

## The Uses of Humor in Stand-up Comedy *Mens Rea* by Pandji Pragiwaksono as a Mechanism of Social Control

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### ABSTRACT

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Humor is an effective tool for delivering messages and building relatable communication in today's fast-paced world. This **research** aims to analyze the political communication messages in Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up comedy *Mens Rea*, which aired on Netflix, based on a paid show in August 2025 in Jakarta. The analysis is conducted by examining how Pandji uses humor to convey criticism of government policies, which have received varying responses from the public through social media. This study uses a qualitative approach, applying Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, which examines the text at the macrostructure (thematic), superstructure (schematic), and microstructure (semantic, syntactic, and stylistic) levels. To deepen the analysis of the function of humor, this study applies Henri Bergson's Theory of Humor, specifically the concept of mechanical inelasticity. Within this framework, the government is represented as a rigid and slow-moving entity, while the wider public, especially Gen Z, is depicted as a fluid force of change. The analysis results show that Pandji uses satire and irony techniques to sharply criticize government policies, while validating the public's anxiety—especially that of Gen Z—as a logical form of resistance, rather than mere baseless complaints (*snowflakes*). The humorous communication message in *Mens Rea* serves as a deconstructive tool to address the negative stigma held by society, particularly toward Gen Z, in the eyes of those in power. *Mens Rea* functions not only as entertainment but also as a form of political communication and social control through humor.

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### Keywords:

Pandji Pragiwaksono; *Mens Rea*; Generation Z; Critical Discourse Analysis; Bergson's Humor Theory; Political Communication.

## INTRODUCTION

How important is humor in our lives? Numerous studies have demonstrated a link between a sense of humor and intelligence, and some even suggest that a good sense of humor is key to mental health (Piñar-Rodríguez et al. 2024). Habib Anis Shoeleh stated, "Currently, the Indonesian nation needs a greater sense of humor. The loss of a sense of humor has led to frequent conflicts in this country" (Fathoni, 2017).

Humor has long been regarded as an effective way to convey messages to audiences. In today's fast-paced and interconnected world, effective communication has become more important than ever, and one powerful tool that can enhance communication and create relatable connections is humor. By infusing conversations with laughter and engagement, humor has the ability to break down barriers, bridge gaps, and foster a sense of camaraderie (Ann Sarah Mathews, 2026).

The messages conveyed to audiences are highly diverse, one of which is social criticism. Social criticism is the practice of using literature, art, or other forms of expression to critique societal norms, injustices, and power structures. This form of commentary often highlights issues such as inequality, corruption, and moral failures within society, aiming to provoke

thought and inspire change (Ughulu 2025; Wiegratz 2016). It is a powerful tool in satire, where authors and artists use humor and exaggeration to expose flaws in social systems, often leading to deeper discussions about ethics and morality (Fiveable, 2026).

: *Mens Rea* is a stand-up comedy show by Pandji Pragiwaksono and serves as a form of social criticism delivered humorously. In general, stand-up comedy is a performance art in which a comedian delivers a series of jokes or humorous stories on stage, typically lasting 10 to 45 minutes. The term “stand-up comedy” refers to a form of comedic expression presented as a monologue before a live audience (Panji Nugroho, 2012).

*Mens Rea* is a stand-up comedy performance by Pandji Pragiwaksono, staged in Senayan, Jakarta, in August 2025. It was subsequently broadcast on Netflix, reaching a wider audience across Indonesia and internationally. In this performance, Pandji critiques various groups, including prominent officials and celebrities such as President Prabowo, Vice President Gibran, artist Raffi Ahmad, and independent gubernatorial candidate Dharma Pongrekun. One viral joke states, “Our police kill, our soldiers enter politics, our president forgives corruptors, and our vice president: Gibran.”

As a stand-up comedian, Pandji is often referred to as a comic. Comics present humorous stories, short jokes, or satirical critiques while employing a distinctive communication style. There are various theories explaining how humor is constructed, one of which is Henri Bergson’s theory of humor, outlined in his book *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900). Bergson’s theory is one of the most influential philosophical approaches to humor, proposing that humor arises when we perceive “something mechanical encrusted upon the living.”

Because it contains elements of criticism, Pandji’s humor aligns more closely with Bergson’s theory than with other humor theories, such as Incongruity Theory, although he still applies both. To distinguish between the two, consider a classic premise often used by comedians: “A rich man tries to live simply but fails.”

From Bergson’s perspective, the humor lies in the rich man’s rigidity. Even when he is in a traditional market, he maintains stiff, “bossy” gestures or uses overly formal language. The audience laughs because he fails to adapt to the new environment, and this laughter functions as a social corrective, reminding individuals not to be overly rigid about their social status (Meyer 2015; Sandberg et al. 2019).

Meanwhile, from the Incongruity perspective, the scene would unfold differently. The comedian might begin with the setup: “Yesterday, I went to the market with my very rich friend” (the audience imagines a typical shopping trip). Then comes the punchline: “He bargained for kale using a PowerPoint presentation.” The incongruity between “market” and “PowerPoint” produces an intellectual surprise. The audience laughs because the combination defies expectations, regardless of whether a moral message is present (Reilly 2018; Warren et al. 2021).

The differences between the two theories of humor can be explained in the following scheme:

Elements	Henri Bergson's Theory	The Incongruity Theory
Sources of Laughter	Humans who behave automatically, rigidly, or lose social awareness.	A setup that leads to a single thought pattern, then is broken by an unexpected punchline

Elements	Henri Bergson's Theory	The Incongruity Theory
Purpose	Social Correction. Punishing rigid behavior with laughter to restore society's flexibility.	Cognitive Resolution. The brain's satisfaction when successfully solving a puzzle or surprise in a joke.
Humor Traits	Tends to be critical and judgmental (Judgmental).	Tends to be technical and structural (Structural).

Comics are easy to find in everyday life, but that does not mean life is the right place to analyze humor. According to Bergson (1911), by assuming the theatrical stage as a simplified form of life, and comedy as a play imitating life, it seems the stage can convey more information than real life.

Based on this consideration, Bergson ultimately identified three techniques for creating comedy: repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference. Just as life demands continuous change—a phenomenon that should be irreversible—and a general sequence understood by the public, these various elements are distorted by the logic of the comedian, thus creating humor (Agung Sumboko, 2021).

At the very least, there are elements, or what Bergson calls “material,” that shape a person and make them comic: mechanism, automatism, inelasticity, rigidity, absentmindedness, and immobility.

To illustrate his point, Bergson presents examples that can be viewed as manifestations of comic relief. He recounts an incident: a man running along a road stumbles and falls, prompting onlookers to burst out laughing. In this case, what makes it funny is the comic element that permeates the runner’s actions. According to Bergson, if the runner possessed the spontaneity to change his behavior—such as slowing down or jumping over a stumbling block—he would avoid his fall. However, due to the stiffness of his body, or a kind of carelessness—a daze that made him unaware of the stumbling block—this is what caused the man to fall and provoked the laughter of those who witnessed it (Agung Sumboko, 2021).

Language is inherently filled with ready-made formulas and stereotyped phrases. Words considered comical contain obvious absurdities, as do clear errors in sentences, because the terms do not conform to established word forms. However, according to Bergson, it is important to note that this must be supported by an element of unintentionality on the part of the speaker. One example of comic language is when a nervous public speaker unexpectedly utters a funny remark, even though the speaker did not intend it that way, perhaps because of inflexibility in speaking or stiffness in facing a particular moment. The audience then immediately laughs at the speaker’s deviation from intended speech (Agung Sumboko, 2021).

Finally, there is the concept of a comic character. According to Bergson (1911), every society establishes certain values as forms of discipline based on its customs, whether written or unwritten. These constructed values clearly serve a purpose, namely to regulate the behavior of each member of society. In this case, comedy emerges when an individual displays an insensitive attitude toward social life, behaving according to their own way without regard for others. Such a person is then considered comic. Society perceives them this way because their behavior is inconsistent with prevailing values, making them appear strange in the eyes of others. This is what is referred to as a comic character. If society were able to observe the

strange behavior of its members in the same way as it watches a comedy performance, only then would such behavior be laughed at (Agung Sumboko, 2021).

The various theories of humor can be analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proposed by Teun A. van Dijk, which divides discourse into three main elements (Ratnaningsih, 2019). First, the macrostructure (thematic) refers to the global meaning of a discourse, representing the dominant and central idea conveyed by the speaker. Second, the superstructure (schematic) concerns the overall organization or flow of the text, typically consisting of an introduction, body, and conclusion that form a coherent whole. Third, the microstructure focuses on detailed linguistic elements, including semantic aspects such as setting, details, intentions, and assumptions; syntactic aspects such as coherence, pronouns, and sentence forms; stylistic aspects related to language style; and rhetorical aspects that emphasize how messages are delivered to influence the audience.

This study is important because humor in stand-up comedy is often underestimated as mere entertainment, whereas it can function as a mechanism of social control. Through humor, public dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and generational criticism can be articulated in ways that remain memorable and influential. In *Mens Rea*, Pandji's performance reflects not only personal opinion but also a broader representation of public unease, especially among younger audiences who are frequently labeled as overly sensitive or politically immature. Thus, the show offers a meaningful space where humor becomes a form of resistance, reflection, and negotiation of power.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the use of humor in Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up comedy *Mens Rea* as a mechanism of social control. More specifically, this study seeks to examine how humor is used to communicate political criticism, how discourse structures are constructed in the performance, and how satire and irony function to challenge dominant power narratives. The benefits of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the field of communication studies, particularly in relation to stand-up comedy, political communication, humor studies, and critical discourse analysis. Practically, this study is expected to provide insight for comedians, media practitioners, communication scholars, and the broader public regarding the role of humor not only as entertainment but also as a strategic instrument of criticism, awareness, and social control in contemporary society.

## **METHOD**

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach with content analysis. The approach aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the stand-up comedy performance *Mens Rea* by comedian Pandji Pragiwaksono, which was performed in Senayan, Jakarta, and later broadcast on Netflix. Qualitative methods were considered appropriate for examining social phenomena in depth and within their proper context (Moleong, 2017, as cited in Bengtsson, 2016). Content analysis was employed as a technique to systematically evaluate the communication content based on its explicit messages (Krippendorff, 2004, as cited in Humayra & Meyniar, 2025).

The data source for this research was a recording of the stand-up comedy show *Mens Rea* performed by Pandji Pragiwaksono in Senayan, Jakarta, and subsequently broadcast on Netflix. The data collection technique used in this research was documentation, focusing on recorded material of the performance (Sugiyono, 2019).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, this research applied source triangulation, which involved comparing data obtained from different sources using the same technique (Sugiyono, 2019).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, one of the viral jokes from Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up comedy performance, "Mens Rea," was, "Our police kill, our president forgives corruptors, and our vice president: Gibran!"

From a communication perspective, this message is a social critique of the current government, which Pandji believes is facing numerous problems. The data Pandji used to convey this message came from news reports that were already very popular due to their extensive coverage in various media outlets.

First, the police were accused of murder during a demonstration that resulted in the death of an online motorcycle taxi driver. This occurred when a car driven by a police officer struck one of the thousands of protesters. It's possible the officer panicked, losing control of his vehicle, while confronting the protesters. (Ainina, 2025)

Second, President Prabowo pardoned corruptors. This was based on the president's statement that corruptors would be forgiven if they returned the proceeds of their corruption. (Nugroho, 2024)

Third, Vice President Gibran was deemed incompetent and elected through a fraudulent election process. This fraud was related to the sudden change in requirements for becoming vice president just before the presidential election. (Faturrahman, 2024)

Ven's critical discourse analysis (CDA) is applied to the Mens Rea performance, indicating the following:

1. Macrostructure (thematic). Based on the definition of macrostructure, which is synonymous with theme, it can be explained that the main theme of the Mens Rea performance is a critique of poor state governance. The viral messages about the president, police, vice president, and others, as explained at the beginning of this section, are evidence of this.
2. Superstructure (schematic/flow). Based on its definition, a text or discourse generally has a schematic or flow. This means that a text is composed of an introduction, body, and conclusion. In the context of Pandji's performance, this can range from the opening line to the punchline. This is evidenced by the storyline Pandji establishes from the outset, concerning the state of poor state governance. For example, Pandji explains how money laundering is carried out by many corruptors using celebrities like Raffi Ahmad. There are cafes built at great expense, deserted for months, yet still open.
3. Microstructure. As previously mentioned, this structure consists of:
  - a) Semantic analysis.

Semantic analysis in van Dijk's critical discourse analysis scheme is categorized as local meaning (Sobur, 2006), namely, meaning that emerges from the relationships between sentences and propositions that construct specific meanings within a text. In Pandji's context, the details of the humor conveyed in Mens Rea can demonstrate details as discourse constructs. When he mentions the independent candidate for governor of DKI Jakarta, for example, the detailed illustration of this figure is that the character (Dharma) identifies whether someone

has COVID-19 by licking their lips. Therefore, Pandji then makes the analogy that if there is a problem, Dharma will lick it as a way to detect it.

b) Sentence analysis (syntax). The strategies used in the microstructure of a discourse in the syntactic category are the elements of coherence, pronouns, and sentence form (Eriyanto, 2011)

(1) Coherence (the connection or relationship between words and sentences). Coherence is the logical relationship between parts of a composition or sentences within a paragraph (Dictionary Compilation Team, 2007). According to Eriyanto (2011: 242-243), coherence is the connection or relationship between words/sentences within a discourse. Coherence is a discourse element that explains a fact or event. Coherence can easily be observed through the conjunctions used, whether two sentences are viewed as having a causal relationship (cause and effect), a relationship of state, time, condition, and so on.

2) Pronouns are elements for manipulating language by creating an imaginary community. Pronouns are tools used by communicators to show where someone's position is in a discourse, where someone expresses their attitude using the pronouns I or we which illustrate that this attitude is solely the official attitude of the communicator, however when using pronouns we make this attitude a representation of a shared attitude in a particular communication situation. The boundary between the communicator's attitude and the audience is eliminated with the intention of showing what the communicator's attitude is as well. In *Mens Rea*, Pandji uses the word *gua* more often, because it shows closeness to his audience who are mostly young people.

3) Sentence form (a logical way of thinking that uses the principle of causality). Sentence form is not only a technical matter of grammatical correctness, but also determines the meaning formed by the sentence structure. Active sentences make a person the subject of the statement, while passive sentences make a person the object of the statement. Sentences in Pandji's performance have both active and passive structures, and most of the discourse places the preposition at the beginning of the sentence. In fact, some are deliberately kept short, because the choice of words is already known to the audience. For example, "...our vice president, Gibran!" This sentence is indeed incomplete, but the audience can interpret Pandji's meaning, that, according to Pandji, Gibran's vice president was not chosen in a good way.

c) Stylistics. Stylistics in critical discourse analysis focuses on the choice of words used by speakers to convey their messages, intentions, and ideologies. Word choice significantly influences how the message is received by the listener. Whether a comedian is harsh, refined, weak, or gentle in language is influenced not only by intonation but also by word choice. Therefore, the stylistic analysis in this study will examine the comedian's word choice in conveying his narrative to the audience. In "*Mens Rea*," Pandji uses phrases commonly used in the everyday language of Jakarta's youth. Therefore, they are sometimes perceived as overly harsh and lead to many misinterpretations. For example, when someone says, "If he prays, he's not corrupt."

d. Rhetoric. Rhetorical studies in van Dijk's critical discourse analysis examine graphic elements, metaphors, and expressions. The focus of this study is on metaphor, where stand-up comedy discourse consistently uses metaphors in its delivery. Pandji used a metaphor to convey that the relationship between citizens and our current government is a very romantic one, like a relationship between a couple or even a married couple. There are bittersweet moments, but they endure.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Pandji Pragiwaksono's stand-up comedy *Mens Rea* showed that its macrostructure consistently centered on social criticism, public concerns, and perspectives intended to encourage social improvement. Its superstructure was organized into a clear introduction, body, and conclusion, while the microstructure revealed semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and rhetorical elements that strengthened Pandji's message. The use of humor in *Mens Rea* also reflected Henri Bergson's theory that laughter functions as a mechanism for correcting rigid and inflexible behavior in society. Rather than serving only as entertainment, humor in the performance acted as a communicative strategy to criticize authority, validate the concerns of younger generations, especially Generation Z, and challenge dominant political narratives. Therefore, *Mens Rea* demonstrated that stand-up comedy can serve as an accessible and effective medium of social criticism. Future research could examine other Indonesian stand-up comedy performances or compare different comedians to explore how humor and discourse are used across various social and political contexts.

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