also influenced by social interaction within the comedians’ environment.

The findings show that political humor constructed by comedians is not spontaneous, but rather the result of a psychological process that begins with subjective experiences in the form of personal and social concerns. These concerns are processed through interpretation before being transformed into humorous material. This shows that humor does not only function as entertainment, but also as a form of individual psychological expression. In line with this, Martin (2007) states that humor involves cognitive, emotional, and social aspects in shaping responses to an experience. Thus, political humor can be understood as an individual’s way of reconstructing subjective experience into a lighter and more acceptable form of communication.

In addition, the findings show that comedians actively adapt to the audience when delivering political humor. This adjustment is made by considering the characteristics of the audience, the performance situation, and sensitivity toward the issue being presented. This indicates that humor is not universal, but contextual and dependent on the social interaction that occurs. Meyer (2000) explains that humor is a social phenomenon whose success is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the audience. Therefore, the acceptability of political humor is not only determined by the content of the material, but also by how the material is delivered within a particular social context.

Furthermore, the findings show that comedians have awareness of the risks involved in delivering political humor, such as potential negative responses or social consequences. However, these risks are not completely avoided, but are managed through certain strategies

so that the humor can still be accepted by the audience. In this context, Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) becomes a relevant framework for explaining this phenomenon. This theory states that humor emerges when a violation of norms remains within non-threatening boundaries. These findings show that comedians actively manage the balance between elements of violation and acceptability, so that political humor can be received without generating excessive resistance.

In addition, the use of strategies such as indirect approaches and personal experiences shows that comedians do not only convey messages explicitly, but also manage the way they deliver them to reduce audience resistance. This strategy indicates that political humor is a complex form of communication, in which messages are conveyed implicitly so that they are easier to accept. Thus, humor does not only function as individual expression, but also as a tool of social communication that involves consideration of audience responses.

In addition to individual factors, the findings also show that social factors, particularly social support from the community, have an important role in the process of constructing political humor. Social support provides space for comedians to develop material and increase their confidence in delivering humor, including humor related to sensitive issues such as politics. In a psychological context, social support plays a role in helping individuals cope with pressure and improve their ability to adapt to the social environment (Ammam & Sovitriana, 2025).

Furthermore, in the context of humor, social factors such as the audience and environment also influence how humor is produced and received. Meyer (2000) states that humor is a social phenomenon whose success is strongly influenced by the interaction between the speaker and the audience. Thus, the acceptability of political humor is not only determined by the content of the material, but also by social support and the surrounding context of interaction. This shows that political humor is the result of interaction between individual and social factors in its construction process.

Overall, this study shows that political humor is an active psychological construction process that involves transforming subjective experience into a form of benign violation through strategic consideration of the audience and social factors. These findings expand the study of humor psychology by emphasizing that humor is not only understood as a response to a stimulus, but as a process constructed by individuals within a particular social context.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study shows that political humor in stand-up comedy is the result of a psychological construction process that is not spontaneous, but begins with subjective experiences in the form of personal and social concerns. These concerns are processed through interpretation and transformed into humorous material that can be accepted by the audience.

In addition, the construction of political humor involves strategic consideration of the audience, risk perception, and prevailing social norms. Comedians actively manage the balance between elements of violation and acceptability, so that humor remains within non-threatening boundaries. In this regard, political humor can be understood as a form of benign violation constructed through the interaction between individual and social factors.

Furthermore, the acceptability of political humor is not only determined by the content of the material, but also by social factors such as community support and audience responses. This shows that political humor is contextual and depends on the dynamics of social interaction. Thus, this study contributes to expanding the study of humor psychology by highlighting humor as an active construction process from the creator's perspective, rather than merely as a response from the audience.

Suggestion

Based on the findings, future studies are recommended to involve more diverse participants in order to enrich perspectives on the construction of political humor. In addition, future research may directly examine audience responses to political humor, as well as develop quantitative or experimental approaches to strengthen the findings. The use of other theoretical frameworks beyond Benign Violation Theory, such as communication theory or the sociology of humor, may also serve as an alternative to broaden the study.

Practically, comedians are expected to pay greater attention to audience sensitivity and social context when delivering political humor. Social support from the community can also be utilized as a source of confidence in the creative process. In addition, stand-up comedy communities are expected to create a supportive environment, while audiences are expected to be more open in understanding political humor as a form of social criticism.

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