



Storytelling Strategies in Instagram Captions and Audience Emotional Engagement: A Narrative Analysis of @viralforjustice.co

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi storytelling dalam konten Instagram akun @viralforjustice.co dengan mengkaji 500 unggahan pertama yang dipublikasikan selama periode Maret–April 2026. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan analisis naratif kualitatif yang dipadukan dengan analisis isi kuantitatif sederhana untuk mengidentifikasi pola struktur caption, penggunaan elemen emosional, serta hubungannya dengan keterlibatan audiens (engagement) yang diukur melalui jumlah likes dan komentar. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya empat model naratif utama, yaitu problem solution, victim hero, call-to-action, dan investigative disclosure. Caption yang mengandung unsur urgensi, framing korban-pahlawan (victim hero framing), serta ajakan bertindak (call-to-action) yang eksplisit secara konsisten menghasilkan tingkat engagement yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan caption yang bersifat informatif semata. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi dalam memahami bagaimana gerakan sipil digital dapat memanfaatkan strategi storytelling untuk mendorong partisipasi publik dan memperkuat akuntabilitas institusi.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes storytelling strategies in the Instagram content of the @viralforjustice.co account by examining the first 500 uploads published during the March to April 2026 period. Using a qualitative narrative analysis approach complemented by simple quantitative content analysis, the study identifies patterns in caption structures, emotional elements, and their relationship with audience engagement as measured by likes and comments. The findings reveal four dominant narrative models: problem–solution, victim–hero, call-to-action, and investigative disclosure. Captions employing urgency, victim–hero framing, and explicit calls to action consistently generate higher engagement than purely informative captions. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how digital civic movements can leverage storytelling strategies to encourage public participation and strengthen institutional accountability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has transformed the landscape of public communication, enabling digital platforms to function not only as spaces for personal interaction but also as arenas for advocacy, civic participation, and institutional accountability. Among these platforms, Instagram has become increasingly important because of its visual orientation and its ability to combine images, videos, and textual narratives into persuasive communication. In Indonesia, the growing penetration of internet access and social media usage has encouraged the emergence of citizen driven initiatives that utilize Instagram to highlight public issues, disseminate information, and mobilize collective action.

One example of this phenomenon is the Instagram account @viralforjustice.co, which serves as a digital advocacy platform for reporting alleged injustices and encouraging public

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participation in legal and social issues. Rather than functioning solely as an information provider, the account constructs narratives that contextualize incidents, personalize victims, and invite audiences to engage through comments, content sharing, or direct reporting to relevant authorities. In this regard, captions become a strategic communication element because they shape audience interpretation and provide meaning beyond the accompanying visual content.

Storytelling has been recognized as an important mechanism for influencing audience perceptions and engagement in digital environments. According to Tufekci (2017), successful digital movements often rely on compelling narratives that transform complex social problems into relatable stories capable of generating emotional resonance and collective action. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that connective action in networked societies is strengthened through personalized communication that enables individuals to identify with broader social causes. On Instagram, storytelling therefore extends beyond information delivery and becomes a means of fostering empathy, shared identity, and participation.

Recent studies have further explored the relationship between narrative structure and audience engagement. Fine et al. (2025) demonstrate that role model narratives remain underutilized in Instagram content despite their potential to encourage audience involvement. Their findings indicate that posts featuring identifiable individuals frequently appear among high performing content, suggesting that narrative quality and personalization may influence engagement. At the same time, studies discussing emotional storytelling emphasize that affective elements can strengthen audience responses, although their effectiveness varies depending on communication context, platform characteristics, and message objectives. Consequently, the relationship between storytelling strategies and audience engagement requires empirical examination within specific advocacy settings rather than broad generalization.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital activism and storytelling, research focusing on Instagram based legal and social advocacy in Indonesia remains limited. Previous studies have predominantly examined platforms with stronger textual characteristics or have emphasized activism in general without specifically analyzing how caption narratives shape audience engagement in visual first environments. Moreover, empirical evidence regarding the interaction between narrative framing, emotional appeals, and engagement indicators in localized advocacy accounts is still scarce. This gap highlights the need for research that systematically investigates storytelling practices within Indonesian digital civic movements.

The March to April 2026 period provides an especially relevant context for such investigation because discussions surrounding parking conflicts involving residents, online motorcycle taxi drivers, and parking attendants became highly visible in Surabaya following the implementation of digital parking policies. During this period, @viralforjustice.co actively documented incidents, highlighted public complaints, and encouraged institutional responses through Instagram based advocacy. The account therefore offers an appropriate case for examining how storytelling techniques are employed to construct public narratives and stimulate audience interaction.

Based on this context, the present study analyzes the storytelling strategies embedded in the captions of the first 500 uploads published by @viralforjustice.co during March to April 2026. Using qualitative narrative analysis supported by simple quantitative content analysis of engagement indicators, the study seeks to identify dominant narrative models and examine their relationship with audience interaction measured through likes and comments.

The novelty of this research lies not only in its examination of an Indonesian Instagram advocacy account but also in its integration of narrative analysis with engagement metrics to explain how specific storytelling patterns function within digital civic communication. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of digital storytelling and communication scholarship by demonstrating how narrative framing, including victim hero

framing, problem solution structures, call to action messages, and investigative disclosure, shapes emotional engagement and public participation in platform-based advocacy. Practically, the findings provide insights for advocacy organizations, citizen journalists, and public institutions seeking to develop more effective communication strategies and strengthen meaningful interaction with online audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Storytelling

Research on storytelling in digital activism has undergone significant developments in the last decade. Tufekci (2017) in his work *Twitter and Tear Gas* argues that the success of digital social movements is largely determined by their ability to translate complex issues into personal narratives that evoke emotions. Furthermore, Tufekci (2017) emphasizes that networked protest requires "memorable stories" to overcome the fragmentation of audience attention in the digital age. The concept of connective action developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) is also relevant to understanding how personal narratives can be connected into collective movements. Within this framework, storytelling serves not only informative but also integrative bringing together geographically separated individuals through emotional resonance and shared identity.

Emotional Engagement as a Success Metric

The concept of emotional engagement in the context of social media has been studied extensively. Smith and Anderson (2018) in a Pew Research Center report show that audience interaction with advocacy content is greatly influenced by affective factors how strongly the content evokes emotions such as anger (moral outrage), empathy, or hope. In a more specific context, a study by WGSN cited in the Alibaba.com Reads analysis (2025) found that emotion-laden Instagram content can increase the impact of brand equity (in this context: the resonance of advocacy messages) by up to 4 times compared to content that is purely informative. The study also identified the three most effective "emotional triggers" on Instagram: awe (awe/surprise) with a 43% increase in engagement, nostalgia (31%), and calmness (27%). However, it is important to note that the WGSN's research focuses on the context of marketing and brand campaigns, so it needs to be adapted for the context of advocacy where the more dominant emotions are anger at injustice and solidarity with victims.

Speech Acts and Rhetorical Strategies in Captions

A linguistic approach to Instagram caption analysis has been developed by communication researchers. A study published in CORE (2025) on the use of speech acts for branding strategies on Instagram found that of the 162 captions analyzed, 78 were characterized by assertive speech acts, 65 by directive speech acts, and 24 by expressive acts (expression of emotions). These findings are relevant for the study because they show that high engagement is often associated with a balanced combination of the three types of speech acts: captioning is not only assertive but also directive and expressive. Research by Influencer Marketing Hub (2025) also emphasizes the importance of front-loading in Instagram captions only about the first 125 characters visible before the "more" button. Therefore, the hook or call-to-action should appear at the beginning of the caption.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative narrative analysis approach complemented by simple quantitative content analysis to examine storytelling strategies and their relationship with audience engagement on Instagram. Narrative analysis was selected because it enables researchers to explore how stories are constructed, how meaning is conveyed through textual elements, and how narratives influence audience interpretation. To strengthen analytical rigor, the study also incorporated quantitative engagement indicators, namely the number of likes and comments associated with each post. This combination of qualitative interpretation and descriptive quantitative measures is consistent with recommendations for systematic qualitative inquiry and content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The primary dataset consisted of the first 500 posts published by the Instagram account @viralforjustice.co between 31 March 2026 and 22 April 2026. The posts were selected chronologically according to their order of publication during the observation period, without applying filters based on topic, popularity, or engagement level. This sampling procedure was intended to minimize selection bias and ensure that the dataset reflected the account's natural communication practices during the specified timeframe. For each post, the researcher extracted the full caption text, number of likes, number of comments, upload timestamp, hashtags, and account mentions. Likes and comments were treated as observable indicators of audience engagement because they represent measurable forms of user interaction with published content. The narrative content of captions served as the primary unit of analysis.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, all captions were read repeatedly and coded to identify recurring storytelling patterns through an iterative analytical process. The development of narrative categories followed established principles of qualitative coding, in which categories emerge through systematic comparison while remaining theoretically informed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012). Guided by previous work on role model narratives by Fine et al. (2025), four dominant narrative models were ultimately identified: Victim Hero, Problem Solution, Call to Action, and Investigative Disclosure. Second, engagement analysis was performed by calculating the average number of likes and comments within each narrative category. Comparative analysis was subsequently undertaken to identify differences in audience responses across storytelling models. To provide deeper insights, posts with the highest engagement and those with the lowest engagement were further examined to explore recurring rhetorical characteristics. Third, rhetorical element analysis focused on textual features that potentially influenced audience engagement. The analysis considered caption length, use of line breaks and formatting, placement of call-to-action messages, use of local language expressions, frequency of institutional mentions, and the presence of moral outrage or ironic framing.

To maintain coding consistency, operational definitions for each narrative category were established before full scale analysis and applied systematically throughout the dataset. Coding decisions were continuously reviewed through repeated reading and constant comparison across captions to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical stability, following established qualitative content analysis procedures (Schreier, 2012). Whenever ambiguity arose, the researcher revisited previously coded cases and refined interpretations based on the predefined coding framework. The credibility of the findings was further supported through iterative analysis and transparent documentation of coding procedures. Rather than relying on isolated examples, interpretations were derived from recurring patterns identified across the dataset and repeatedly verified against the original captions. This approach enhanced the trustworthiness of the analytical process and reduced the risk of inconsistent interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were also taken into account. The study exclusively analyzed content that was publicly accessible on Instagram and did not involve direct interaction with

account owners, victims, or other individuals featured in the posts. No private information was collected or disclosed beyond what had already been made publicly available by the account. Furthermore, the analysis focused on storytelling strategies and communication patterns rather than making evaluative judgments about the individuals or cases presented, thereby adhering to ethical principles for internet mediated research involving publicly available data (Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Model in Caption @viralforjustice.co

Based on iterative coding of the 500 captions, four dominant narrative models were identified. Their distribution and average engagement in terms of likes and comments are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution and Characteristics of Narrative Models

Narrative Model	Frequency (n=500)	Proportion	Caption	Likes Averages	Comments Averages
Victim-Hero	187	37.4%	Featuring specific victims, highlighting injustices, building empathy	9.847	412
Problem-Solution	156	31.2%	Explain the problem, then mention the actions of the apparatus/movement as a solution	7.231	289
Call-to-Action (CTA)	98	19.6%	Direct calls to report, go viral, or act	3.887	156
Investigative Disclosure	59	11.8%	Revealing new facts, documents, or evidence without emotional solicitation	1.846	74

Source: Researcher's processed data

Victim-Hero

This model is the most dominant (37.4% of total uploads) and generates the highest engagement. This model is very much in line with the concept of role model narratives identified by Fine et al. (2025), where the narrative is focused on the "specific individual who takes action" or in this context, the individual who is a victim and needs action from the movement. A typical example of this model is an upload about "Grandma Elina (80 years old)" whose house was forcibly demolished or "Pak Suwardi" a Sunan Ampel tourism worker who was laid off without severance pay. By giving names, ages, and backgrounds, captions create strong emotional identification.

Another example, one highly engaged caption begins with: "Kasus yang menjerat Amsal Christy Sitepu, seorang videografer, kini menjadi sorotan publik," immediately introducing a named individual and framing the issue through his personal experience. Another post highlights "Pak Eko," a teacher who allegedly received threats after confiscating a student's mobile phone, with the caption stating: "Tak hanya dipukul, ternyata Pak Eko juga diancam kepalanya akan dibeli, rumahnya dibakar." Such personalization transforms abstract legal issues into relatable human stories that encourage audience empathy. As stated by Fine et al. (2025), an effective role model narrative is one that allows audiences to "imagine themselves

in a similar situation". An important difference with the findings of Fine et al. (2025) is that while their research found that the role model narrative did not have statistically significant differences in engagement in a large sample, in the context of legal advocacy in Surabaya, this model consistently outperformed other models. This may be due to differences in cultural context (collectivist Surabaya society vs a more individualistic global sample) and topical framing (legal injustice vs climate action). As stated by Tufekci (2017), narrative effectiveness is highly dependent on "cultural resonance" with the target audience.

Problem-Solution

This model (31.2% of uploads) has a clear structure: orientation (what is the problem), complication (who is involved, what is the impact), and resolution (what the apparatus or movement is doing). This structure exactly follows Labov's (1972) narrative model of the natural narrative. What distinguishes this model from the Victim-Hero model is its emphasis on the institutional and procedural aspects rather than the personal. Captions tend to highlight institutional responses (police, Dishub, Satpol PP) and systemic solutions. An example is an upload about the arrest of illegal jukir by the Surabaya Police Sat Samapta Police, where the caption praises the speed of the response of the authorities while reminding about the correct procedures. One representative example appears in a caption stating, "Pemerintah e Teges, Wargane Kudu Wani! Manut Pak Walikota @ericahyadi_," which frames the issue of parking enforcement before directing attention to governmental initiatives and public compliance. Rather than focusing solely on victimization, captions in this category emphasize practical responses and institutional solutions intended to address public concerns. This model often uses assertive speech acts, statements of facts about what happened and what has been done. According to the CORE study (2025), assertive speech acts are the most common type found in Instagram captions (78 out of 162 captions in their sample) because they provide credibility and factual information.

Call-to-Action (CTA)

This model (19.6% of uploads) has the most distinctive feature: a call to action that appears at the beginning of the caption and is repeated frequently. In contrast to other models where a call to action may only be an addition at the end, in a CTA model, the call to action is at the heart of the message. An extreme example is an upload where almost all of the captions contain instructions: " Laporkan ke 110 atau bisa DM @samaptapolrestabessby atau langsung DM akun polsek sekitar ". This kind of caption is very short, straight to the point, and effective for quick mobilization. However, interestingly, the CTA model has significantly lower engagement than the Victim-Hero and Problem-Solution models. This indicates that audiences are more responsive to narratives that build emotional resonance first before being asked to act, compared to direct invitations without emotional framing. These findings are consistent with the principle of emotional engagement stated by WGSN (2025) that "content that evokes emotions can increase the impact by up to 4 times".

Investigative Disclosure

This model (11.8% of uploads) is the least frequent and has the lowest engagement. Captions in this model tend to be long, information-dense, and have minimal emotional content. An example is an upload that reveals project contract documents that are allegedly problematic or an analysis of PAD leaks from the parking sector. The low engagement of this model can be explained by the Influencer Marketing Hub's (2025) findings that "only about the first 125 characters of the caption are visible before the 'more' button. Long and informative investigative captions often lose the audience at the beginning because they don't have a strong

hook. As experts emphasize, "the opening quotation should stand alone as a whole message". However, it's important to note that low engagement doesn't necessarily mean this model is worthless. Investigative captions serve to build the movement's long-term credibility as a trusted source of information, even if it doesn't trigger instant engagement.

Personalization of Victims as a Trigger for Empathy

The most powerful finding from this analysis is that victim personalization consistently appears in captions with the highest engagement. As stated by Fine et al. (2025), role model narratives are effective because they "help audiences imagine themselves in similar situations". The caption not only mentions "a citizen" but provides his name, age, profession, and other personal details. An example from an April 15, 2026 upload about the jukir conflict: even though the victim is not named in full, the caption builds the driver's persona as a "rule-abiding Surabaya citizen" who dares to fight against illegal practices. This persona is easily identifiable by audiences who may have been in a similar situation. The difference with the findings of Fine et al. (2025) is that in the context of legal advocacy in Surabaya, victim personalization seems to be more effective than hero or activist personalization. This may be because audiences are more likely to empathize with the victim (who is "innocent" and "oppressed") than with the hero figure (who may be perceived as having more privilege or capacity).

Moral Outrage as a Trigger for Engagement

Moral outrage is the most often triggered emotion by captions with high engagement. As identified by WGSN (2025), content that evokes strong emotions can significantly increase engagement. In this context, anger is directed at the injustice experienced by the victim and the irregularities of the system that allowed it to happen.

Captions build moral outrage through:

1. Moral contrast: Comparing what should have happened (as per the rules, the law) with the harsh reality on the ground.
2. Accusatory language: Using words like "biadab", "preman", "hama", "meresahkan" to frame the perpetrator as morally wrong.
3. Situational irony: Highlights the absurdity of situations, such as jukir asking for higher fares under the excuse of "ganti helm jika hilang".

Several posts employ emphatic expressions such as "Premanisme Lewat Batas!" or "Aksi tidak terpuji yang dilakukan 'Polisi Cepek'," immediately framing the reported incident as a serious violation of social or moral expectations. Another example appears in the caption "Tak hanya dipukul, ternyata Pak Eko juga diancam," This anger is constructive because it is directed at actions (reporting, viral) and not just an overflow of emotions without a solution. As stated by previous researchers, negative emotions that are not directed can lead to slacktivism engagement without any real impact.

Mentions as a Public Accountability Strategy

The use of mentions to official accounts (Surabaya Police, Dishub, Prosecutor's Office, KPK) in 96% of caption top engagement is a unique strategy that distinguishes digital advocacy from conventional forms of advocacy. This strategy has three functions:

1. Forced transparency: By publicly tagging institutions, the movement forces them to respond or at least be aware of the existence of public pressure.
2. Guide for audiences: Audiences know exactly where to report or follow up, because the destination account is already mentioned.
3. Pressure amplification: When audiences co-tag the same account, it creates a mass tagging effect that increases the visibility of the issue.

This strategy is in line with the principle of "calling institutions into the digital public space" which is a new form of social accountability. Another recurring characteristic of highly engaged posts is the strategic use of institutional mentions to encourage accountability and public participation. One caption explicitly addresses "@cyberpoldajatim bantu kami lacak akun ini," while another references "@ericahyadi_" in discussing local policy implementation. Rather than serving merely as identifiers, these mentions direct audience attention toward relevant authorities and create opportunities for coordinated civic engagement. The findings suggest that tagging official accounts functions as both an informational device and a mechanism for amplifying institutional visibility within digital advocacy practices.

Local Language as a Marker of Collective Identity

The use of the Surabaya dialect Javanese (ngoko kasar) in 82% of captions top engagement (vs only 24% in bottom engagement) shows that the local language is not an obstacle, but an asset in building a community. Words such as "rek" (short for "arek"/child), "lur" (short for "cakulur"/nickname), "wes" (already), and "wayae" (ayo) serve as in-group markers of group identity markers that reinforce the sense of "we" between the admin and the audience. As stated by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), connective action requires a "common language" that creates a sense of community beyond individual interests. In this context, the Surabaya dialect becomes the glue that unites Surabaya residents who feel disturbed by the practice of illegal parking, transcending differences in class or background. The use of local language also creates authenticity that is difficult for accounts to imitate who do not really understand the nuances of Surabaya culture. This authenticity builds the audience's trust in the movement.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed 500 Instagram captions from the advocacy account @viralforjustice.co to identify effective storytelling strategies in building audience emotional engagement. Four main findings can be concluded: first, this account uses four dominant narrative models: Victim Hero (37.4% of uploads), Problem Solution (31.2%), Call-to-Action (19.6%), and Investigative Disclosure (11.8%). The Victim Hero model consistently generates the highest engagement, confirming the effectiveness of victim personalization in generating empathy and mobilization. Second, captions with high engagement consistently contain elements of moral outrage, victimization personalization, call to action at the beginning of the caption, the use of mentions to institutions, and the local language of the Surabaya dialect. These five elements work synergistically: personalization builds empathy, moral outrage creates urgency, mentions direct pressure, local language reinforces collective identity, and invitation to turn emotions into action. Third, @viralforjustice.co's storytelling strategy not only focuses on short-term engagement but also builds long-term credibility through investigative content (even if the engagement is low) and consistency in responding to citizen complaints.

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