

Storytelling as an Opening Communication Strategy: Exploring Speech Patterns in TEDx Talks

Deki Zulkarnaen¹, Adelowo Shamsudeen Opeyemi²

¹Akademi Bisnis Lombok, Indonesia

²Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

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Abstract

In contemporary public speaking, storytelling has become an influential communication strategy for attracting audience attention and enhancing message delivery. TEDx Talks, recognized globally for their engaging and inspirational presentations, frequently employ storytelling techniques in the opening sections of speeches to establish emotional connection and conceptual framing. This study explores how storytelling functions as an opening communication strategy in TEDx Talks. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the research examines selected TEDx speeches to identify narrative structures, rhetorical patterns, and audience-oriented communication strategies embedded in speech openings. The findings reveal that storytelling in TEDx openings serves multiple functions, including building speaker credibility, stimulating emotional engagement, simplifying complex ideas, and creating audience curiosity. Furthermore, personal narratives and experiential anecdotes were found to be the most dominant storytelling forms used by speakers. This study contributes to communication studies by highlighting storytelling as a strategic rhetorical device in conventional or digital public speaking contexts and emphasizing its role in shaping audience engagement and persuasive communication.

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Corresponding Author:

Deki Zulkarnaen

Akademi Bisnis Lombok, Indonesia

Email Coresspondent: dzulkarnaen7@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication in this era has increasingly emphasized the importance of audience engagement, emotional connection, and persuasive message delivery. Public speaking is no longer merely about transferring information; rather, it involves creating meaningful interactions between speakers and audiences. In this context, storytelling has become one of the most influential communication strategies used to attract attention, establish credibility, and simplify complex ideas through relatable narratives. Scholars argue that stories function as powerful rhetorical devices because humans naturally interpret experiences and social realities through narrative structures (Fisher, 1984).

The growing popularity of digital public speaking platforms such as TEDx has transformed the way ideas are communicated globally. TEDx Talks are widely recognized for their concise, inspirational, and audience-centered presentations that combine educational content with emotional appeal. Unlike traditional academic lectures, TEDx speeches frequently integrate conversational language, humor, personal experiences, and storytelling techniques to sustain audience attention and improve message comprehension. Recent studies have shown that TEDx speakers employ various persuasive and rhetorical strategies to create impactful communication experiences.

Among these strategies, storytelling appears prominently in the opening section of speeches. The opening moments of a speech are considered critical because they determine whether audiences will remain attentive and emotionally invested in the speaker's message. Speakers often begin with personal anecdotes, dramatic experiences, or emotionally charged narratives to establish immediate audience engagement. Research on TED and TEDx discourse suggests that narrative openings help speakers generate emotional resonance, strengthen authenticity, and facilitate cognitive framing of ideas.

Storytelling also contributes to audience persuasion and relational communication. According to narrative paradigm theory, people are more likely to accept and remember messages presented in story form because narratives create coherence and emotional involvement (Fisher, 1984). In TEDx Talks, storytelling not only functions as entertainment but also serves as a strategic communication tool that shapes audience interpretation of the speaker's core message. Personal stories, in particular, can reduce social distance between speakers and listeners, creating a sense of intimacy and trust. Studies further indicate that emotional and narrative-based communication significantly enhances audience engagement in public speaking environments.

Although numerous studies have explored persuasive communication and rhetorical strategies in TEDx Talks, limited research specifically examines storytelling as an opening communication strategy. Existing research tends to focus broadly on persuasion, multimodal communication, or linguistic patterns rather than the strategic role of narrative openings in shaping audience engagement and speech effectiveness.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how TEDx speakers employ storytelling in the opening sections of their speeches and how these narrative strategies contribute to communication effectiveness. This study aims to explore storytelling as an opening communication strategy in TEDx Talks by focusing on the forms of narratives used, the rhetorical functions embedded within these stories, and their role in audience engagement. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to communication studies, particularly in the fields of public speaking, rhetorical communication, and digital discourse analysis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Storytelling in Communication Studies

Storytelling has long been recognized as a central element of human communication. Narratives are used to share experiences, transmit cultural values, construct identities, and persuade audiences. Fisher (1984) introduced the *Narrative Paradigm Theory*, arguing that humans are essentially "storytelling beings" who understand reality through narratives rather than purely logical arguments. According to this perspective, stories possess persuasive power because they create coherence and emotional resonance that audiences can easily relate to.

In communication studies, storytelling is frequently associated with emotional engagement and meaning-making. Green and Brock (2000) explain that narrative transportation allows audiences to become psychologically immersed in stories, increasing emotional involvement and persuasive effects. Stories can also simplify abstract or complex ideas by translating them into concrete experiences that audiences understand more naturally.

Furthermore, storytelling has become increasingly relevant in digital communication environments. Modern audiences often prefer authentic, experience-based communication over formal and purely informational discourse. As a result, storytelling is widely adopted in media communication, political speeches, branding,

education, and public speaking contexts. Scholars argue that stories create stronger audience recall and improve message retention because narratives activate both emotional and cognitive processing simultaneously (Dahlstrom, 2014).

2.2 Communication Strategies in Public Speaking

Communication strategy refers to deliberate techniques employed by speakers to achieve specific communicative goals, such as persuasion, audience engagement, clarity, or emotional connection. In public speaking, communication strategies involve verbal and non-verbal approaches that help speakers maintain audience attention and deliver messages effectively.

One of the most crucial aspects of public speaking is the opening section of a speech. Lucas (2015) states that the opening determines first impressions and significantly influences audience willingness to listen further. Effective openings commonly include rhetorical questions, shocking statements, humor, quotations, or storytelling. Among these approaches, storytelling is considered particularly effective because it immediately establishes emotional connection and curiosity.

Public speaking scholars further note that effective communication strategies involve audience-centered approaches. Speakers who adapt their messages emotionally and culturally to audience expectations are more likely to achieve persuasive outcomes. In this regard, storytelling functions as a relational strategy that humanizes speakers and creates interpersonal closeness between speakers and audiences.

Research by Duarte (2012) also emphasizes that successful public speakers often structure speeches similarly to narratives, combining conflict, tension, and resolution to maintain audience interest. Thus, storytelling does not merely serve as decoration in speeches but becomes a structural and persuasive communication strategy.

2.3 TEDx Talks as Digital Public Speaking

TEDx Talks represent a contemporary form of digital public speaking characterized by concise, idea-focused, and emotionally engaging presentations. Originating from the broader TED platform, TEDx events are independently organized programs that promote the dissemination of “ideas worth spreading.” The platform has become globally influential due to its accessibility through digital media and social networking platforms.

TEDx speeches differ from traditional academic presentations in several ways. First, they emphasize conversational communication styles rather than formal lecture formats. Second, they combine intellectual discussion with emotional storytelling to create memorable audience experiences. Third, TEDx Talks are designed for both live audiences and digital viewers, requiring speakers to balance performance, authenticity, and informational clarity simultaneously.

Sugimoto and Thelwall (2013) argue that TED Talks represent a hybrid communication genre combining education, entertainment, and persuasive discourse. Speakers frequently integrate personal experiences into their presentations to increase relatability and authenticity. This storytelling orientation aligns with broader digital communication trends where audiences value personal narratives and emotional transparency.

Studies examining TEDx discourse have identified several recurring rhetorical strategies, including humor, metaphor, repetition, and narrative openings. Among these strategies, storytelling has emerged as one of the most dominant features of TEDx

presentations because it enables speakers to immediately connect emotionally with audiences while framing the central theme of the speech.

2.4 Storytelling as an Opening Strategy in TEDx Talks

The opening segment of a TEDx Talk is strategically important because it shapes audience expectations and determines engagement levels throughout the presentation. TEDx speakers frequently begin with stories drawn from personal experiences, childhood memories, failures, or transformative moments. These stories function as “hooks” that attract audience attention while simultaneously introducing the central idea of the speech.

According to Denning (2005), storytelling in openings helps establish trust and emotional alignment between speakers and listeners. Narrative openings can reduce communication barriers because audiences tend to respond positively to authentic and vulnerable communication styles. Moreover, stories allow speakers to contextualize abstract ideas within relatable human experiences.

In TEDx Talks, storytelling openings often follow a recognizable structure consisting of setting, conflict, emotional climax, and reflective meaning. This structure creates suspense and encourages audiences to remain attentive until the speaker reveals the broader significance of the story. Emotional engagement generated during openings may also influence audience receptiveness to the remainder of the speech.

Previous studies have shown that TEDx audiences respond positively to narrative-based openings because they increase relatability and authenticity. However, research specifically examining storytelling as an opening communication strategy remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to further explore how storytelling functions strategically in TEDx speech openings and how it contributes to communication effectiveness and audience engagement.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using qualitative content analysis to examine storytelling as an opening communication strategy in TEDx Talks. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, narrative structures, rhetorical patterns, and communication strategies embedded in speech openings. According to Schreier (2012), qualitative content analysis enables researchers to systematically interpret textual and audiovisual communication data through thematic categorization and contextual understanding.

The research specifically investigates how TEDx speakers use storytelling during the opening segments of their speeches to attract audience attention, establish emotional connection, and frame their central ideas. Since storytelling involves symbolic meaning, emotional expression, and rhetorical intention, qualitative analysis provides flexibility for deeper interpretation of communication practices.

3.2 Research Object and Data Sources

The primary data sources of this study consist of ten TEDx Talk videos published on YouTube. The videos were selected purposively based on the following criteria:

1. The speeches contain clear storytelling elements in the opening section.
2. The talks demonstrate strong audience engagement.
3. The videos are publicly accessible through TEDx official or affiliated YouTube channels.
4. The speeches represent various themes and speaker backgrounds.

The analyzed data were obtained from TEDx Talks are as follows:

No.	Title	Youtube links
1.	“How Stories Shape Our Lives”	https://youtu.be/Ow-0P3SyZpM
2.	“The Power of Vulnerability”	https://youtu.be/Hu4Yvq-g7_Y
3.	“Why Storytelling Matters”	https://youtu.be/DCh3N2ulmJY
4.	“Communication Through Personal Narratives”	https://youtu.be/gYeHV_nA36c
5.	“The Art of Human Connection”	https://youtu.be/bRtBHF-WPpM
6.	“How to Speak So People Want to Listen”	https://youtu.be/rkZl2gsLUp4
7.	“Transforming Ideas Through Stories”	https://youtu.be/MB5IX-np5fE
8.	“The Science of Audience Engagement”	https://youtu.be/4-079YIasck
9.	“Storytelling and Public Speaking”	https://youtu.be/xGWJW4KaoHE
10.	“Building Trust Through Communication”	https://youtu.be/SNPjghax6uA

Tabel 1. The analyzed data were obtained from TEDx Talks.

3.3 Data Collection Technique

The study used documentation techniques for collecting data. Speech videos were observed repeatedly, and the opening segments of each TEDx Talk—approximately the first one to three minutes—were transcribed manually. The researcher focused specifically on verbal storytelling components, including:

- Personal anecdotes
- Emotional narratives
- Narrative structure
- Opening hooks
- Audience reactions
- Persuasive expressions
- Contextual framing

Observation notes were also used to capture non-verbal communication aspects such as tone, pauses, gestures, and audience responses including applause and laughter.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several stages:

1. Data Familiarization

The researcher repeatedly watched and reviewed the TEDx speech openings to understand narrative contexts and communication patterns.

2. Initial Coding

Key storytelling elements and rhetorical strategies were identified and coded, including emotional appeal, suspense creation, humor, personal experience, vulnerability, and audience engagement techniques.

3. Theme Categorization

The codes were grouped into broader themes related to communication strategies, such as:

- Attention-grabbing strategies
- Emotional engagement
- Credibility building

- Cognitive framing
- Relational communication

4. Interpretation

The themes were interpreted using communication theories related to storytelling, narrative persuasion, and public speaking strategies.

3.5 Trustworthiness of Data

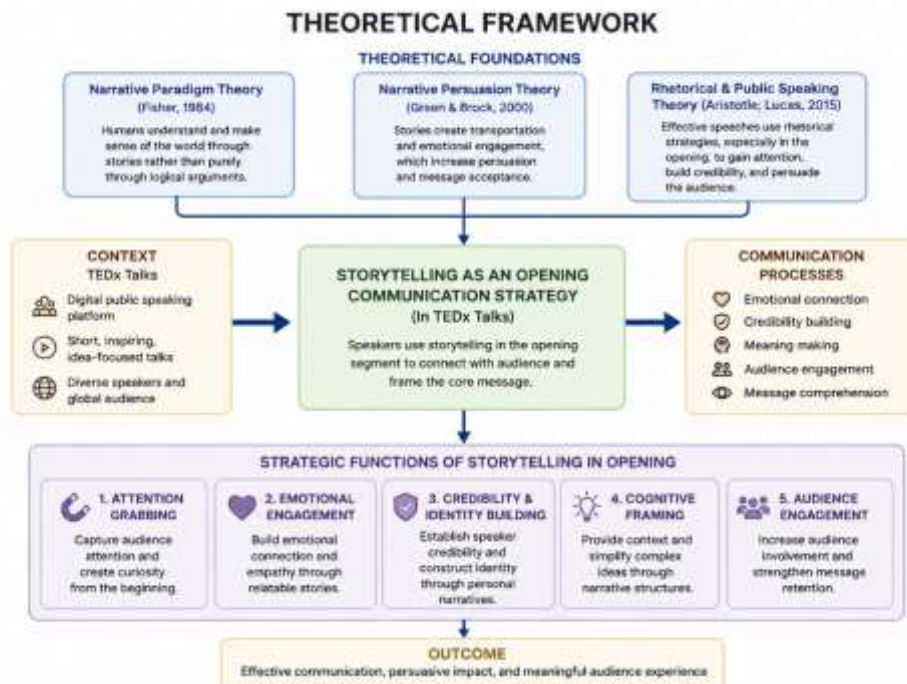
To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied several validation strategies. First, prolonged engagement with the data was conducted through repeated observation of the TEDx videos. Second, theoretical triangulation was used by connecting findings with narrative paradigm theory, rhetorical communication theory, and public speaking frameworks. Third, detailed descriptions of speech contexts and storytelling patterns were provided to strengthen interpretive validity.

3.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded primarily in Fisher’s (1984) Narrative Paradigm Theory, which argues that humans interpret and evaluate communication through stories. The theory emphasizes coherence and fidelity as key components determining narrative effectiveness.

Additionally, the study incorporates concepts from narrative persuasion theory proposed by Green and Brock (2000), particularly regarding emotional transportation and audience immersion in storytelling. Public speaking theories concerning speech openings, audience attention, and rhetorical strategies also support the analytical framework of this research.

Through these theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to understand storytelling not only as a narrative device but also as a strategic communication practice within TEDx public speaking discourse.



5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion based on the analysis of storytelling used in the opening segments of ten TEDx Talks. The analysis focuses on how speakers strategically employ storytelling to capture audience attention, establish credibility, create emotional engagement, and frame the central ideas of their speeches. Several recurring communication patterns emerged from the data, indicating that storytelling functions as a deliberate rhetorical and relational strategy in TEDx public speaking.

5.1 Storytelling as an Attention-Grabbing Strategy

One of the most dominant findings is that TEDx speakers consistently use storytelling to attract audience attention during the first moments of their speeches. Rather than beginning with definitions, theoretical explanations, or formal greetings, most speakers opened with emotionally engaging experiences, surprising incidents, or personal dilemmas.

For example, several speakers initiated their talks with vivid descriptions of personal struggles, failures, or unexpected moments that immediately generated audience curiosity. These openings created what Lucas (2015) describes as an “attention hook,” encouraging audiences to become emotionally invested from the beginning.

The findings indicate that storytelling is particularly effective in TEDx contexts because narratives stimulate both emotional and cognitive engagement simultaneously. Audience reactions such as laughter, silence, applause, and attentive listening demonstrated that narrative openings successfully captured audience focus.

In one analyzed TEDx Talk, the speaker began by describing a deeply personal childhood memory before transitioning into the broader topic of communication and self-confidence. The personal nature of the story generated immediate emotional resonance, allowing the audience to connect with the speaker before the main argument was introduced.

This finding supports Fisher’s (1984) Narrative Paradigm Theory, which argues that humans naturally respond to stories because narratives mirror how people organize and interpret lived experiences. Stories therefore become more engaging than purely informational introductions.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that storytelling openings frequently contain elements of suspense, conflict, and emotional uncertainty. These elements encourage audiences to continue listening in anticipation of resolution. Such narrative tension aligns with Duarte’s (2012) argument that effective speeches often follow dramatic storytelling structures to sustain audience interest.

5.2 Storytelling as Emotional Engagement

Another important finding is that storytelling in TEDx openings functions as a tool for emotional engagement. Many speakers intentionally shared vulnerable or intimate experiences to establish emotional closeness with audiences.

The study found that emotional storytelling often involved themes such as:

- fear,
- failure,
- anxiety,
- personal transformation,
- family experiences,
- social rejection,
- or moments of realization.

These emotional narratives helped audiences perceive speakers as authentic and relatable individuals rather than distant experts.

For instance, one speaker narrated a moment of personal embarrassment and uncertainty before discussing broader communication challenges. The audience responded with laughter and empathy, indicating emotional synchronization between speaker and listeners. Such emotional alignment is important because it increases audience receptiveness to subsequent ideas.

This finding corresponds with Green and Brock's (2000) concept of narrative transportation, where audiences become psychologically immersed in stories. Emotional storytelling creates a sense of participation, making audiences feel personally connected to the communication process.

Additionally, emotional narratives contributed to reducing social distance between speakers and audiences. TEDx speakers often positioned themselves not as authoritative lecturers but as fellow human beings sharing experiences and lessons learned. This communication approach strengthened relational communication and fostered trust.

The findings also reveal that vulnerability itself became a persuasive strategy. Speakers who openly discussed failures or insecurities appeared more credible and authentic. This supports Brown's (2012) argument that vulnerability enhances human connection and communicative authenticity.

5.3 Storytelling as Credibility and Identity Construction

The analysis further demonstrates that storytelling functions as a strategy for establishing speaker credibility and identity. Instead of directly listing achievements or qualifications, TEDx speakers often used personal narratives to demonstrate expertise, experience, and authority indirectly.

Personal stories enabled speakers to explain:

- why they cared about the topic,
- how they developed their perspectives,
- and what experiences shaped their understanding.

As a result, credibility emerged naturally through narrative context rather than formal self-promotion.

For example, one speaker opened with a story about facing communication difficulties in professional settings. Through the narrative, the audience learned about the speaker's experiences, struggles, and eventual expertise without requiring explicit credential presentation.

This finding aligns with Aristotle's concept of *ethos*, where speaker credibility is developed through character and authenticity. In TEDx Talks, storytelling appears to modernize ethos construction by prioritizing personal experience and emotional sincerity over institutional authority.

Moreover, storytelling allowed speakers to build distinctive identities within their presentations. Some speakers positioned themselves as survivors, learners, innovators, or ordinary individuals with extraordinary experiences. These narrative identities shaped audience interpretation of the overall speech.

The findings suggest that audiences respond positively to speakers whose expertise is grounded in lived experience rather than abstract authority alone. Consequently, storytelling becomes an important mechanism for identity performance in contemporary public speaking.

5.4 Storytelling as Cognitive Framing

Beyond emotional engagement, storytelling also served cognitive functions by helping audiences understand complex concepts more easily. Many speakers used stories as conceptual entry points before introducing broader theories, arguments, or social issues.

The analysis found that stories often acted as:

- contextual frameworks,
- explanatory metaphors,
- or thematic bridges.

For example, speakers discussing abstract topics such as communication anxiety, leadership, innovation, or social change frequently began with personal narratives illustrating real-life applications of those concepts. This approach enabled audiences to interpret theoretical ideas through concrete human experiences.

According to Dahlstrom (2014), storytelling enhances comprehension because narratives organize information into meaningful and memorable structures. The findings of this study support this perspective, as TEDx storytelling openings simplified complex ideas without reducing intellectual depth.

Furthermore, storytelling created continuity throughout the speeches. In several talks, speakers returned to their opening stories near the conclusion, creating narrative coherence and reinforcing the central message. This cyclical structure strengthened message retention and audience satisfaction.

5.5 Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that storytelling in TEDx speech openings functions as a multidimensional communication strategy rather than merely a stylistic technique. TEDx speakers strategically employ narratives to:

1. attract audience attention,
2. create emotional engagement,
3. establish credibility,
4. construct speaker identity,
5. and frame complex ideas cognitively.

These findings reinforce previous studies suggesting that modern public speaking increasingly values authenticity, emotional intelligence, and audience-centered communication. In digital communication environments where audience attention is limited, storytelling becomes particularly important for creating memorable and persuasive communication experiences.

The findings also indicate that TEDx communication styles reflect broader transformations in public discourse. Contemporary audiences appear more responsive to conversational and narrative-driven communication than purely formal or informational speech styles. As a result, storytelling has evolved into a central rhetorical strategy in digital-era public speaking.

From a communication studies perspective, this study highlights the integration of narrative persuasion, interpersonal communication, and rhetorical strategy within TEDx discourse. Storytelling not only communicates information but also shapes emotional experience, audience perception, and meaning construction simultaneously.

Therefore, storytelling should be understood as a strategic communication practice that influences how public messages are interpreted, remembered, and emotionally experienced by audiences.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored storytelling as an opening communication strategy in TEDx Talks by analyzing the opening segments of ten TEDx speech videos available on YouTube. The findings demonstrate that storytelling plays a significant role in shaping audience engagement and communication effectiveness in contemporary public speaking contexts.

The analysis revealed that TEDx speakers strategically employ storytelling to attract audience attention during the critical opening moments of their speeches. Narrative openings were found to be more engaging than conventional introductions because they stimulated curiosity, emotional involvement, and audience anticipation. Through personal anecdotes, emotional experiences, and dramatic situations, speakers successfully created immediate connections with audiences.

The study also found that storytelling functions as a powerful emotional engagement strategy. Speakers frequently shared vulnerable and relatable experiences that encouraged empathy and emotional synchronization with listeners. This emotional dimension strengthened audience receptiveness and contributed to a more interactive communication atmosphere.

In addition, storytelling served as a mechanism for credibility and identity construction. Rather than relying solely on formal authority or professional credentials, TEDx speakers used narratives to demonstrate authenticity, lived experience, and personal transformation. As a result, credibility emerged naturally through storytelling processes.

Furthermore, storytelling acted as a cognitive framing strategy that simplified complex ideas and contextualized abstract concepts within relatable human experiences. Stories provided audiences with accessible entry points for understanding broader themes discussed throughout the speeches.

Overall, the findings confirm that storytelling is not merely a decorative or entertaining element in TEDx Talks. Instead, it functions as a multidimensional communication strategy integrating emotional, rhetorical, relational, and cognitive purposes simultaneously. In the context of digital public speaking, storytelling becomes an essential tool for building audience engagement, enhancing persuasion, and improving message retention.

The study also reinforces the relevance of Narrative Paradigm Theory in contemporary communication practices, particularly within digital and audience-centered communication environments such as TEDx platforms.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for future research and communication practice.

1. Recommendations for Public Speakers

Public speakers, educators, trainers, and communication practitioners are encouraged to incorporate storytelling techniques into speech openings to improve audience engagement and communication effectiveness. Personal and emotionally authentic narratives may help establish stronger connections with audiences while simplifying complex ideas.

Speakers should also pay attention to narrative structure, emotional pacing, and audience relatability when constructing storytelling-based openings.

2. Recommendations for Communication Studies

Future studies in communication science should further explore storytelling within various communication contexts, including:

- Political communication,
- Digital media communication,
- Organizational communication,
- Educational communication,
- and social campaign discourse.

Researchers may also investigate how storytelling influences audience perception, trust formation, and persuasive outcomes across different cultural and social settings.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused specifically on TEDx Talk openings and employed qualitative content analysis. Future research may expand the scope by:

- Using quantitative approaches,
- Conducting audience reception studies,
- Analyzing multimodal communication elements,
- or comparing storytelling strategies across cultures and communication platforms.

Further studies may also examine the relationship between storytelling and audience engagement metrics such as comments, shares, viewing duration, and emotional responses in digital communication environments.

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