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Research Article

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIES AS TOOLS FOR EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Digital storytelling has become an increasingly important strategy for social enterprises seeking to communicate social missions, strengthen community visibility, and expand opportunities through creative technologies. This study aimed to examine how digital storytelling supports empowerment by enhancing narrative agency, digital competence, stakeholder engagement, and access to social and economic opportunities. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed involving six social enterprises and 30 participants, including founders, communication staff, and community beneficiaries. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and analysis of 180 digital storytelling materials, then examined using thematic analysis and cross-case comparison. The findings showed that empowerment was strongest when community members actively participated in selecting themes, producing content, reviewing representations, and determining story dissemination. Increased digital reach did not automatically produce economic empowerment; stronger outcomes emerged when storytelling was combined with transferable digital skills, responsive communication systems, market access, and partnership networks. The study concludes that creative technologies become meaningful tools for empowerment when they are embedded in participatory, ethical, and opportunity-oriented organizational practices. Digital storytelling should therefore be understood not merely as a promotional technique, but as a mechanism for strengthening voice, capability, participation, recognition, and sustainable social value creation within contemporary social enterprise ecosystems and communities.

Keywords: Creative Technologies, Digital Storytelling, Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has reshaped the ways individuals, communities, and organizations communicate social experiences, construct identities, and mobilize collective action. Digital storytelling has emerged within this transformation as a creative practice that combines narrative, images, audio, video, animation, and interactive media to communicate experiences through accessible digital formats (Hajarrahmah et al., 2024; Kakeesh, 2024). Its significance extends beyond conventional communication because storytelling can provide individuals with opportunities to articulate experiences that are frequently absent from dominant public narratives. Recent studies have demonstrated that digital storytelling can contribute to digital competence, solidarity, personal expression, and empowerment, particularly among communities experiencing social or digital marginalization (Kusumawardhany et al., 2025; Novrita et al., 2025).

Social enterprises have simultaneously developed as organizational models that combine entrepreneurial practices with explicit social objectives. Their activities seek to address social, economic, cultural, or environmental problems while maintaining sufficient organizational and financial sustainability to continue delivering social value (Khater et al., 2025). Creative technologies are increasingly incorporated into these enterprises through social media, digital platforms, mobile applications, multimedia production, crowdfunding systems, artificial intelligence, and online marketplaces (Al-kfairy & Alyafei, 2025). Evidence from social enterprises working with creative communities demonstrates that digital platforms can help creative workers express cultural identity, connect with customers, mobilize social networks, promote inclusive participation, and gain access to financial or institutional support (Lim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

The convergence between digital storytelling and social enterprise provides an important context for examining empowerment in the contemporary digital economy. Social enterprises require more than economically viable products because their legitimacy often depends on their ability to communicate social missions, represent beneficiaries ethically, build stakeholder trust, and demonstrate meaningful social impact (Sangnak, 2025; Wang & Wang, 2025). Digital storytelling offers a mechanism through which social enterprises can transform experiences, local knowledge, cultural resources, and community aspirations into compelling narratives capable of reaching wider audiences. Creative technologies consequently function not only as communication instruments but also as potential infrastructures for participation, visibility, economic opportunity, cultural recognition, and collective agency (Aslam et al., 2025; Gholikhani Farahani et al., 2025).

The growing availability of digital technologies does not automatically guarantee meaningful empowerment for communities served by social enterprises. Unequal access to devices, digital infrastructure, technological skills, creative resources, and online networks can reproduce existing inequalities rather than eliminate them (Pretorius et al., 2025; Shen et al., 2025). Groups experiencing economic disadvantage, geographical isolation, limited digital literacy, or restricted institutional support may remain less capable of controlling their digital representation. Digital storytelling can consequently become concentrated in the hands of technologically privileged actors, raising an important question concerning whether creative technologies genuinely redistribute communicative power or merely modernize established patterns of organizational communication (Singh et al., 2025; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

The representation of communities through digital stories also presents ethical and organizational problems that require closer scholarly attention. Social enterprises frequently communicate personal experiences, poverty, cultural traditions, community challenges, or narratives of vulnerability to attract customers, donors, investors, volunteers, and institutional partners (Le et al., 2025; Wiklund-Engblom et al., 2023). Such practices can increase public visibility, yet they can also simplify complex experiences, commodify hardship, reproduce stereotypes, or position beneficiaries primarily as objects of organizational narratives.

Empowerment requires greater consideration of who produces the story, who decides what can be represented, who controls technological resources, whose interests shape the narrative, and whether participating communities retain meaningful agency over the circulation of their identities and experiencs (Escala et al., 2025; P.-A. Li et al., 2025).

The relationship between storytelling effectiveness and tangible social outcomes remains another central research problem. High levels of social media engagement, audience reach, emotional response, or digital visibility cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of empowerment (Hadi Mogavi et al., 2024). A compelling digital narrative may attract attention without improving income, decision-making power, skills, social inclusion, market access, or community participation. Research examining creative technologies should therefore distinguish communicative success from substantive empowerment (Smare & Elfatihi, 2025). This distinction becomes especially important for social enterprises because technological adoption may generate organizational visibility while producing limited benefits for the communities whose experiences constitute the narrative foundation of the enterprise (Fang et al., 2024; Rizvanović et al., 2023).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how digital storytelling and creative technologies are utilized within social enterprises as mechanisms for individual and community empowerment. Particular attention should be directed toward the processes through which digital narratives enable participants to communicate lived experiences, cultural identities, social challenges, entrepreneurial activities, and community aspirations (Chia & Frattarola, 2025; Gunklach et al., 2025). The study should examine digital storytelling as a participatory process rather than treating it exclusively as promotional content, allowing the research to determine whether storytelling creates opportunities for marginalized or underrepresented groups to exercise voice, agency, self-representation, and greater control over their public narratives (Karkar Esperat & Stickley, 2024; Madaan & Sharma, 2025).

The second objective is to analyze the organizational and technological mechanisms that connect digital storytelling with social value creation. Investigation should encompass the use of social media, audiovisual technologies, mobile communication, digital platforms, artificial intelligence-assisted content production, online marketplaces, and other creative technologies employed by social enterprises (Agarwal et al., 2025; Aritenang et al., 2025). Attention should also be given to the ways these technologies influence audience engagement, stakeholder relationships, access to markets, fundraising opportunities, digital skills, collaborative networks, and cultural visibility. Such an analysis can clarify the conditions under which technological creativity moves beyond communication and contributes to measurable economic, social, and cultural opportunities (Lin & Chu, 2024; Shao, 2025).

The third objective is to evaluate the factors that enable or constrain empowerment through digitally mediated storytelling. Relevant dimensions include technological accessibility, digital literacy, organizational capacity, narrative ownership, ethical representation, community participation, institutional support, cultural sensitivity, and the distribution of benefits generated through digital engagement (Alexiou et al., 2025; Schiuma et al., 2024). The study should ultimately establish a conceptual relationship among digital storytelling, creative technology utilization, social enterprise practices, and empowerment outcomes. Such an objective provides a foundation for generating practical recommendations concerning more inclusive, participatory, ethical, and socially responsible uses of creative technology within social entrepreneurship (Fan et al., 2023; Z. Li & Zhou, 2025).

Existing digital storytelling scholarship has generated substantial knowledge concerning education, literacy, identity formation, community participation, and the representation of marginalized populations. Recent research, for example, has documented the capacity of digital storytelling to develop digital competencies, social relationships, solidarity, language learning, personal expression, and empowerment among women experiencing various forms of marginalization (Brock & Crawford, 2024; Calabretta et al., 2025). The dominant emphasis of

this literature nevertheless remains concentrated on educational, developmental, community-based, or participatory communication settings. The integration of digital storytelling into the organizational processes and social value-creation mechanisms of social enterprises remains comparatively less developed as a coherent field of investigation (Balloni et al., 2025; Barile et al., 2025).

Social entrepreneurship literature has independently examined digital transformation, platform adoption, social innovation, sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and the role of technology in expanding entrepreneurial opportunities. Research on Indonesian social enterprises has shown that digital platforms can strengthen cultural identity, customer relationships, inclusive governance, and access to donor support among creative workers (Hajarrahmah et al., 2024; Kusumawardhany et al., 2025). Recent discussions of creative economies similarly emphasize the potential of digital tools to connect entrepreneurial activity with social sustainability and inclusive economic participation. Existing studies nonetheless tend to discuss digital technology at the level of platforms, digital business models, or organizational innovation rather than examining narrative production itself as an empowerment mechanism.

A conceptual gap consequently exists between three streams of scholarship that are frequently examined separately: digital storytelling, social entrepreneurship, and empowerment through creative technology. Limited research explains how storytelling practices operate simultaneously as processes of representation, entrepreneurial communication, stakeholder engagement, capability development, and social value creation. Empirical assessments also frequently emphasize technological access or organizational outcomes without sufficiently examining narrative ownership and power relations. The proposed study can address this fragmentation by integrating technological, entrepreneurial, communicative, and empowerment perspectives within a single analytical framework, thereby examining not merely whether social enterprises use digital tools but how creative technologies redistribute or potentially fail to redistribute voice, resources, opportunities, and agency.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning digital storytelling as an integral component of the social enterprise empowerment process rather than reducing it to a marketing or promotional technique. The proposed perspective conceptualizes storytelling as a multidimensional practice capable of connecting narrative agency, digital capability, stakeholder participation, cultural representation, and entrepreneurial value creation. Such an approach enables empowerment to be examined at several interconnected levels, including individual confidence and capability, community voice and participation, organizational legitimacy, market accessibility, and broader social visibility. This conceptual integration can extend existing studies that typically examine technological innovation, storytelling practices, or social entrepreneurship as relatively separate domains (Khater et al., 2025; Novrita et al., 2025).

The study also offers novelty by critically distinguishing technological adoption from genuine empowerment. The presence of sophisticated multimedia tools, artificial intelligence, online platforms, or extensive social media activity does not in itself constitute evidence that communities have gained greater power. A more rigorous analytical approach should examine whether participants control their narratives, develop transferable digital capabilities, gain access to economic opportunities, influence organizational decisions, strengthen social networks, and experience greater recognition within relevant social environments. This perspective prevents technological determinism and provides a more critical assessment of the assumption that digitalization necessarily generates inclusion, participation, or social improvement.

The significance of the proposed research derives from the increasing dependence of social enterprises on digital environments for visibility, resource mobilization, customer engagement, community building, and social impact communication. Creative technologies are

expanding the capacity to produce and circulate narratives, yet their social consequences depend upon organizational practices, ethical standards, accessibility, community participation, and distributions of technological power. Research connecting these dimensions can contribute theoretically to digital storytelling, social entrepreneurship, empowerment, and social innovation scholarship while offering practical guidance for social entrepreneurs, community organizations, policymakers, educators, and technology practitioners. The resulting framework can support the development of digital storytelling practices that are not only persuasive and technologically innovative but also participatory, ethically responsible, socially inclusive, and capable of producing sustainable empowerment.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how digital storytelling and creative technologies are utilized by social enterprises to strengthen individual and community empowerment. The qualitative approach was selected because the study focused on understanding participants' experiences, organizational practices, narrative construction, technological use, and perceptions of empowerment within their natural social and entrepreneurial contexts. A multiple-case study design enabled the researchers to compare different social enterprises while identifying recurring patterns and context-specific practices associated with digital storytelling. The study conceptualized digital storytelling as the purposeful integration of narrative, photographs, video, audio, graphic design, social media content, and other digital media to communicate social missions, community experiences, products, and social impacts (Al-kfairy & Alyafei, 2025; Lim et al., 2024).

The research focused on three interconnected dimensions: digital storytelling practices, creative technology utilization, and empowerment outcomes. Digital storytelling practices included narrative development, content production, community participation, message dissemination, and audience engagement. Creative technology utilization covered social media platforms, video-production applications, graphic-design tools, mobile technologies, online marketplaces, websites, and artificial intelligence-assisted content creation where applicable. Empowerment was examined through participants' perceptions of increased visibility, self-expression, digital competence, participation in decision-making, access to economic opportunities, network development, and capacity to communicate their own experiences. This analytical structure allowed the study to avoid equating technological adoption with empowerment and instead assess whether digital technologies generated meaningful changes in participants' agency and opportunities.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis supported by cross-case comparison. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and digital storytelling materials were coded according to both predetermined research dimensions and themes emerging from the empirical data. Initial coding identified statements related to narrative ownership, technological skills, organizational communication, audience interaction, economic opportunity, community participation, representation, and perceived social impact. Related codes were subsequently organized into broader themes and compared across the participating social enterprises. Cross-case analysis was conducted to identify similarities, differences, enabling conditions, and constraints in the use of creative technologies for empowerment. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, member checking, systematic documentation of analytical decisions, and comparison of evidence obtained from different participant groups and data sources.

Research Target/Subject

The research population consisted of individuals involved in social enterprises that actively used digital storytelling and creative technologies to communicate social missions, promote products or services, represent community experiences, or engage stakeholders. Eligible organizations were required to demonstrate an explicit social or community-oriented mission, conduct entrepreneurial activities that generated economic value, and regularly employ at least one form of digital storytelling through social media, video platforms, websites, digital campaigns, or other multimedia channels. Social enterprises operating in creative industries, community development, education, environmental initiatives, women's economic empowerment, youth entrepreneurship, and local cultural production were considered particularly relevant because these sectors commonly depend on narrative communication and digital visibility (Liu et al., 2025).

Purposive sampling was used to select six social enterprises that fulfilled the predetermined inclusion criteria and represented variation in organizational focus, target communities, and digital communication practices. Participants were subsequently recruited from each organization using criterion-based purposive sampling. The sample consisted of 30 participants, comprising six founders or managers, twelve staff members responsible for communication or digital content, and twelve community members or beneficiaries who had participated directly in storytelling, production, promotion, or other digitally mediated activities. This composition enabled the study to examine digital storytelling from organizational, technological, and community perspectives rather than relying exclusively on the views of social enterprise managers.

Sample adequacy was evaluated according to information richness and thematic saturation rather than statistical representativeness. Participant recruitment continued until interviews generated limited new conceptual information concerning the central themes of digital storytelling, creative technology, participation, and empowerment. Diversity in participant roles was deliberately maintained to reduce managerial bias and to capture possible differences between organizational claims and community experiences. Inclusion criteria required participants to have been involved with the selected social enterprise for at least six months and to possess direct experience with its digital communication, storytelling activities, entrepreneurial programs, or community initiatives. Participation was voluntary, and each participant received information concerning the objectives, procedures, confidentiality provisions, and intended use of research data before providing informed consent.

Research Procedure

The research procedures began with the identification of social enterprises that met the inclusion criteria and demonstrated consistent use of digital storytelling or creative technologies. Initial screening was conducted by examining organizational profiles, websites, social media activities, and publicly available descriptions of their social missions (Wiklund-Engblom et al., 2023). Eligible organizations were contacted formally and provided with information about the research objectives, expected participation, data collection procedures, and ethical safeguards. Organizational permission was obtained before individual participants were recruited. Informed consent was subsequently collected from all participants, and they were informed of their right to decline particular questions or withdraw from the study without adverse consequences.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and digital content documentation. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or through secure video-conferencing platforms depending on participant availability and geographical accessibility. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field observations were conducted during selected storytelling, content-production, entrepreneurial, or community

activities whenever access was permitted. Relevant digital storytelling materials produced during the study period were systematically documented to allow comparison between participants' explanations and observable communication practices. Personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts and research records, while pseudonyms or organizational codes were used during analysis and reporting.

The analytical procedure followed sequential stages of data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme refinement, interpretation, and cross-case comparison. Researchers repeatedly reviewed transcripts, field notes, and digital materials before assigning initial codes to relevant data segments. Codes addressing similar phenomena were grouped into thematic categories such as narrative agency, digital capability, participatory storytelling, economic opportunity, community visibility, stakeholder engagement, ethical representation, and technological barriers. Themes were then compared across cases to determine which empowerment mechanisms appeared consistently and which were dependent upon organizational or community contexts. Member checking was conducted by sharing concise interpretations with selected participants to confirm that the analysis reasonably represented their experiences. The final interpretation integrated evidence from all data sources to explain how, under what conditions, and to what extent digital storytelling and creative technologies operated as tools for empowerment within social enterprises.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed according to the conceptual dimensions of digital storytelling, creative technology, social entrepreneurship, and empowerment. Separate but interconnected interview questions were prepared for founders or managers, communication staff, and community participants. Questions for organizational leaders examined institutional objectives, storytelling strategies, technology selection, audience development, resource allocation, perceived social impact, and challenges associated with digital transformation. Questions for communication personnel explored content production, narrative development, digital platforms, creative tools, audience interaction, and ethical considerations (Escala et al., 2025). Questions addressed to community participants focused on involvement in storytelling, control over personal narratives, acquisition of digital skills, changes in confidence, economic opportunities, social networks, participation, and perceptions of whether digital storytelling had strengthened their individual or collective agency.

An observation guide was employed to document the practical implementation of digital storytelling within participating social enterprises. Observations focused on content-production processes, interactions between organizational staff and community participants, use of digital devices and creative applications, decision-making during narrative development, and mechanisms through which stories were reviewed and distributed. The researchers also examined publicly available digital materials produced by the selected social enterprises, including social media posts, short-form videos, campaign materials, digital photographs, website stories, promotional narratives, and multimedia content. Documentary analysis considered narrative themes, representation of beneficiaries, calls to action, evidence of community participation, technological formats, and patterns of audience engagement.

Instrument quality was strengthened through expert review and preliminary testing. The interview and observation protocols were examined by researchers with expertise in social entrepreneurship, digital communication, and qualitative methodology to evaluate conceptual relevance, linguistic clarity, and correspondence with the research objectives. A pilot interview was conducted with participants who possessed characteristics similar to those of the intended sample but were not included in the final analysis. Feedback from the pilot process was used to refine ambiguous questions, remove repetitive items, and improve the sequencing of interview

topics. Data-source triangulation involving interviews, observations, and digital documents was applied to increase the dependability and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive dataset consisted of evidence obtained from six social enterprises involving 30 participants, including six founders or managers, twelve communication or digital-content staff members, and twelve community members or beneficiaries. Documentary analysis covered 180 digital storytelling materials consisting of short-form videos, social media posts, photographs accompanied by narrative captions, website stories, campaign materials, and multimedia promotional content. The six enterprises represented creative handicrafts, community-based education, food production, ecotourism, cultural media, and inclusive design. Digital platform records showed that the average monthly audience reach increased from 18,420 users before the intensive storytelling period to 32,760 users during the observed campaign period, representing an average increase of approximately 77.9%. The mean engagement rate increased from 4.2% to 6.8%, while average monthly digital inquiries concerning products, services, participation, or collaboration increased from 41 to 67 inquiries per organization.

Participant-level descriptive findings demonstrated that 27 of 30 participants reported greater public visibility after becoming involved in digital storytelling activities, while 26 participants described an improvement in their ability to use digital media for communication or entrepreneurial purposes. Twenty-four participants stated that storytelling enabled them to communicate experiences or identities more confidently, 22 reported expansion of professional or community networks, 19 identified new or improved economic opportunities, and 18 perceived greater participation in organizational or program-related decision-making. The distribution of these findings across the six cases is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Descriptive Findings Across the Six Social Enterprise Cases

Case	Enterprise Focus	Participants	Digital Materials Analyzed	Community Co-Creation of Stories	Change In Digital Reach	Participants Reporting Economic Opportunities
A	Creative handicrafts	5	32	81%	+92%	4 of 5
B	Community education	5	28	75%	+68%	3 of 5
C	Community food production	5	31	84%	+105%	4 of 5
D	Ecotourism	5	30	73%	+59%	3 of 5
E	Cultural media	5	29	88%	+86%	3 of 5
F	Inclusive design	5	30	79%	+61%	2 of 5
Total/Average	Six sectors	30	180	80.0%	+78.5%	19 of 30

The increase in digital reach was most evident among organizations that combined personal narratives with visually rich content and direct community participation. Case C recorded the highest increase in audience reach at 105%, followed by Case A at 92% and Case E at 86%. Interviews with communication staff indicated that stories featuring recognizable

individuals, production processes, community challenges, and visible outcomes generated more meaningful audience responses than conventional product-centered advertisements. Digital storytelling appeared to humanize entrepreneurial activities by providing audiences with information about the people, cultural practices, and social purposes behind the products or services. Such narratives strengthened audience interest because the enterprises were perceived not merely as commercial entities but as organizations representing identifiable social missions.

Participant explanations also revealed that digital visibility alone did not automatically produce empowerment. Several participants distinguished between obtaining online attention and gaining substantive benefits from that attention. Case E, for example, achieved an 86% increase in digital reach, but only three of five participants identified direct economic opportunities arising from digital storytelling. Case F showed a similar pattern, with a 61% increase in reach while only two participants reported measurable economic benefits. These findings indicate that increased visibility functioned primarily as an enabling condition rather than as empowerment itself. Organizational mechanisms such as market access, follow-up communication, digital purchasing channels, training opportunities, and stakeholder partnerships were required to convert narrative visibility into more tangible individual or community outcomes.

Narrative agency emerged as one of the strongest themes across the dataset. Twenty-four participants reported that involvement in story development enabled them to express experiences, knowledge, identities, or entrepreneurial aspirations in ways that had previously received limited public attention. Community members participating in Cases A, C, and E described greater confidence when contributing photographs, short videos, personal testimonies, or descriptions of production practices. Evidence from interview transcripts showed that empowerment was strongest when participants were involved in selecting themes, reviewing captions, determining how personal experiences were presented, and deciding which stories could be publicly distributed. Participants who merely appeared in organizational content without participating in narrative decisions expressed weaker perceptions of ownership over the resulting digital representation.

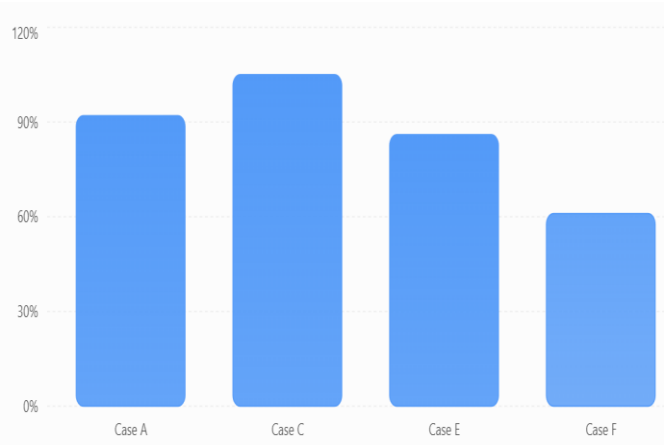


Figure 1. Increase in Digital Reach Across Cases

Digital competence represented another prominent descriptive outcome. Twenty-six participants identified improvements in at least one area of digital capability, including smartphone photography, video recording, basic editing, social media management, graphic design, online customer communication, or digital marketplace use. Staff members frequently described technology learning as initially instrumental because applications were introduced to facilitate organizational communication (Hadi Mogavi et al., 2024; P.-A. Li et al., 2025). Community participants gradually used the acquired skills beyond formal enterprise activities,

including promoting independent products, documenting community events, communicating with customers, and maintaining professional networks. The data therefore suggest that the empowerment value of creative technologies was partly associated with the transferability of digital skills beyond the immediate requirements of social enterprise campaigns.

Cross-case analytical inference indicated that higher levels of community participation in narrative production were consistently associated with stronger perceived empowerment outcomes. Cases A, C, and E recorded the highest rates of community co-creation, ranging from 81% to 88%, and participants in these organizations more frequently reported narrative ownership, confidence, network expansion, and participation in organizational decisions. Cases B and D displayed more manager-led storytelling processes and generated comparatively weaker accounts of participant control over public narratives. This pattern does not constitute population-level statistical causation because the study employed a qualitative multiple-case design, but the recurrence of the relationship across independent cases provides analytical support for the proposition that participatory storytelling contributes more strongly to empowerment than externally produced representation.

A second inferential pattern concerned the relationship between technological capability and the conversion of visibility into social or economic benefits. Cases with regular skills development, accessible technological tools, and clearly organized digital follow-up mechanisms demonstrated stronger outcomes than organizations that relied predominantly on communication specialists. Case A and Case C, for instance, combined storytelling training with online selling mechanisms and reported economic opportunities among four of five participants in each case. Case F produced visually sophisticated stories but maintained more centralized control over content production and recorded economic opportunities among only two of five participants. Cross-case evidence therefore supports the analytical inference that technology becomes empowering when access, skills, narrative control, and opportunity structures operate together rather than when digital tools are introduced as isolated communication instruments.

A consistent relationship was identified between narrative agency, digital competence, and stakeholder engagement. Participants who exercised greater control over storytelling also tended to describe higher confidence in interacting with customers, partner organizations, donors, community groups, or wider online audiences. Twenty-one of the 24 participants who reported improved narrative agency also described stronger audience or stakeholder interaction. This overlap suggests that the capacity to tell one's own story may influence not only representation but also participants' willingness to engage with external actors. Interview data showed that participants became more comfortable explaining product origins, cultural meanings, community challenges, and social objectives after repeated involvement in digital-content development.

The association between digital visibility and economic opportunity was more conditional. Twenty-seven participants perceived greater visibility, yet only nineteen reported economic benefits such as increased sales inquiries, invitations to events, collaboration opportunities, new customers, paid creative work, or improved access to wider markets. This discrepancy demonstrates that visibility should not be treated as a direct proxy for economic empowerment (Fang et al., 2024; Rizvanović et al., 2023). Cases possessing functioning online marketplaces, responsive communication systems, clear product information, and established partner networks translated digital attention into economic opportunities more effectively. The relationship among the data therefore indicates a sequential mechanism in which storytelling enhances visibility, visibility facilitates interaction, and organizational capacity determines whether interaction becomes a meaningful economic or social opportunity.

Case A, a community-based handicraft enterprise, demonstrated how storytelling could connect cultural representation with economic participation. Community artisans were involved in selecting story themes, documenting production processes, explaining symbolic

meanings, and reviewing content before publication. Thirty-two digital materials were analyzed during the observation period, and approximately 81% demonstrated direct community participation in the storytelling process. Digital reach increased by 92%, while four of five interviewed participants reported receiving new customer inquiries, collaboration opportunities, or invitations to participate in exhibitions. Artisans stated that stories explaining the cultural meaning and production history of their products generated more serious customer interest than conventional product photographs accompanied only by prices.

Case C, a community food-production social enterprise, produced the strongest increase in digital reach, reaching 105% during the storytelling campaign period. The organization emphasized short-form video narratives depicting producers, local ingredients, traditional preparation techniques, household economic challenges, and changes generated through participation in the enterprise. Community co-creation was recorded in approximately 84% of the analyzed materials. Four of five participants reported economic opportunities, while all five described increased confidence in presenting their work to external audiences. The case also revealed that storytelling created symbolic recognition because producers who had previously been presented collectively as beneficiaries were increasingly identified as skilled producers with individual knowledge, responsibilities, and entrepreneurial capacities.

Evidence from Case A showed that the empowering effect of storytelling was closely related to narrative ownership. Artisans were not simply photographed as beneficiaries of a social program but were involved in deciding which cultural practices could be documented and which information should remain private. This distinction was particularly significant where creative products incorporated community knowledge or cultural symbols. Organizational staff reported that consultation occasionally slowed content production, yet the process reduced misrepresentation and strengthened participant trust. The case demonstrates that participatory storytelling may require additional time and negotiation, but these practices can improve both ethical representation and the legitimacy of the resulting digital content.

Evidence from Case C illustrated how creative technologies could strengthen empowerment when communication was integrated with broader entrepreneurial infrastructure. Increased audience reach generated customer inquiries because stories were directly connected to ordering information, online customer service, product catalogs, and community-based production systems. Participants received basic training in recording videos, preparing captions, responding to online inquiries, and presenting production processes. The economic outcomes observed in this case therefore cannot be attributed solely to storytelling. The interaction among narrative visibility, practical digital skills, market infrastructure, and organizational support created the conditions through which digital engagement translated into opportunities with greater practical value for participants.

The findings indicate that digital storytelling contributes to empowerment most effectively when community members participate as narrative producers rather than merely as subjects of organizational communication. Increased visibility constituted the most widespread outcome, but narrative ownership, transferable digital skills, expanded networks, participation in decision-making, and economic opportunities represented more substantive dimensions of empowerment (Chia & Frattarola, 2025; Gunklach et al., 2025). The results challenge a technology-centered interpretation in which the use of sophisticated digital applications is assumed to generate social impact automatically. Human participation, control over representation, and organizational mechanisms for converting attention into opportunity were more influential than technological sophistication alone.

The overall pattern suggests that creative technologies function as enabling infrastructures whose social value depends on how they are governed and integrated into social enterprise practices. Digital storytelling strengthened empowerment when it connected voice, capability, recognition, stakeholder engagement, and access to opportunity within a participatory organizational environment. Cases with centralized content production generated

communication benefits but weaker evidence of participant agency, whereas enterprises that shared narrative control demonstrated broader empowerment outcomes. These findings position digital storytelling as more than a promotional strategy and identify it as a potentially significant mechanism for socially embedded entrepreneurship when technological access, ethical representation, community participation, and economic pathways are developed simultaneously.

The findings demonstrate that digital storytelling can function as an important mechanism of empowerment within social enterprises when community members participate actively in producing, interpreting, and disseminating their own narratives. Evidence across the six cases indicated improvements in digital visibility, narrative agency, technological competence, stakeholder interaction, network development, and access to economic opportunities. Digital reach increased across all cases, although the magnitude of improvement differed according to organizational characteristics and storytelling practices. The strongest outcomes were found in enterprises where community members contributed directly to decisions concerning story themes, visual representation, narrative language, and content distribution. Such patterns indicate that empowerment was associated less with the availability of digital technology itself than with the extent to which individuals could exercise meaningful control over its use.

Narrative agency emerged as one of the most prominent dimensions of empowerment. Most participants who were involved directly in storytelling reported greater confidence in communicating personal experiences, cultural knowledge, entrepreneurial activities, and community aspirations. Participants who helped determine how their stories were framed appeared to develop a stronger sense of ownership than those who primarily served as subjects of organizational content. The findings indicate that digital storytelling can move individuals from being represented by organizations toward becoming active producers of representation. This distinction is theoretically significant because voice alone cannot be equated with empowerment unless participants possess some degree of influence over what is communicated, how it is communicated, and the audiences to whom the narrative is presented.

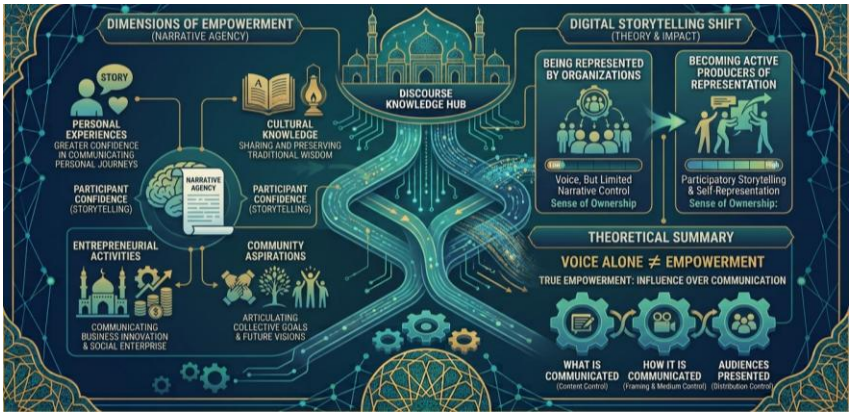


Figure 2. Narrative Agency: The Frontier of Empowerment in Islamic Discourse

Digital competence constituted another important outcome across the cases. Participants reported improvements in smartphone photography, video production, basic editing, graphic design, social media communication, online customer interaction, and digital marketing. Several of these competencies were subsequently used outside the immediate activities of the participating enterprises, suggesting that the benefits were potentially transferable to broader entrepreneurial and community contexts. Such transferability is important because technological empowerment involves more than learning to operate a particular application. Digital competence becomes more socially meaningful when individuals can independently apply acquired skills to create opportunities, maintain networks, communicate knowledge, and

participate more effectively in an increasingly digital economic environment (Karkar Esperat & Stickley, 2024; Madaan & Sharma, 2025).

Economic empowerment was evident but substantially less universal than increased digital visibility. Most participants recognized improvements in public exposure, yet a smaller proportion experienced identifiable economic opportunities arising from this visibility. Enterprises with functioning digital marketplaces, responsive customer-service systems, product information, partnership networks, and established mechanisms for converting audience attention into transactions achieved stronger economic outcomes. The findings consequently demonstrate that digital reach should not be interpreted as a direct measure of empowerment. Visibility represents an intermediate resource whose value depends on the institutional and entrepreneurial structures available for transforming communication into tangible benefits.

The prominence of narrative agency in the present findings is consistent with previous research positioning digital storytelling as a participatory mechanism through which marginalized individuals can reinterpret and communicate their experiences. Research involving digitally marginalized women in Zimbabwe found that storytelling activities contributed not only to digital competence but also to relationship-building and solidarity, demonstrating that empowerment develops through social interaction as well as technical learning (Agarwal et al., 2025). Recent research with Afghan refugee women similarly identifies digital storytelling as a means of connecting literacy, personal expression, and empowerment. The present study extends these observations into social-enterprise contexts by showing that narrative agency can interact with entrepreneurial participation, stakeholder communication, and market-facing activities rather than remaining primarily within educational or community-development settings.

The findings also correspond with recent scholarship emphasizing storytelling as a mechanism for developing collective meaning and social capital. Hou and Hearn demonstrate that participatory storytelling networks can generate narrative agency and contribute to the communicative foundations of social capital, particularly where communities experience unequal power relations. The current findings reveal a comparable process within social enterprises, as participants who exercised greater narrative control frequently reported stronger interactions with customers, community organizations, partners, and wider networks. This similarity suggests that storytelling creates value not only because narratives communicate information but also because the process of constructing and exchanging stories can reorganize relationships among storytellers, organizations, audiences, and other stakeholders.

A meaningful difference emerges when the present findings are compared with literature that conceptualizes storytelling mainly as organizational communication. A 2024 review of narrative in social enterprise and social innovation identified several established functions, including mobilizing support, stimulating social change, building entrepreneurial identity, and shaping debates about social innovation. The same review argues that social-enterprise scholarship has frequently emphasized storytelling as mass communication while paying less attention to communal debate and internal forms of narrative meaning-making. The current study reinforces that critique by showing that the most consequential empowerment outcomes appeared when storytelling operated as a participatory process rather than simply as externally directed communication designed to strengthen organizational reputation or marketing performance.

The relationship between technological adoption and empowerment also supports emerging evidence from digital economic empowerment research. Studies of community-based enterprises have shown that locally grounded narratives, community participation, and appropriate technological adaptation can be more consequential for sustainable empowerment than technology adoption in isolation (Leon, 2023). Community-oriented digital storytelling initiatives have similarly reported improvements in skills, cultural representation, and audience

engagement when creative content is produced through locally situated processes. The present study contributes a more cautious interpretation by showing that technological competence and digital exposure generated uneven economic outcomes. Creative technologies therefore appear to expand the field of opportunity, but organizational arrangements determine how far such opportunities can be converted into sustainable benefits.

The findings signify a broader transformation in how empowerment may be understood within contemporary social entrepreneurship. Conventional discussions frequently frame empowerment in terms of employment, income generation, access to resources, or participation in organizational programs. Digital environments introduce an additional dimension in which the capacity to represent oneself becomes a form of social and economic power. Individuals who possess the ability to construct and circulate credible narratives can participate more actively in defining how their identities, communities, products, and aspirations are understood. Narrative agency should consequently be recognized as a meaningful dimension of empowerment alongside economic capability, participation, and access to institutional resources.

The difference between appearing in a story and controlling a story represents another important signal emerging from the findings. Digital media can increase the visibility of marginalized groups without fundamentally altering existing power relations if organizations continue to determine which experiences are selected, how vulnerability is framed, and what benefits arise from public exposure. Earlier critical digital storytelling research has emphasized the value of enabling marginalized participants to transform experiences in which they were objectified into subjects of their own representation. The findings of the present study indicate that this principle remains relevant within entrepreneurial contexts, where the commercial or promotional value of personal narratives may otherwise create new risks of extractive representation.

The unequal relationship between visibility and economic outcomes also signals the limitations of interpreting digital metrics as indicators of social impact. Audience reach, likes, shares, views, and engagement rates can provide useful evidence of communication performance, yet they say little about whether community members gain control over resources, improve their livelihoods, participate in decisions, or develop sustainable capabilities. Earlier evaluations of digital storytelling have similarly cautioned that conventional outcome measurements may fail to capture locally experienced forms of empowerment and process-based effects. The present findings add the reverse caution: positive communication metrics may also exaggerate empowerment if researchers fail to examine what happens after visibility has been achieved.

The observed transfer of digital skills beyond formal organizational activities represents a particularly important sign of more durable empowerment. Participants who used storytelling competencies to promote independent products, communicate with external networks, or document community activities demonstrated that technological learning had moved beyond task-specific participation. Such outcomes resemble recent digital storytelling studies in which participants developed personal expression, cultural pride, social connection, and broader capacities through participatory narrative practices. Sustainable empowerment therefore appears more likely when participants retain knowledge and capacities that remain useful after a particular campaign, project, or organizational intervention has ended.

The theoretical implication of these findings is that digital storytelling should be incorporated into social-enterprise scholarship as a mechanism of value creation that operates simultaneously at communicative, relational, cultural, and economic levels. Existing frameworks often separate social value creation from communication strategies, treating narratives as mechanisms for describing impacts that have already occurred. The present findings suggest a different interpretation: the production of narratives can itself become part of the empowerment process. Story development can generate reflection, skill acquisition, identity

negotiation, stakeholder interaction, and collective recognition before any subsequent marketing or fundraising outcome is achieved. Storytelling should therefore be examined as part of social-enterprise practice rather than merely as a vehicle used to publicize that practice.

The practical implication for social enterprises concerns the design of digital communication processes. Organizations seeking empowerment outcomes should create structures that allow community members to participate in selecting stories, developing scripts, producing visual content, reviewing representations, and determining appropriate distribution channels. Participation cannot be reduced to obtaining permission to use photographs or testimonies after an organizational narrative has already been constructed. Meaningful co-creation requires the redistribution of decision-making authority throughout the storytelling process. Recent research emphasizing authorship, co-design, and agency in marginalized settings similarly conceptualizes communication design as a relational process through which participants reshape narratives about their experiences.

The managerial implication concerns the need to connect storytelling infrastructure with pathways for realizing economic and social opportunities. Increased reach generated limited material outcomes in cases where organizations lacked effective online purchasing mechanisms, stakeholder follow-up, customer communication, or partnership structures. Social enterprises should therefore avoid investing exclusively in content production while neglecting systems that enable audiences to respond meaningfully to that content. Digital stories may generate interest, but appropriate market channels, organizational responsiveness, training, mentoring, and networks are required to convert interest into transactions, collaborations, participation, or other forms of value.

The policy and development implication relates to the design of digital inclusion programs. Technology-based empowerment initiatives frequently emphasize access to devices, internet connectivity, software platforms, or technical training. The findings indicate that such interventions are necessary but insufficient. Effective initiatives should incorporate narrative literacy, ethical representation, entrepreneurial pathways, community ownership, and opportunities to apply acquired capabilities in real contexts. Research on women's digital inclusion has similarly demonstrated the importance of evaluating empowerment through contextualized experiences rather than treating access and competence as complete outcomes in themselves. Digital inclusion policy would therefore benefit from moving from a model centered on access toward one centered on agency, capability, participation, and opportunity.

The positive relationship between participatory storytelling and empowerment can be explained through the psychological and social processes inherent in authorship. Individuals who construct narratives must select experiences, organize meaning, determine emphasis, and decide how they wish to be perceived by others. These activities create opportunities for reflection and self-definition that differ substantially from passive participation in externally produced media. Previous digital storytelling research has associated narrative construction with positive identity development because participants are able to reorganize personal experiences into narratives characterized by possibility and agency. Similar mechanisms appear to operate in social enterprises, although narrative identity becomes linked more explicitly with entrepreneurial identity, cultural representation, and economic participation.

The improvement in digital competence can be explained by the experiential nature of storytelling activities. Participants did not acquire technology skills exclusively through abstract training but used digital tools to achieve meaningful communicative objectives. Photographing products, recording stories, editing video, preparing captions, responding to customers, and publishing digital content required repeated engagement with technology in authentic contexts. Such situated learning reduces the separation between technical competence and practical usefulness. Participants had identifiable reasons to learn particular tools, immediate opportunities to apply new skills, and visible outcomes through which they could evaluate their progress.

The weaker relationship between visibility and economic empowerment can be explained by differences in organizational conversion capacity. Audience attention has limited economic value unless mechanisms exist through which potential customers, partners, donors, or collaborators can act upon their interest. Social enterprises possessing online marketplaces, clear product information, responsive digital communication, and existing stakeholder networks were better positioned to transform storytelling success into measurable opportunities. Enterprises lacking these structures generated attention without consistently converting it into economic value. The finding underscores a crucial distinction between communication capital and economic capital: the former may support the latter, but conversion is neither automatic nor equally accessible.

The variation among cases can also be explained through differences in power distribution and organizational culture. Social enterprises with participatory governance were more likely to involve community members in narrative decisions because collaborative practices already existed beyond digital communication. Organizations characterized by centralized managerial control tended to reproduce similar hierarchies in content production. Stakeholder scholarship has emphasized the importance of engagement in navigating the competing social and commercial tensions experienced by social enterprises. Digital storytelling appears to reflect those broader institutional dynamics, meaning that technological practices cannot easily become participatory when organizational decision-making remains fundamentally centralized.

Future research should examine digital storytelling through longitudinal designs capable of determining whether observed empowerment outcomes persist beyond short-term campaigns. Increased confidence, digital competence, and network expansion may initially result from intensive organizational support but decline when training, equipment, or facilitation is withdrawn. Longitudinal evidence could clarify whether participants continue producing their own narratives, maintain digital networks, generate independent economic opportunities, and exercise greater influence within social enterprises over time. Such research would distinguish temporary program effects from more durable transformations in individual and collective agency.

Subsequent studies should develop multidimensional measures that distinguish digital visibility from substantive empowerment. Quantitative indicators could include changes in income, customer access, collaboration networks, digital independence, decision-making participation, and skill retention, while qualitative evidence could examine narrative ownership, confidence, identity, cultural recognition, and perceived agency. Mixed-method approaches would be particularly valuable because digital storytelling outcomes often contain experiential dimensions that standardized indicators fail to capture. Earlier methodological research has shown that purely quantitative measures may overlook important locally experienced effects of storytelling. Combining measurable outcomes with participant-centered interpretation could consequently provide a more credible account of empowerment.

Social enterprises should institutionalize ethical storytelling protocols that define consent, authorship, editorial rights, privacy, benefit sharing, and procedures for withdrawing content. Such protocols are especially important when narratives involve poverty, disability, displacement, cultural identity, discrimination, or other potentially sensitive experiences. Research with marginalized youth has demonstrated that digital storytelling can generate important advocacy opportunities while simultaneously raising concerns related to vulnerability and privacy. Ethical safeguards should therefore extend beyond initial consent and recognize that digital circulation can expose stories to audiences, interpretations, and uses that participants may not fully anticipate when content is first produced.

The next stage in the development of digital social enterprise should focus on building integrated empowerment ecosystems rather than expanding technological adoption alone. Creative technologies can provide tools for storytelling, artificial intelligence can facilitate

production, social media can extend reach, and digital marketplaces can connect enterprises with wider audiences, yet sustainable empowerment emerges when these resources are combined with human agency, ethical governance, transferable capabilities, social networks, and viable economic pathways. The central lesson of this study is that technology becomes empowering not simply when communities gain access to digital tools, but when they acquire meaningful authority and capacity to use those tools in shaping narratives, relationships, opportunities, and futures of their own.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that digital storytelling contributes to empowerment not merely by increasing visibility, but by strengthening narrative agency, digital competence, stakeholder engagement, and access to social and economic opportunities. The strongest empowerment outcomes emerged in social enterprises where community members were actively involved in selecting themes, producing content, reviewing representations, and determining how their stories were disseminated. Increased digital reach alone did not consistently lead to economic empowerment, indicating that visibility functions primarily as an enabling resource rather than a final outcome. Social enterprises that combined participatory storytelling with digital skills, responsive communication systems, online market access, and partnership networks were more successful in transforming public attention into practical opportunities. These findings demonstrate that creative technologies become empowering when communities exercise meaningful control over both the production of narratives and the opportunities generated through their circulation.

The principal contribution of this research lies in its conceptual integration of digital storytelling, social enterprise, creative technology, and empowerment within a single analytical framework. The study extends existing perspectives that commonly treat storytelling as a promotional or communication strategy by positioning narrative production itself as part of the social value-creation process. Empowerment is therefore conceptualized as a multidimensional outcome involving narrative ownership, transferable digital capability, participation in decision-making, social recognition, network expansion, and economic opportunity. The multiple-case study approach also provides a methodological contribution by combining interviews, field observations, digital-content analysis, and cross-case comparison to examine the relationship between organizational practices and participant experiences. This approach offers a more critical basis for evaluating digital innovation because it distinguishes technological adoption and communication performance from substantive changes in community agency.

The study is limited by its qualitative multiple-case design, relatively small participant group, and concentration on six social enterprises, which restrict the statistical generalizability of the findings across different sectors and geographical settings. The observed changes in digital reach, engagement, and perceived empowerment also represent a limited period of organizational activity and therefore cannot establish whether these outcomes remain sustainable over the longer term. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs involving larger and more diverse samples to test the relationships among participatory storytelling, narrative agency, digital competence, organizational capacity, and measurable economic or social outcomes. Comparative studies across cultural contexts, industries, and levels of digital development would further clarify the conditions under which creative technologies produce sustainable empowerment. Future investigations should also examine the growing use of artificial intelligence in narrative production, particularly its implications for authorship, authenticity, ethical representation, community consent, and the distribution of creative control within social enterprises.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used BlackBox AI to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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