

From Isolation to Understanding: Leveraging Transmedia Storytelling to Foster Empathy for Infertility in Indonesia

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Abstract

Due to deep-rooted mythical and societal beliefs, infertility in Indonesia is heavily stigmatized, leaving affected couples feeling isolated and impacting their well-being. Although storytelling is recognized as a powerful medium for fostering empathy, it faces challenges such as shortened attention spans across generations and the cognitive effort required for empathetic engagement. This study explores the effectiveness of a transmedia storytelling experience, tailored to hook users according to their preferred channels, in enhancing empathy towards infertility. An intervention involving Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 20 women was conducted to determine which storytelling approaches captured their attention and evoked empathy. The findings indicate that offering multiple channels and a variety of storytelling formats enhances understanding of infertility. However, the study also reveals that infertility is still perceived as a minor inconvenience by women who have already given birth, compared to the more profound impact recognized by women who have not yet experienced childbirth. These results underscore the importance of diverse and engaging storytelling methods in addressing stigma and fostering empathy towards individuals facing infertility.

Keywords: Empathy, Infertility, Stigma, Transmedia Storytelling, Indonesia

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Introduction

Infertility is one of the stigmatized issues in Indonesia. It is rooted in cultural, religious beliefs, and societal values revolving around newlywed couples. Once a couple gets married, there is an immediate expectation to have offspring, and any delay in doing so often raises questions within the community. The first question typically asked is: "Is the woman fertile enough to bear a child?". In modern society, where some couples may struggle to conceive immediately or choose to delay pregnancy for financial or personal reasons, societal values often fail to understand these decisions (Harzif et al., 2019). This can lead to significant stress and impact the couple's well-being (Damayanti et al., 2022). Although the root causes of infertility vary, societal norms frequently place the blame on women when the issue arises within a marriage. As a result, women often become the target of intense social scrutiny, leading to emotional distress and social isolation.

Traditional beliefs and practices further amplify the stigma around infertility (Purvis, 2015). Although infertility is a medical issue that requires professional aid, society still believes that the act of seeking medical help will further complicate the situation. The trust issue towards medical treatment remains high among non-urban societies, and they rely heavily on the help of shamans and religious figures, hindering couples from seeking immediate help for their conditions (Bennett, 2018). Furthermore in a non-urban area, where medical help is rare, society relies on the rescue of traditional approaches: massage, herbal drinks, shaman, and prayer. To amplify the mental burden, Women, in particular, bear a disproportionate share of this burden, as societal views often portray childbearing as their ultimate responsibility (Bennett, 2018; Harzif et al., 2019; Novrika, 2018; Panggabean, 2014).

Despite the availability of treatments that may help couples address infertility, one crucial aspect often remains overlooked: well-being. Couples grappling with infertility frequently experience profound loneliness and alienation from society (Gusti Agung Istri Teresna Anindhita et al., 2021; Latifah, 2023). Many withdraw from social interactions for a variety of reasons, such as feeling envy when friends or family share pregnancy news, despair over repeated failures to conceive, sadness from monthly disappointments, and anger or frustration from the relentless pursuit of parenthood. A pervasive sense of inferiority compounds these emotions within a society that expects childbearing. The complex interplay of these feelings can intensify feelings of isolation. Infertile couples often report loneliness stemming from a lack of understanding among friends and family; only those who have faced similar struggles seem able to empathize truly. However, connecting with others who share these experiences is often hindered by the shame associated with seeking out support, as the stigma surrounding infertility discourages open discussions and engagement in community forums (Bennett, 2018).

In this context, fostering empathy towards individuals experiencing infertility could relieve some pressure and contribute to a more supportive social environment. However, empathy is not easily given (Cameron, 2018); it requires cognitive effort and emotional investment, which many people may be reluctant to expend, particularly in fast-paced digital environments with limited attention spans. This cognitive cost makes empathy challenging to achieve on a large scale.

Storytelling, however, offers a promising approach to bridging this gap. Storytelling can engage audiences more effectively by embedding empathetic narratives about infertility in various media formats catering to diverse preferences (Pinasthika, 2023). However, the

challenge remains: In a world saturated with brief, fragmented content, how can narratives be crafted to capture and sustain attention, allowing for the emotional depth needed to foster genuine empathy?

This study explores the potential of transmedia storytelling to foster empathy for infertile couples in Indonesia. By adapting storytelling formats to match users' media consumption habits, this approach addresses the cognitive cost of empathy and the cultural nuances of infertility stigma. It aims to answer crucial questions about how stories can be tailored to engage audiences and inspire a compassionate response, ultimately creating a foundation for broader societal understanding and support.

Theoretical Framework

Empathy is an essential yet complex response, requiring both cognitive and emotional engagement (Cameron et al., 2019; Shen, 2010). Given that empathy encompasses both understanding and affective connection, it can be intentionally evoked through structured narrative and storytelling that introduces audiences to the fundamental struggles faced by others (Carmel-Gilfilen & Portillo, 2016). In today's digital age, characterized by high volumes of media and diminished attention spans, maintaining such engagement has become increasingly challenging (Pinasthika, 2023).

Empathy theories highlight the importance of narrative immersion, where storytelling enables audiences to experience the perspective of another, fostering a sense of emotional understanding (Getchell et al., 2023). Transmedia storytelling enhances this process by delivering narratives across multiple formats, each providing unique entry points that align with audiences' varied media preferences (Jenkins, 2007). This multi-platform approach helps to lower the cognitive demand required to engage empathetically, making the experience more accessible and better suited to contemporary media consumption habits (Guadaña, 2021).

Indonesian societal values strongly emphasize family as a cornerstone of identity and success. Infertility is therefore not only seen as a personal shortcoming but a disruption to social order (Bennett, 2018). Research has shown that stigmas associated with infertility lead to social exclusion and affect psychological well-being. Such stigma disproportionately impacts women, who are often regarded as the primary party responsible for childbearing (Komalasari & Septiyanti, 2017; Panggabean, 2014). Comparative studies in other high-context cultures reveal similar patterns, highlighting the role of traditional beliefs and societal expectations in shaping perceptions around infertility (Purvis, 2015).

Studies on narrative empathy indicate that storytelling is uniquely suited to foster empathy by providing structure and context, essential for readers to engage emotionally (Getchell et al., 2023). Story structures that incorporate real-life experiences or relatable fictional characters can evoke empathy by bridging the gap between the audience and stigmatized groups (Batson et al., 1997; Frijda et al., 2000). However, research has shown that the cognitive effort required can act as a barrier, particularly when stories are lengthy or complex (Pinasthika, 2023).

Transmedia storytelling—distributing a narrative across different media formats—allows for a layered, immersive experience that can accommodate varied audience preferences. In recent years, this approach has gained popularity as a solution to engagement challenges,

particularly with young audiences who prefer interactive and visually engaging content followed by active engagement (Heilemann et al., 2017; Satyagraha & Hutapea, 2023; Soderlund et al., 2021). By offering diverse entry points into the narrative, transmedia storytelling fosters a deeper emotional connection with the content while addressing barriers related to cognitive load and attention span.

Despite the recognized potential of storytelling to foster empathy, there is a gap in applying transmedia approaches specifically to stigmatized issues like infertility within culturally sensitive contexts. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how transmedia storytelling can be tailored to reduce the cognitive cost of empathy, making it accessible and meaningful within an Indonesian cultural framework.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore the impact of different storytelling formats on empathy towards infertility. The research is divided into three experimental groups, each exposed to distinct storytelling interventions tailored to their preferred media channels.

The first group consisted of 6 women aged 19 to 23. They were presented with a long-form narrative blog detailing the real-life infertility journey of a couple. The narrative was divided into three separate blog posts, culminating in an unresolved, emotionally charged conclusion where the couple's second attempt at intrauterine insemination (IUI) fails.

The second group, comprising 9 women aged 21 to 52, was guided through a transmedia experience under the premise: "You just met me, and you try to find out things about me through social media." Participants engaged with the story through Instagram, where they encountered posts, stories, and interactive quizzes that mimicked a natural person's account. The narrative journey included links to related YouTube content and quizzes, offering an immersive experience. The story's outcome depended on how thoroughly participants engaged with the content; a detailed exploration led to a happy ending where the couple successfully conceived, while a superficial engagement left them with a less satisfying conclusion.

The third group involved 5 women aged 23 to 37, who were introduced to a fan-fiction story. This narrative, written in a classic Indonesian style, depicted a fictional couple's challenging journey toward in vitro fertilization (IVF), which ultimately ended in disappointment.

Each group was carefully constructed to ensure diversity in terms of marital status, with both married and single women included, as well as a mix of participants who had experienced childbirth and those who had not.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based on criteria designed to capture a broad demographic spectrum. The 20 women involved in the FGDs ranged from 19 to 52 years. Selection criteria did not include prior experience with infertility, allowing for a more diverse range of perspectives. Participants were drawn from various cultural backgrounds, with the majority

identifying as Muslim, reflecting the predominant religious demographic in Indonesia. This diversity was crucial in understanding how different women perceive and react to narratives about infertility.

Data Collection

Data was collected through FGDs, with each group exposed to a specific storytelling intervention. The interventions varied in narrative format and media channels, tailored to align with the participants' preferred modes of information consumption.

- **Group 1:** Participants engaged with three blog posts, written in an accessible, everyday language, narrating a real-life couple's infertility journey. The narrative was straightforward, providing a detailed account of the couple's struggles, culminating in a somber ending where their second IUI attempt fails.

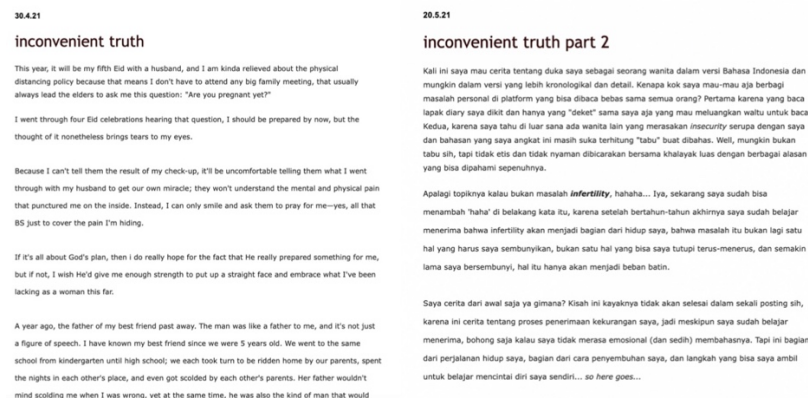


Figure 1: Long Blog Narration

- **Group 2:** Participants were introduced to the same infertility story through a transmedia storytelling approach, primarily via Instagram. The narrative was fragmented into 30 posts, supplemented with Instagram Stories and interactive quizzes. The content was designed to mimic a real-life social media presence, with links directing users to additional content on YouTube and blogs. The experience was dynamic; those who fully engaged with the story journeyed to a positive resolution, while those who skimmed through missed the deeper narrative layers.

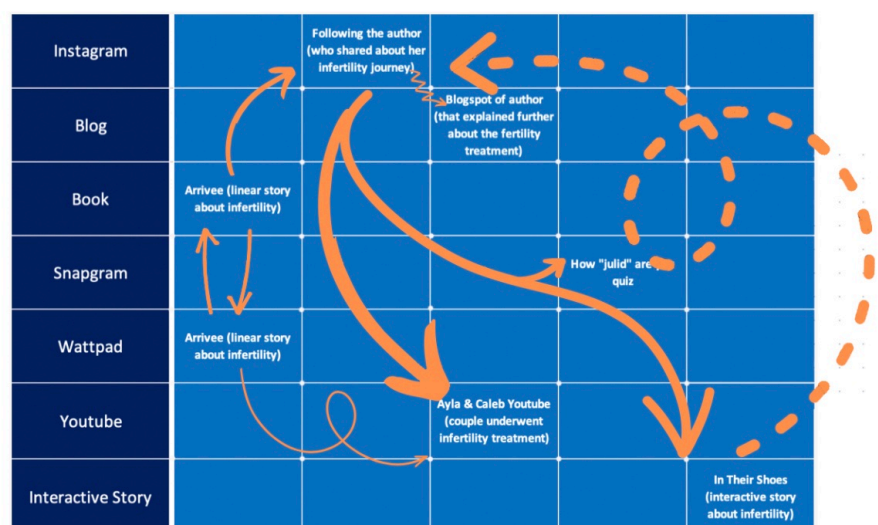


Figure 2: Transmedia Storytelling Map

- **Group 3:** This group read a fan-fiction story in a traditional Indonesian narrative style, starring Cho Kyuhyun (of Super Junior) as the main character who struggled with infertility with his wife. The fictional tale follows a couple's journey through IVF, failing. The narrative was crafted to resonate with the cultural and emotional sensibilities of the participants. To ensure engagement, the participants chosen were fans of the idol who enjoyed reading fan fiction in their free time.

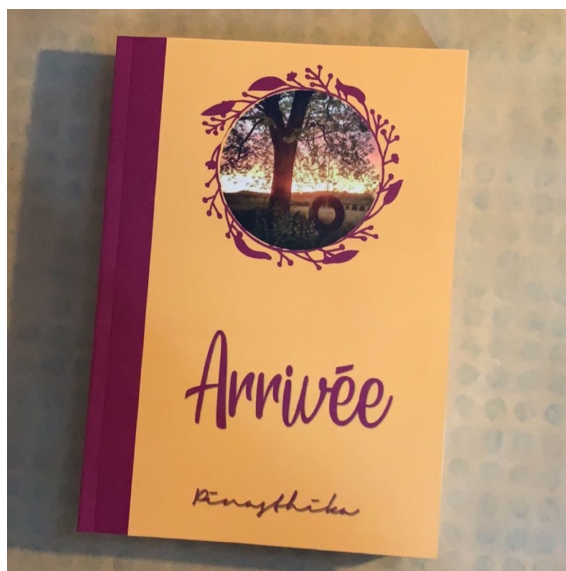


Figure 3: Fan Fiction Approach

The storytelling was not tailored to the demographic preferences of the participants but was instead based on various forms of storytelling typically encountered in their daily lives. Group 1 received a comprehensive, text-heavy narrative reflective of traditional blog content. Group 2's experience was designed for a more interactive, visually-oriented engagement typical of social media consumption, integrating English language and multimedia elements. Group 3 was presented with a story rooted in classic Indonesian fiction, appealing to those who favor narrative depth and cultural familiarity.

Results and Analysis

Narrative Engagement

The analysis revealed significant differences in engagement levels across the three groups, primarily driven by the format and length of the storytelling medium. Participants' responses indicated that narrative structure, medium, and length significantly influenced their ability to connect with the content.

- **Group 1 (Blog Format):** Participants in Group 1, consisting primarily of Gen Z women, reported challenges in maintaining focus throughout the long-form narrative. A recurring theme was the struggle with attention span, with participants expressing sentiments like, "The story was too long" and "I skimmed through parts." This suggests that lengthy narratives may need to be more compelling for audiences accustomed to consuming shorter, more fragmented content, such as social media posts.
- **Group 2 (Instagram Format):** In contrast, Group 2, which engaged with a transmedia storytelling experience via Instagram, showed higher levels of engagement,

particularly among the younger participants. Comments like, "It felt like a real person's account" and "I liked that I could explore the story in different ways" highlight the effectiveness of this format. The ability to interact with various media formats (posts, stories, quizzes) allowed participants to engage more deeply with the narrative, reflecting their typical information-seeking behavior on social media. However, the older participants found this approach less engaging, with some expressing difficulty following the narrative through multiple platforms.

- **Group 3 (Fan Fiction):** Group 3 participants who read a fan-fiction narrative acknowledged the emotional depth of the story. However, many reported difficulties in relating to the content. Unmarried participants, in particular, noted that they "could not relate" to the theme of infertility, with some stating that they did not believe a man could be "so understanding" about such matters. This reflects the cultural skepticism regarding male empathy in the context of infertility and suggests a gap between the narrative's intended emotional impact and the audience's perception.

Cultural Relatability

Cultural norms and expectations were crucial in shaping participants' responses to the storytelling formats. The analysis indicated that personal experience and societal beliefs significantly influenced the degree of empathy participants could muster toward the characters in the stories.

Relatability and Cultural Expectations: Participants' ability to relate to the narrative was heavily influenced by their experiences with infertility and the cultural context surrounding the issue. For instance, those who had not experienced infertility or were unmarried found it challenging to empathize with the characters. This was particularly evident in Group 3, where participants expressed disbelief in portraying a male character's empathy. Comments such as "I do not think men are that understanding" reflect entrenched cultural expectations regarding gender roles and emotional expression.

Impact of Personal Experience: The narratives resonated differently with participants depending on their experiences. Women who had given birth tended to view infertility as a minor inconvenience, as indicated by feedback like, "It is sad, but it does not affect me." In contrast, women who had not yet experienced childbirth were more likely to express a deeper understanding and empathy towards the characters, suggesting that personal experience with childbearing influences one's ability to empathize with infertility.

Empathy Responses

Empathy responses varied significantly across the groups, highlighting the interplay between narrative format, cultural relatability, and personal experience.

Cognitive Effort and Empathy: The findings suggest that participants' willingness to engage emotionally with the narratives was influenced by the perceived cognitive effort required. In Group 1, where the narrative was long and complex, participants appeared less willing to invest emotionally, reflecting the challenge of fostering empathy in audiences with limited attention spans. In contrast, Group 2's transmedia approach reduced cognitive load by breaking the narrative into digestible pieces, resulting in higher empathy levels among younger participants.

Cultural Skepticism and Empathy: Group 3's responses indicated a cultural skepticism toward certain narrative elements, particularly portraying male empathy. This skepticism hindered participants' ability to fully empathize with the characters, suggesting that cultural beliefs and stereotypes can hinder effective empathy-building through storytelling.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the profound impact of culturally attuned transmedia storytelling in fostering empathy toward couples struggling with infertility in Indonesia. Infertility in Indonesian society is intertwined with deeply rooted cultural expectations regarding marriage and childbearing, which often lead to intense social stigma, particularly toward women. The pressure and isolation experienced by these couples underscore the need for an empathetic societal response. However, empathy is a complex emotional and cognitive process, further challenged by the rapid consumption habits shaped by modern media.

Through this study, we explored how transmedia storytelling could serve as an effective empathy-building tool tailored to various media consumption preferences to engage audiences with limited attention spans. Distributing the narrative across different media channels—from long-form blogs to interactive social media stories and traditional fan fiction—allowed participants to engage according to their preferred formats. The results indicate that transmedia storytelling can mitigate the cognitive cost of empathy by breaking down narratives into more accessible and engaging pieces, thus fostering a more profound emotional connection with the content.

Findings reveal significant variations in empathy responses based on media formats and individual demographic factors, such as marital status and personal experience with infertility. Younger participants, particularly those with social media, demonstrated higher empathy when engaging with transmedia formats that allowed interaction and discovery, aligning with their everyday media behaviors. Conversely, older participants or those less familiar with infertility found it challenging to relate to the content, reflecting both the emotional distance created by cultural beliefs and the influence of life experience on empathic engagement.

Academically, this study contributes to empathy research, storytelling, and cultural studies by demonstrating how transmedia storytelling can be strategically applied to address stigmatized topics within specific cultural frameworks. By reducing the emotional and cognitive costs associated with empathy, transmedia storytelling offers a promising approach to facilitate more compassionate societal attitudes toward stigmatized groups, such as those affected by infertility.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring transmedia storytelling's effectiveness in different cultural contexts and with other stigmatized issues, providing a broader understanding of its potential to foster empathy. Moreover, incorporating longitudinal studies could offer insights into the lasting impact of empathy built through transmedia storytelling on audience attitudes and behavior intentions, thus contributing to developing more sustainable, empathy-driven communication strategies.

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