

# Does Storytelling Spark Empathy and Drive Prosocial Consumption in Social Crowdfunding? Evidence from KitaBisa's Crowdfunding Campaigns

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of storytelling on prosocial consumption in the context of non-profit crowdfunding, focusing on empathetic concern as a mediating mechanism. A stimulus-based survey was conducted using 75-second video content from the KitaBisa platform, targeting 708 Facebook and Instagram users in the JABODETABEK region through Meta Ads. The data was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the relationship between storytelling, empathetic concern, and subsequent prosocial consumption intention. The findings revealed that storytelling significantly heightened empathetic concern, which in turn encouraged prosocial consumption intention. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on consumer storytelling by demonstrating how emotionally compelling narratives can foster empathy and drive charitable action in digital crowdfunding settings. Practical insights are offered for non-profit organizations seeking to design more emotionally resonant and impactful campaigns.

**Keywords:** Consumer Storytelling, Empathy, Prosocial Consumption, Social Crowdfunding, Non-Profit Organization

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## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has emerged as a compelling communication strategy in the non-profit sector, particularly in digital crowdfunding contexts where narratives are used to humanize social issues and emotionally engage potential donors (Aji, 2024; Merchant et al., 2010). By crafting relatable and emotionally resonant stories, organizations aim to evoke empathy, deepen moral concern, and ultimately mobilize support for charitable causes (Segal, 2015; Shehu et al., 2016). In Indonesia, this strategy has been widely adopted by platforms such as KitaBisa, which raised approximately IDR 812 billion in 2024 alone, distributing over IDR 589 billion to a range of social initiatives (KitaBisa, 2024). These figures highlight the growing relevance of storytelling in shaping donor behavior within the country's thriving crowdfunding ecosystem (Fauzia et al., 2024).

At the heart of storytelling's persuasive power lies its ability to evoke empathetic concern, a form of emotional response characterized by feelings of compassion and care for others in distress (Batson et al., 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2010). According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, empathetic concern plays a critical role in motivating individuals to act altruistically, even in the absence of personal benefit

(Batson et al., 2014). While incidental self-gains may accompany such behavior, the original motivation remains rooted in concern for others' welfare (Batson et al., 2008; Hartmann et al., 2017). In crowdfunding settings, emotionally engaging stories can stimulate this empathetic response, creating a psychological bridge between viewers and beneficiaries, and encouraging viewers to contribute charitably (Nguyen, 2015).

This process aligns with the broader concept of prosocial consumption, which refers to consumer behaviors aimed at benefiting others or society rather than the self (Small & Cryder, 2016; White et al., 2020). Such behaviors include donating to non-profit campaigns, supporting ethical brands, or engaging in community-focused initiatives (Safra et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2020). In Indonesia, prosocial consumption is evident in the expansion of traditional giving practices such as zakat, infaq, and sadaqah (Alawiyah, 2013; Alonso, 2015), and the country's global ranking in generosity further underscores this cultural orientation (CAF, 2024). However, while Indonesia's generosity is well-documented, the psychological mechanisms linking storytelling, empathy, and prosocial action remain insufficiently explored.

Existing research has examined storytelling's impact on donor trust and motivation (Aji, 2024; Merchant et al., 2010) and has separately addressed the emotional basis of altruistic behavior (Batson et al., 2014; Feigin et al., 2014). Yet few studies have directly analyzed how storytelling activates empathetic concern to drive prosocial consumption in a unified framework, particularly in the context of non-profit crowdfunding. This study addresses this gap by investigating the emotional pathway through which storytelling influences charitable behavior. By focusing on three interrelated variables: storytelling, empathetic concern, and prosocial consumption, this study offers both theoretical contributions and practical implications for non-profit organizations seeking to design more emotionally impactful and socially effective campaigns.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Storytelling, Empathetic Concern, and Prosocial Consumption

Storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool in both marketing and non-profit contexts, offering a means to emotionally engage audiences and guide behavior through narrative immersion. According to consumer storytelling theory, stories are more than mere communication tools; they serve as experiential pathways through which individuals internalize meaning, align with values, and adopt symbolic roles presented in narratives (Muniz et al., 2015; Woodside, 2010). In the realm of social crowdfunding, storytelling humanizes social issues and fosters emotional connections between donors and beneficiaries, prompting reflection and social action (Aji, 2024; Merchant et al., 2010).

One key outcome of this emotional engagement is empathetic concern, a prosocial emotion characterized by compassion and genuine care for others' well-being (Batson et al., 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2010). When individuals are exposed to emotionally resonant stories depicting vulnerability, hardship, or injustice, they often experience narrative transportation, becoming psychologically immersed in the characters' experiences (Aji, 2024). This immersion is strengthened by the activation of universal moral values such as fairness, compassion, and concern for others, which serve as cognitive anchors for emotional resonance (Al-Hawamleh, 2019; Talgorn & Ullerup, 2023). As a result, storytelling is expected to evoke empathetic concern by enabling audiences to emotionally connect with the ethical significance of others' suffering.

H1: Storytelling has a positive effect on empathetic concern.

Beyond its emotional effects, storytelling is also expected to influence behavior—particularly prosocial consumption, defined as voluntary actions aimed at benefiting others or society (Small &

Cryder, 2016; White et al., 2020). In social crowdfunding contexts, this includes donations, volunteering, or sharing social campaigns. Prior studies have shown that emotionally engaging stories in crowdfunding campaigns can lead to higher donor engagement and charitable actions (Aji, 2024; Merchant et al., 2010). Therefore, when storytelling fosters a sense of connection and moral responsibility, it can directly motivate individuals to engage in prosocial consumption. Based on this rationale, the second hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Storytelling has a positive effect on prosocial consumption.

### **Empathetic Concern and Prosocial Consumption**

Empathetic concern itself is also a central mechanism linking emotional engagement to prosocial consumption. When exposed to stories emphasizing suffering, injustice, or human vulnerability, audiences often draw upon universal moral values—such as fairness, compassion, and concern for others—to make sense of the situation and recognize its ethical implications (Al-Hawamleh, 2019; Rapert et al., 2021). These values act not only as cognitive frameworks for interpretation but also as emotional triggers that give rise to empathetic concern—a prosocial emotion marked by sincere care for the well-being of others (Boggiss et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2021). Empathetic concern emerges when individuals become emotionally attuned to the experiences of those who suffer, often resulting in a personal sense of moral urgency. This emotional response is particularly salient when the narrative features vivid portrayals of hardship, which allow audiences to connect with the beneficiaries on a human level (Aji & Muslichah, 2022). As a result, individuals who experience heightened empathetic concern are more likely to translate these feelings into concrete actions aimed at alleviating others' distress.

In the context of social crowdfunding, this response is manifested in the form of prosocial consumption such as making donations, spreading awareness, or endorsing social campaigns. Unlike behavior driven by self-interest, prosocial consumption in this setting reflects a deep emotional engagement and a voluntary desire to contribute to the greater good. Therefore, individuals who experience stronger empathetic concern are more inclined to act in ways that support social causes. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Empathetic concern has a positive effect on prosocial consumption.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a stimulus-based survey to examine how storytelling influences prosocial consumption through different motivational routes. Prior to completing the questionnaire, respondents were instructed to view a 75-second video drawn from a real crowdfunding campaign published by KitaBisa.com, Indonesia's leading non-profit donation platform. The video, which had previously gained significant attention on social media, features the true story of Preliyan, a young boy facing life without parental care. Key narrative scenes depict him mourning at his father's grave, selling cakes in the market, and continuing his schooling despite severe hardship. The video concludes with a direct call-to-action inviting viewers to contribute financially to support Preliyan's survival and education (see Figure 2).

After watching the video, respondents were directed to complete a structured questionnaire consisting of 29 items, using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree"). The estimated time for survey completion was between 5 to 10 minutes.

To recruit respondents, this study used a Meta Ads campaign targeting users on Facebook and Instagram who reside in the Greater Jakarta region—including Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and

Bekasi. Algorithmically targeted sampling was applied to ensure respondents diversity and representativeness. The Meta Ads campaign displayed a custom recruitment poster with a link to the Google Form survey. As an incentive, a total of IDR 1 million in e-wallet top-ups was awarded to randomly selected participants. The list of recipients was made available through a publicly accessible Google Sheet to ensure transparency.

In accordance with ethical research standards, no personal identifiable information was collected. Participants were provided with an online informed consent form embedded at the start of the survey. This research protocol received ethical approval from the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Republic of Indonesia.



Figure 1. Screen Capture of The Video

Source: TikTok @kitabisacom

## Measures

All measurement items used in this study were adapted from previously validated instruments in the literature. The construct of storytelling was measured using four items adapted from Kim and Hall (2020), which assess the narrative structure, emotional depth, and clarity of the digital storytelling presented in the crowdfunding campaign. A sense of responsibility was measured using four items from Gebauer et al. (2008), capturing the extent to which individuals feel obligated or morally compelled to help others. To assess empathy, this study employed seven items adapted from Verhaert and Van den Poel (2011), reflecting emotional responsiveness and concern for others. Religious values were measured using five items adapted from Jamal et al. (2019), which capture the role of religious teachings, afterlife beliefs, and fear-based motivations in charitable behavior. Universal moral values were assessed using four items from Rapert et al. (2021), focusing on concern for the welfare of others as a guiding principle in decision-making. Finally, prosocial consumption was measured using six items adapted from Ahn et al. (2018) and van der Linden (2011), which gauge the intention and willingness to engage in charitable giving through the crowdfunding platform KitaBisa.com. The relationships of all variables in this study is illustrated in Figure 2.

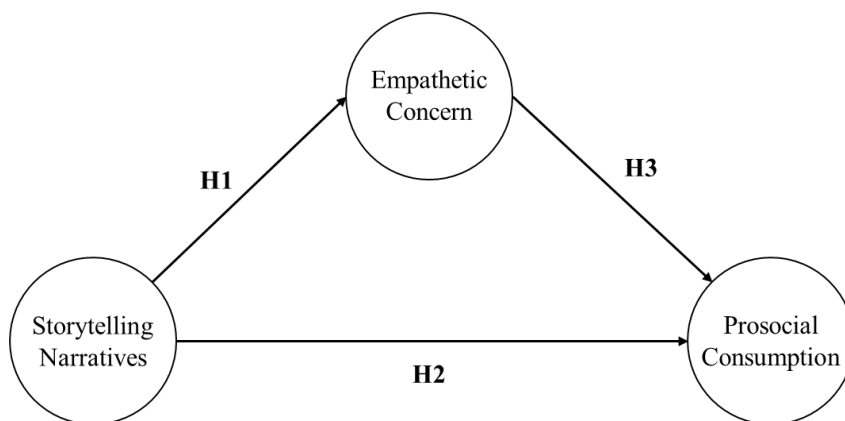


Figure 2. Research Model

## FINDINGS

### Respondent Profile

A total of 708 valid responses were collected and analyzed. The sample is predominantly composed of individuals aged 24–35 years, who make up 73.6% of the total participants. In terms of gender distribution, the sample is female dominated, with women comprising 79.7%, substantially outnumbering their male counterparts. Regarding marital status, a large majority (81.1%) identified as married. In terms of educational background, most respondents (65.1%) reported completing senior high school, suggesting a moderate level of formal education across the sample. In terms of monthly income, the most frequently reported bracket was IDR 1 to 3 million, accounting for 42.1% of respondents. Furthermore, 43.9% indicated they had less than IDR 500,000 in savings, highlighting a notable prevalence of limited financial reserves within the sample. Collectively, these demographic characteristics provide critical context for interpreting the respondents' perceptions and decision-making processes, particularly in relation to donation behavior and financial motivations in the crowdfunding environment.

### Measurement Model

Table 1 presents the results of the reliability and convergent validity assessment for the constructs used in this study: storytelling, empathetic concern, and prosocial consumption. All items demonstrated strong standardized loadings, with most exceeding the 0.70 threshold, confirming satisfactory indicator reliability. Internal consistency was also established, as evidenced by Cronbach's alpha (CA) values of 0.875 for storytelling, 0.908 for empathetic concern, and 0.962 for prosocial consumption. Similarly, composite reliability (CR) values were high, ranging from 0.915 to 0.969, exceeding the recommended cutoff of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Convergent validity was supported by average variance extracted (AVE) scores of 0.839, 0.730, and 0.839 for storytelling, empathetic concern, and prosocial consumption, respectively—all surpassing the 0.50 benchmark.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

| Indicators  | Mean Score | Loadings | CA    | CR    | AVE   |
|---|------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>Storytelling (S)</b>   |            |          | 0.875 | 0.915 | 0.839 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The storytelling lets you know what KitaBisa.com is thinking and feeling.</li> </ul> | 6.555      | 0.883    |       |       |       |

| Indicators  | Mean Score | Loadings | CA    | CR    | AVE   |
|---|------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| • The storytelling of KitaBisa.com explains why things happen, that is, what causes things to happen.   | 6.621      | 0.862    |       |       |       |
| • The storytelling of KitaBisa.com has a well delineated beginning (initial event), middle (crisis or turning point) and ending (conclusion). | 6.404      | 0.914    |       |       |       |
| • The storytelling of KitaBisa.com focuses on specific, particular events rather than on generalizations or abstractions.                     | 6.439      | 0.750    |       |       |       |
| <b>Empathetic Concern (EC)</b>  |            |          | 0.908 | 0.928 | 0.730 |
| • I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me   | 6.621      | 0.831    |       |       |       |
| • Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems (RC)   | 6.624      | 0.900    |       |       |       |
| • When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them  | 6.452      | 0.868    |       |       |       |
| • Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal (RC)  | 6.472      | 0.687    |       |       |       |
| • When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them (RC)  | 6.410      | 0.791    |       |       |       |
| • I am often quite touched by things that I see happen  | 6.637      | 0.896    |       |       |       |
| • I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person   | 6.134      | 0.635    |       |       |       |
| <b>Prosocial Consumption (PC)</b>   |            |          | 0.962 | 0.969 | 0.839 |
| • I am willing to donate through KitaBisa.com.  | 6.178      | 0.916    |       |       |       |
| • I intend to donate through KitaBisa.com.  | 6.181      | 0.943    |       |       |       |
| • I intend to donate through KitaBisa.com if there is a chance.   | 6.352      | 0.923    |       |       |       |
| • I intend to donate more through KitaBisa.com  | 6.079      | 0.930    |       |       |       |

RC = Reverse-coded

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), as recommended by Hair et al. (2022). Table 2 shows that all HTMT values fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85, with the highest value being 0.853 between storytelling and empathetic concern. These results indicate that the constructs are empirically distinct from one another and capture unique dimensions of the prosocial crowdfunding behavior under investigation. Collectively, the findings confirm that the measurement model meets the criteria for construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity - HTMT

|                              | Empathy | Prosocial Consumption | Storytelling |
|------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------------|
| <b>Empathy</b>               |         |                       |              |
| <b>Prosocial Consumption</b> | 0.678   |                       |              |
| <b>Storytelling</b>          | 0.853   | 0.618                 |              |

### Structural Model

Table 3 summarizes the results of the structural model analysis, including assessments of multicollinearity, common method bias (CMB), explanatory power ( $R^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and hypothesis testing. All predictor variables reported Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) value well below the critical threshold of 3.3, indicating no multicollinearity issues. Additionally, common method bias was assessed and found to be non-problematic across all tested paths.

The structural model demonstrated strong explanatory and predictive capability. Storytelling (S) significantly influenced empathetic concern (EC), with a high  $R^2$  value of 0.593 and  $Q^2$  of 0.358, indicating substantial predictive relevance. Similarly, both storytelling and empathetic concern showed significant effects on prosocial consumption (PC), with  $R^2 = 0.413$  and  $Q^2 = 0.347$ , reflecting moderate explanatory and predictive power. Hypothesis testing revealed that all proposed relationships were statistically supported. The path from storytelling to empathetic concern (H1) yielded a t-value of 9.282 ( $p < 0.001$ ), supporting a strong positive effect. The effect of storytelling on prosocial consumption (H2) was also significant ( $t = 2.115$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ), albeit with a smaller effect size. Finally, empathetic concern significantly predicted prosocial consumption (H3), as indicated by a t-value of 4.477 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Overall, the model offers robust empirical support for the proposed hypotheses.

Table 3. Structural Model Analysis

| Hyp | Paths   | VIF   | Common Method Bias (CMB) | R2    | Q2    | T-Stats | p-Value | Sig? |
|-----|---------|-------|--------------------------|-------|-------|---------|---------|------|
| H1  | S → EC  | 1.000 | No issue                 | 0.593 | 0.358 | 9.282   | 0.000   | Yes  |
| H2  | S → PC  | 2.466 | No issue                 | 0.413 | 0.347 | 2.115   | 0.034   | Yes  |
| H3  | EC → PC | 2.466 | No issue                 | 0.413 | 0.347 | 4.477   | 0.000   | Yes  |

### DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on how storytelling functions as a psychological mechanism to foster prosocial consumption, particularly through the lens of empathetic concern. In line with previous research on consumer storytelling theory (Woodside, 2010; Woodside et al., 2008) and emotion-based persuasion in nonprofit marketing (Aji, 2024; Merchant et al., 2010), the results confirm that emotionally engaging narratives significantly enhance empathetic concern, which in turn drives prosocial consumption intention in crowdfunding settings. The compelling story of Preliyan—a child facing hardship and abandonment—effectively evoked empathy among respondents by transporting them into his lived experience and reinforcing shared moral values such as compassion and justice (Al-Hawamleh, 2019; Talgorn & Ullerup, 2023).

The finding that storytelling significantly improves empathetic concern indicates that narrative-based content does more than merely inform—it emotionally immerses audiences. This immersive effect, often described as narrative transportation (Aji, 2024), allows viewers to psychologically enter the story, humanize its characters, and emotionally resonate with their struggles. The implication is substantial for nonprofit campaigns: rather than focusing solely on statistical data or general appeals, they should

strategically utilize personal stories that highlight individual suffering. This approach may be particularly relevant in collectivist societies like Indonesia, where compassion and social connectedness are culturally reinforced. Storytelling thus emerges as a low-cost, high-impact intervention capable of building empathy and prompting civic-minded behavior.

Furthermore, the analysis confirms that storytelling directly influences prosocial consumption. While prior research has acknowledged the persuasive power of emotionally charged narratives in driving charitable behavior (Merchant et al., 2010), this study extends the understanding by empirically validating that storytelling alone—*independent of other emotional drivers*—can move audiences from passive viewing to active participation. This supports the idea that well-structured narratives do not merely shape perceptions but also serve as behavioral nudges. For nonprofit organizations and social marketers, this finding underscores the importance of designing digital content not only to inform but to convert emotional engagement into tangible action. The implication is clear: storytelling is not simply an aesthetic element—it is a behavioral catalyst.

Perhaps most importantly, the study demonstrates that empathetic concern strongly predicts prosocial consumption in social crowdfunding. This reinforces the role of empathy as a bridge between narrative exposure and donation intention (Boggiss et al., 2023; Rapert et al., 2021). When audiences are emotionally attuned to human suffering—*especially through vivid storytelling*—they experience a moral urgency that compels them to act. Empathy thus plays a dual role: it functions as both a moral compass and an emotional engine, converting awareness into intention. For practitioners, this suggests that campaigns must prioritize emotional authenticity and ethical resonance to foster sustained donor support. Empathy, therefore, should not be seen as merely a byproduct of storytelling, but as a strategic asset in designing persuasive nonprofit appeals.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated whether storytelling could spark empathy and drive prosocial consumption in the context of social crowdfunding, drawing on a real campaign from KitaBisa.com as a practical example. The results demonstrate that storytelling significantly enhances empathetic concern, which in turn plays a vital role in encouraging prosocial consumption intention. This suggests that emotionally charged narratives are not merely informative; they actively cultivate moral emotions and foster a sense of social responsibility. Additionally, the study found that storytelling itself directly influences prosocial consumption, confirming its dual function as both an emotional primer and a behavioral driver.

Taken together, these findings underscore the strategic value of storytelling in digital fundraising campaigns. By humanizing the experiences of those in need and evoking universal moral values, storytelling becomes a powerful tool for building empathy and mobilizing collective support. In socially conscious and collectivist cultures such as Indonesia, emotionally resonant narratives offer a cost-effective and impactful approach to strengthening civic engagement and promoting charitable giving in online crowdfunding environments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the study's findings, several strategic recommendations can be offered to nonprofit organizations, crowdfunding platforms, and social marketers seeking to enhance donor engagement in digital campaigns. First, emotionally resonant storytelling should be treated as a central strategy rather than a supplementary element. Campaigns that vividly portray personal hardship, injustice, and resilience—like the story of Preliyan—are more likely to trigger empathetic concern and motivate action. These stories should be structured with a clear narrative arc, including a beginning, crisis, and resolution, to facilitate narrative transportation and emotional immersion.



Second, empathy must be recognized as a strategic driver of prosocial consumption, not merely an emotional byproduct. Campaign designers should intentionally craft narratives that evoke compassion, fairness, and a sense of shared humanity, as these moral triggers can convert passive awareness into active participation. In addition, given the cultural context of collectivist societies such as Indonesia, storytelling that emphasizes social solidarity, moral obligation, and communal support is likely to resonate more strongly with audiences.

Third, digital content strategies should aim to enhance the psychological realism and authenticity of storytelling. This involves using visual and emotional cues that allow potential donors to connect with beneficiaries on a human level. Platforms should prioritize stories that are both emotionally powerful and ethically grounded, ensuring that they are not only persuasive but also credible and respectful.

Finally, nonprofit organizations and crowdfunding platforms should embed storytelling into the core of their campaign strategies. This involves integrating emotionally engaging narratives across all digital touchpoints—from social media to donation pages—ensuring consistency and depth of message. By doing so, organizations can foster a more compelling donor experience, build trust, and increase the likelihood of sustained charitable behavior.

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