

**STRATEGIES TO REFUTE THE MYTH OF ABLEISM IN SOLO COMEDIES
BY INDONESIAN WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES: A SEMIOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS BY ROLAND BARTHES**

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the strategy of dismantling the myth of ableism in the comedy of Resti, a blind Indonesian female comedian. Departing from the gap between Law No. 8/2016 and the reality of stereotypical representation in the media, this study aims to identify the play of denotative and connotative signs as a strategy of resistance. Using an interpretive qualitative approach and Roland Barthes' semiology, data in the form of verbal texts are analyzed through units of meaning without reviewing the performative aspect. The findings reveal three strategies: the reversal of binary oppositions that undermine the normal-abnormal hierarchy, structural irony that criticizes the failure of state media institutions, and the reappropriation of stigma that takes over the narrative of identity. These three strategies prove that humor is not just entertainment, but a structured social critique. This study contributes to the Sociology of Inclusive Society by emphasizing that inclusion requires cultural transformation through language and discourse. The comedy stage has proven to be an effective space of resistance for marginalized groups.

Keywords: Representation, Roland Barthes' semiology, stand-up comedy, disability, Sociology of Inclusive Society

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream media portrays people with disabilities through three stereotypes (Al Fajri et al., 2024): as objects of pity and need of help (Södergren & Vallström, 2023), as objects of ridicule due to their physical disabilities (Holland et al., 2024), or as superheroes who have successfully 'overcome' their limitations (Árnason & Sigurbjörnsson, 2025). These misrepresentations appear in a number of cultural products such as film, television, and social media (Gallego et al., 2025; Barroso-Moreno et al., 2024). These narratives about people with disabilities emerge from the dichotomy between 'tragic victims' and 'superheroes' (Grue, 2016). Ultimately, the conflict between these two poles distances people with disabilities from depictions of normal humanity.

Misrepresentation is not simply an aesthetic issue (Jones et al., 2025). It is a product of power with real impacts (Timmons et al., 2024). This representation reinforces stigma and social isolation (Riley, 2005). It also normalizes the deeply rooted hierarchy of ableism in society. Ableism positions the 'normal' body as the only legitimate standard

(Love & Beneke, 2025). Subtly, ableism constructs people with disabilities as 'other' and 'inferior' (Karlssona & Rydström, 2023).

These social barriers exacerbate the exclusion of people with disabilities (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). It is the environment that is unprepared to embrace diversity, not people with disabilities who are unable to adapt (Degener, 2016; Harpur, 2011). This practice of ableism also persists in Indonesia (Setiawan, 2026). Although Law Number 8 of 2016 provides legal protection, cultural transformation through increased representation remains an absolute requirement for realizing an inclusive society (Billah et al., 2025).

The practice of ableism also appears in comedy performances (Lockyer, 2015). Disability humor has a problematic dual function (Martinez-Guillén, 2023; Araújo, 2019). On the one hand, non-disabled comedians often repeat demeaning stereotypes (Lockyer, 2015). They portray disability as a physical oddity or a family burden (Wilde, 2018). This type of humor reinforces stigma and normalizes ableist hierarchies. However, on the other hand, humor controlled by disabled comedians can be a medium of resistance (Reid et al., 2006). It also functions as a means of social critique and identity negotiation (Bingham & Green, 2016). By controlling the narrative, disabled comedians subvert unequal power relations (Malli, 2024). They present disability as a valid and complex human experience.

The phenomenon of comedians with disabilities in Indonesia was pioneered by Dani Aditya (with cerebral palsy), who became the first comedian with a disability to appear in the national competition SUCI 5 in 2015 and reached the top 4 (Refi, 2021; Tan et al., 2022). He was then followed by other comedians with disabilities such as Zaka Ahmad (blind), Budi Hardian (blind), Joel Purba (kyphosis), and Anggi Wahyuda (physically disabled) who appeared on various national television platforms (Sihombing, 2023). Their presence marked a significant shift (Tan et al., 2022). People with disabilities were no longer the objects of jokes, but rather creators of humor that criticized social barriers (Wibowo, 2023). Humor also became a tool to fight against entrenched ableism (Marlina et al., 2024). However, humor created by comedians with disabilities also risks justifying discrimination (Lockyer, 2015). Audiences need critical literacy to distinguish between humor that debunks stigma and humor that repeats it (Tan et al., 2022). Less critical audiences may only see superficial laughter without understanding its subversive message (Refi, 2021).

Research on disability comedy in Indonesia remains limited, both in terms of quantity and depth of analysis (Al Fajri et al., 2024). Existing studies still employ linguistic approaches that focus on word choice and sentence structure (Tan et al., 2022), critical discourse analysis that highlights the commodification of disability discourse (Refi, 2021), or communication studies that explore the communication orientations of co-cultural groups of disabled comedians (Wibowo, 2023). No research has systematically used semiological tools to dissect the layers of meaning (denotation, connotation, and myth) behind the comedic material of Indonesian disabled comedians, particularly those that focus on verbal texts without examining performative aspects. Yet comedy operates through language play, irony, and the violation of expectations (Barthes, 1972; 1974). All of these are meaningful sign operations that require ideological dissection to uncover how the myth of ableism is constructed, reproduced, and dismantled through humor (Eagleton, 1983).

To fill this gap, this study focuses on comedy material about the lives of people with disabilities presented by a blind comedian named Resti. This blind female comedian delivers comedy material that explicitly addresses her lived experiences as a one-eyed



woman, covering everything from everyday hardships and childhood exclusion to critiques of policies, media representations, and exploitative practices.

This study strictly limits itself to an analysis of the verbal text of Resti's comedy material, without examining gestures, facial expressions, or intonation (Barthes, 1977). This methodological decision is based on consistency with Roland Barthes's principle of the "Death of the Author." This principle emphasizes that the meaning of a text is determined by the linguistic sign system itself, not by the extralinguistic elements that accompany it (Gasillón, 2016). With these limitations, the verbal transcript is treated as an autonomous text full of stand-alone linguistic signs, so that the analysis can be more focused on the language structure, choice of diction, and rhetorical mechanisms that construct meaning as well as the strategy of debunking myths in jokes (Barthes, 1974; Saldaña, 2021; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Based on the description above, this study proposes a problem formulation in the form of how the play of signs between denotation and connotation in the verbal text of Resti's stand-up comedy material is used as a strategy to debunk the myth of ableism about disability?

METHOD

This research uses a poststructuralist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This paradigm views reality as a linguistic construct (Eagleton, 1983). The meaning of disability is unstable and plural (Gasillón, 2016). Knowledge is always formed within a historical and political context (Barthes, 1977). This research supports efforts to dismantle domination (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). This choice of paradigm is consistent with Barthes's semiology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Barthes rejects the stability of meaning and the authority of the author (Barthes, 1977). The consistency of paradigm, theory, and method is a strength of this research.

The research approach used is interpretive qualitative (Flick, 2014). This approach aims to understand meaning in depth (Patton, 2015). This approach does not attempt statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers generate meaning through active reading of the text (Barthes, 1977). This aligns with the principle of the Death of the Author (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers do not seek the 'true meaning' behind jokes. Researchers offer a critical reading of the sign system.

The data source is a transcript of Resti's stand-up comedy performance on Deddy Corbuzier's show, Somasi. The performance was then uploaded to a YouTube account named Tebe at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k__8k85Iao.

Resti discusses her life as a blind person.

The data collection technique involved three stages (Flick, 2014). First, video recordings were identified and selected (Patton, 2015). Researchers searched YouTube and national television channels. Second, they downloaded and archived them in digital format. Each video was assigned a complete identification code. Third, a verbatim transcript was created (Saldaña, 2021). The transcript was made verbatim from Resti's speech. Nonverbal elements were not recorded or analyzed. These transcripts constitute the primary data for this study (Miles et al., 2014).

Analisis data mengikuti kerangka semiologi Barthes (Barthes, 1972). Tahap pertama adalah pembagian teks ke dalam leksia (Barthes, 1974). Leksia adalah fragmen pendek sebagai unit pembacaan (Barthes, 1974). Leksia bisa berupa *setup* dan *punchline* (Lockyer, 2015). Bisa juga satu anekdot atau segmen tematis

(Reid et al., 2006). Pembagian leksia dilakukan secara reflektif dan fleksibel (Saldaña, 2021).

Data analysis followed Barthes's semiological framework (Barthes, 1972). The first step was to divide the text into segments (Barthes, 1974). Segments are short fragments used as reading units (Barthes, 1974). A segment can be an introduction and a conclusion (Lockyer, 2015). Segments can also be single anecdotes or thematic segments (Reid et al., 2006). Segmentation was carried out reflectively and flexibly (Saldaña, 2021).

The second stage is denotative analysis (Barthes, 1972). Researchers note the literal meaning of each lexicon. This analysis answers: what is literally said? (Eagleton, 1983). This stage forms the basis of the raw data (Tan et al., 2022).

The third stage is connotative analysis (Barthes, 1974). Researchers examine cultural and ideological meanings (Barthes, 1972). This analysis answers: What values and stereotypes are activated? (Eagleton, 1983). Connotations are read within the context of Indonesian culture (Al Fajri et al., 2024). Social models and intersectionality play a role in this stage (Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991). Researchers identify whether connotations reinforce or dismantle stigma (Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

The fourth stage is myth and strategy analysis (Barthes, 1972). This is the primary focus of the study. Researchers identify the debunked myth of ableism (Barthes, 1974). They also analyze strategies for debunking it (Grue, 2016). Wittgenstein's philosophy helps us understand comedic language games (Wittgenstein, 1953). Comedy is an alternative language play (Lockyer, 2015). Comedy challenges the dominant ableist grammar (Bingham & Green, 2016).

The fifth stage is synthesis and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher integrates findings from the previous three stages (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher identifies patterns of sign use (Barthes, 1972). The researcher groups myths into thematic categories (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). The researcher identifies comic semiotic techniques (Bingham & Green, 2016). The findings are presented in a descriptive-analytical narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are no tables to maintain the flow of the argument.

Data validity uses four strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, triangulation of data sources (Patton, 2015). The researcher analyzes several segments of Resti's performance (Flick, 2014). This identified consistent patterns across segments (Miles et al., 2014). Second, theoretical triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Researchers integrated four theoretical frameworks (Eagleton, 1983). This examined findings from multiple perspectives (Patton, 2015). Triangulation avoided overly narrow interpretations.

This study has several limitations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, the study did not conduct an interview with Resti (Barthes, 1977). This is a logical consequence of paradigmatic choice (Eagleton, 1983). Second, the study only analyzed one female comedian. Generalization is not the goal of interpretive qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The goal is depth of understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, the study only analyzed video recordings (Flick, 2014). Recordings allow for repetition and cross-examination (Saldaña, 2021). Fourth, the findings are influenced by the researcher's positionality (Patton, 2015). This was addressed through triangulation and discussions with experts.

This study adheres to research ethics by not violating privacy and aims to support stigma elimination and contribute to advocacy for inclusion.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Revealing Subversion Strategies: Semiological Findings on Resti's Joke Texts

A semiological analysis of Resti's verbal joke text yielded three strategies for debunking the myth of ableism. These findings were obtained after dividing the text into several sections. Each section was read at both the denotative and connotative levels. The results revealed a systematic and directed pattern of resistance.

The first strategy is the reversal of binary opposition. Resti reverses the hierarchy between 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies. In one quote, Resti says, "*Tetapi meskipun saya seperti ini, saya selalu merasa normal, bahkan sangat normal sehingga saya memakai lensa kontak. Jadi saya memakainya bergantian. Saya memakai satu, dan saya menempelkan yang lain di kulkas*" (But even though I'm like this, I always feel normal, so normal that I wear contact lenses. So I wear them alternately. I wear one, and I stick the other on the refrigerator). Denotatively, this is a story about alternating contact lenses. One is worn, the other is stuck on the refrigerator. Connotatively, this quote reveals the absurdity of 'normal' beauty standards. These standards force people to follow meaningless rituals. Resti also says about makeup, "*Tetapi satu mata terlihat bagus jika riasannya tahan lama. Paman, saya telah menggunakan maskara dan eyeliner selama 3 tahun tanpa henti. Saya hanya menggunakan yang kiri untuk membuatnya lentik, tetapi yang kanan membutuhkannya, jadi yang kanan tidak perlu dilentikkan*" ("But one eye looks good if the makeup lasts. Uncle, I've been using mascara and eyeliner for three years non-stop. I only use the left one to curl it, but the right one needs it, so the right one doesn't need to be curled.") Denotatively, she admits to saving on cosmetics. Connotatively, she turns a 'flaw' into a practical advantage.

Resti also shared her dream of becoming a police officer. She said, "*Saya juga pernah bilang ingin menjadi polisi, tapi guru menertawakan saya. Padahal saya punya potensi untuk menjadi penembak jitu*" ("I once said I wanted to be a police officer, but the teachers laughed at me. But I have the potential to be a sniper"). Denotatively, she joked about her shooting ability. Connotatively, she was reversing the stigma that people with disabilities cannot work in certain sectors. She also said, "*Meskipun saya hanya punya satu mata, saya bisa naik sepeda motor bersama teman-teman saya. Serius. Jadi ketika saya melihat jalan, saya menggunakan sudut kiri, sudut kanan dengan perasaan*" ("Even though I only have one eye, I can ride a motorcycle with my friends. Seriously. So when I look at the road, I use left and right angles by feeling.") Denotatively, this describes a physical limitation. Connotatively, she demonstrates the ability to adapt creatively.

The second strategy is structural irony. Resti criticized the state and the media. She linked her views to the Kanjuruhan Tragedy. She said, "*Apakah ada yang ingat tragedi Kanjuruhan? Ingat, saya adalah salah satu korban gas air mata. Yang di sebelah kiri terkena gas air mata, yang di sebelah kanan juga terkena gas, tetapi tidak ada air mata.*" ("Does anyone remember the Kanjuruhan tragedy? Remember, I was one of the tear gas victims. The one on the left was hit by tear gas, the one on the right was also hit by gas, but there were no tears."). Denotatively, this is a factual statement about a traumatic experience. Connotatively, it is a bitter irony against a protective state. Resti also criticized the Muslim Tretan. She said, "*Saya lelah membela penyandang disabilitas,*

tetapi Tretan Muslim malah mengumpulkan penyandang disabilitas. Mengeksploitasi mereka, membina mereka. Ya Tuhan, Aan Salman, ditampilkan di YouTube." ("I'm tired of defending people with disabilities, but the Muslim Tretan instead gathers people with disabilities. Exploiting them, fostering them. Oh my God, Aan Salman, featured on YouTube.") Denotatively, this is a critique of exploitative practices. Connotatively, the words 'gather' and 'foster' imply dehumanization.

Resti also criticized job requirements. She said, *"Sangat sulit untuk mencari pekerjaan. Persyaratannya adalah penampilan yang menarik, tinggi badan, dan akhirnya, kesehatan fisik dan mental. Saya sehat secara spiritual, tetapi kesehatan fisik saya agak kurang."* ("It's very difficult to find a job. The requirements are good looks, height, and finally, physical and mental health. I'm spiritually healthy, but my physical health is a bit lacking."). Denotatively, she acknowledged that she was spiritually healthy. Connotatively, the phrase 'physically healthy' became a subtle tool of discrimination. Resti also criticized the legal system. She said, *"Aku pengen banget Om jadi Hakim biar bisa mandang hukum sebelah mata. Kan hukum di negeri ini kayak aku cacat."* ("I really want to be a judge, Uncle, so I can see the law with one eye. The law in this country is like I'm disabled.") Denotatively, she compared the law to her body. Connotatively, she criticized the law for being unfair and unequal. The phrase 'one eye' is a clever play on words with two meanings.

The third strategy is reclaiming stigma. Resti appropriates derogatory words. She describes herself, *"Nama saya Resti dan saya biasanya dipanggil 'gadis bumi' (migrain buta)." ("My name is Resti and I'm usually called 'gadis bumi' (blind migraine)."*). She also says, *"Jujur, sebagai komedian penyandang disabilitas dari desa, saya takut datang ke Jakarta, Paman."* ("Honestly, as a disabled comedian from the village, I'm afraid to come to Jakarta, Uncle."). Denotatively, this is a derogatory nickname. Connotatively, she claims these words as a proud identity. She responds to children's fears. She says, *"Anak-anak kecil itu akan takut jika mereka melihat saya, Paman, mereka akan mengira saya adalah Dajjal. Dajjal adalah transgender. Tapi saya imut, seperti Minion."* ("Those little kids will be scared if they see me, Uncle, they'll think I'm the Dajjal. The Dajjal is transgender. But I'm cute, like a Minion."). Denotatively, this is a joke about children's reactions. Connotatively, she shows that stigma stems from ignorance.

Resti also shared her experience intervening with a mother. She said, "Once, there was a little girl who was scared and kept asking her mother, *"Ada anak kecil yang ketakutan dan terus bertanya kepada ibunya, 'Bu, ada apa dengan matanya?'" ("Mom, what's wrong with her eye?"). Her mother replied, 'Itu karena dia terlalu banyak bermain ponsel.'* ("It's because she plays with her phone too much.""). I couldn't stand that lie. I went to her mother and told her that she was pecked by a chicken, Mom." Denotatively, she gave an even more absurd answer. Connotatively, she demonstrated that all explanations about her body were social constructs. She refused to be an object described by others. She took control of the narrative and defined her own body. These three strategies were found consistently throughout Resti's comedy material. These findings form the basis for further discussion.

Discussion

From Humor to Social Criticism: A Discussion on Strategies for Debunking Disability Myths

The findings of this study indicate that Resti's humor is a form of structured ideological resistance. The three strategies found work simultaneously and reinforce each other. The reversal of binary oppositions undermines the hierarchy of values between



normal and abnormal. This action aligns with Barthes's concept of demystification (Barthes, 1972). Myths naturalize historical constructions as something natural (Barthes, 1972). By reversing oppositions, Resti dismantles the idea that 'normal' is merely a social construct. She shows that the bodies of people with disabilities are not inferior. In fact, they have advantages in certain contexts. This finding strengthens the argument of the social model of disability (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). The social model emphasizes that the primary barriers come from the environment, not from the disability itself (Degener, 2016). Resti suggests that it is the environment that fails to recognize diversity.

Resti's reversal of binary oppositions also enriches the study of resistance comedy. Previous research in the UK found a similar pattern (Lockyer, 2015). Disabled comedians there also challenge stigma through humor (Reid et al., 2006). However, Resti highlights the uniqueness of the Indonesian context. She critiques exclusionary and wasteful beauty standards and highlights discrimination in the job market and legal system. This demonstrates that resistance to ableism is not a singular phenomenon. It always intersects with issues of gender, class, and power structures (Crenshaw, 1991).

Resti's use of structural irony critiques the failures of public institutions. The state, media, job market, and law are the targets of her critique. This finding aligns with Refi (2021) research on the commodification of people with disabilities in the media. Refi found that disability discourse is often commercialized for industrial purposes. Resti deepens this finding by highlighting the practice of 'collecting' and 'cultivating' people with disabilities. These words indicate systematic dehumanization. This critique criticizes the exploitative creative industry (Handoyo, 2024). Resti also critiques the state through the Kanjuruhan tragedy. She links personal disability to structural violence. This is a political critique rarely seen in mainstream comedy (Malli, 2024).

Resti's irony regarding the job market is also important to examine. The requirement of being 'physically and mentally healthy' is a subtle tool of discrimination (Schur et al., 2017). Previous research has shown that people with disabilities face significant barriers in the workforce (Lindsay, 2023). Resti demonstrates that these barriers are not only physical they are also discursive and symbolic. The phrase 'a little less' conveys a seemingly neutral logic of exclusion. In fact, it denies full access to people with disabilities (Marlina et al., 2024). Resti's critique of the law is also incisive. The metaphor of 'disability law' is a radical critique of structural injustice. She equates legal inequality with her own experience as a person with a disability. This is a subversive reversal (Eagleton, 1983). Resti is no longer an object of pity; she becomes a subject who critiques state institutions.

Resti's reuse of stigma represents a claim to autonomy in self-definition. She takes derogatory words and transforms them into a proud identity. This action reflects the principle of the Death of the Author (Barthes, 1977). The meaning of disability is not determined by others. Resti demonstrates that subjects with disabilities have the right to define themselves. This also aligns with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (1953). Meaning is the use of certain language games. Resti creates alternative language games. She challenges the dominant grammar of ableism. She uses comedy as a space to redefine her identity.

These findings reinforce the study of reappropriation in identity movements (Crenshaw, 1991). Marginalized groups often use derogatory terms to resist. Resti did the same with the words 'disabled' and 'earth'. She also responded to children's fears with

jokes about the Dajjal. She added the word "transgender" to simultaneously critique gender stigma. This demonstrates a strong intersectional awareness (Billah et al., 2025). She is a woman, has a disability, and comes from a village. These three identities intersect in her experiences facing discrimination. This enriches the analysis by demonstrating the complexity of oppression.

The methodological decision to focus on verbal text proved effective. Resti's resistance lies in the structure of language and diction, rather than in performative elements such as gesture or intonation (Barthes, 1974). This affirms the autonomy of text within Barthes's semiological tradition. This research contributes to the Sociology of Inclusive Society (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). Its main contribution is demonstrating that inclusion requires a discourse war. Policy change alone is insufficient without cultural transformation (Setiawan, 2026). Representations and myths must be dismantled through language. Humor is an effective medium for this dismantling (Bingham & Green, 2016).

Resti is an example of a change agent from popular culture. The comedy stage serves as an alternative public space (Fraser, 1990). Marginalized groups can voice criticism in this space. This research also fills a gap in the study of disability comedy in Indonesia. Previous studies still use a linguistic or discourse approach (Tan et al., 2022; Refi, 2021). This research offers a more systematic semiological approach. These findings can be used as advocacy material for an inclusive society. Public education on critical literacy for disability humor is crucial. The public needs to distinguish between stigmatizing and subversive humor. Further research could expand the scope of comparisons between comedians. Comparisons between male and female comedians with disabilities are also important. Analysis of audience reception could be a direction for future research. Overall, this research reinforces the thesis that language is a battlefield of ideologies. Resti demonstrates that humor can be a powerful weapon of resistance. An inclusive society must be built from the discourse level to policy.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes strategies to debunk the myth of ableism in Resti's comedy. Resti is a blind female comedian from Indonesia. This analysis uses Roland Barthes's semiology as the primary theory. This research focuses on verbal texts without examining performative aspects. The findings reveal three semiological strategies employed by Resti.

First, the reversal of binary oppositions. Resti reverses the hierarchy between 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies. She shows that the one-eyed body is not inferior. In fact, it has advantages in various contexts. This shatters the myth of the inferiority of disability.

Second, structural irony. Resti critiques the state, the media, and other public institutions. She debunks the myth that these institutions are inclusive. She shows that these are false signals, masking true structural failures.

Third, reclaiming stigma. Resti uses derogatory words and transforms them into proud identities on stage. She demonstrates that people with disabilities are active subjects. They have the right to define themselves. The myth of disability as a passive object is dismantled.

This research contributes to the Sociology of Inclusive Societies. Its primary contribution is demonstrating the need for discourse warfare. Inclusion alone is not sufficient through policy changes. Cultural transformation through language and humor is crucial. Humor has proven to be an effective medium of resistance. The comedy stage has become an alternative public space for marginalized groups.



Overall, this research emphasizes one important point: language is a strategic ideological battleground. An inclusive society must be built from discourse to policy. Resti demonstrates that humor can be a powerful weapon of resistance.

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