

Digital Storytelling for Women's Empowerment in Africa: The Case of Tareasa Johnson and Rose Adikin

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Abstract

Digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool for amplifying vulnerable and marginalized voices. This study was inspired by Tareasa Johnson (Reesa Teesa), a master storyteller whose viral story on TikTok captivated millions globally. Within 21 days, the 50-part video series had attracted 400 million views and 3.6 million followers, up from 8,000. The study explored how digital storytelling can serve as a tool for women's economic, social, and political empowerment across Africa. It documents the lived experiences of two women (Tareasa Johnson and Rose Adikin), examines digital storytelling techniques, and uncovers the challenges they face in digital storytelling. Grounded in constructivist theory and using the qualitative phenomenological design, the study examined online videos posted by two purposively sampled Black women and conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the two women's stories. Data was analyzed thematically, with six themes identified: Cultural adaptation and identity, community building, economic empowerment, emotional resilience, digital storytelling challenges, and production techniques. The study recommends that governments, media organizations, and NGOs recognize and adapt digital storytelling as a strategic tool for grassroots empowerment and policy engagement and prioritize investments in digital infrastructure, digital literacy programs for women, and the creation of safe, inclusive online spaces.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling; Women Empowerment; Cultural Adaptation and Identity; Emotional Resilience; Community Building; Production Techniques; Challenges

Background

Storytelling is traditionally a powerful tool for sharing wisdom, stimulating empathy, transmitting knowledge, and persuading audiences. The World Wide Web that hosts social media is essentially a digital platform where storytelling thrives. West et al. (2022) define digital storytelling as three-to-five-minute videos that combine narration with ethics, while McLellan (2006, pp. 26) defines digital storytelling as ‘the art and craft of exploring different media and software applications to communicate stories in new and powerful ways using digital media.’ Digital storytelling is sometimes referred to as a research method, but it can also mean stories that individuals share online. This study adopted the second meaning and took note of the fact that current stories that are hosted on digital platforms can last hours, a departure from West et al.’s (2022) definition.

Women in Africa predominantly exist in patriarchal societies, prompting feminist activism against all forms of oppression against them. Haradhan (2022) describes feminism as a movement that advocates for the advancement of women’s interests in social organization and the attainment of gender equality by all. A significant chunk of women in Africa are yet to experience empowerment. For instance, the African Development Bank (n.d.) reports that despite women holding about one-third of parliamentary seats in 11 African countries compared to Europe, many are still constrained by mundane, unproductive pursuits like fetching water and wood, with women working 50% longer hours than men. Even in corporate set-ups, there is a significant gap between men’s and women’s paychecks and promotions. UN Women (n.d) reports that most women in Africa hold poorly paid jobs, work in insecure environments, and are less likely to advance in their careers. Socially, women suffer from a lack of knowledge to free themselves from life-threatening issues like gender-based violence (GBV). Politically, women are underrepresented in leading positions and as voters (UN Women, n.d.).

While global feminist theory has provided valuable insight into women’s empowerment, it is important to highlight African feminist voices that have long emphasized the intersection of gender, culture, and postcolonial realities. Amina Mama, a founding editor of *Feminist Africa*, critiques how mainstream development frameworks often overlook the lived experiences of women and advocates for feminist epistemologies that prioritize narrative autonomy and self-representation (Mama, 2001). Similarly, Tamale (2020) explores how patriarchal norms are reproduced through law, media, and policy, and how women’s voices, especially in digital spaces, can be harnessed to contest these structures and advance liberation in African societies.

On the practical front, organizations such as Akili Dada and African Women in Media (AWiM) are actively shaping the landscape of digital storytelling for African women. Akili Dada provides mentorship and digital training for young women leaders in marginalized communities across Kenya and Africa at large, enabling them to use digital tools for social transformation (Akili Dada, 2022). AWiM’s research and advocacy efforts focus on equitable representation, content production, and access to media platforms for African women, offering essential data and frameworks for understanding barriers and possibilities in digital storytelling (AWiM, 2023). These African voices and institutions reaffirm that digital storytelling in African contexts is not merely about technology but is a vehicle for asserting identity, resisting erasure, and promoting culturally grounded empowerment.

According to the United Women (n.d.), globally, one out of 10 women lives in extreme poverty; women are less likely to access social protection; women experience food insecurity more than men; women are more affected by sanitation issues than men; more women are unbanked or have access to financial institutions; and women experience the digital divide more than men.

There are global, regional, and national interventions that are geared towards women's empowerment. For instance, UN Women seeks to empower about 2 million women globally in building assets, increasing income, and taking the lead in wealth and business. The African Union has developed a strategy called Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018-2028, which rests on four pillars: e-tech dividends; right to dignity and security; effective laws, policies, and institutions; and leadership, voice, and visibility. The World Bank's new Gender Strategy is pegged on three key objectives: eliminate all forms of gender-based violence (GBV); enhance and expand economic opportunities; and engage women as leaders. Niroo and Crompton (2022) showed that women received empowerment in entrepreneurship, communication, and health. The current study contributes to this discourse through suggestions that individuals have the space and potential to empower themselves through digital storytelling.

Recognizing the power of digital storytelling, Hlalele and Brexa (2015) conclude that women can be empowered digitally and be the change agents against family or community-related violence. Tacchi (2009) postulates that the vulnerable find a voice through leveraging ICTs and using local content to develop and communicate ideas, information, and perspectives. His views find support in Shishko (2019), who opines that the position of women is significantly influenced by storytelling; they should be taught how to use ICTs to create content from their experiences.

Digital storytelling combines various media formats like images, video, text, and audio for compelling and engaging narratives. Stories can be shared in formats such as videos, podcasts, social media posts, blogs, etc. Generally, people engage in digital storytelling for education, entertainment, information, marketing, activism, and many other purposes. One main advantage of digital storytelling includes sharing stories with a wider audience, who include the general public, activists, government, sponsors, donors, policymakers, etc. Uduodum and Ifeanyi (2023) share several advantages of digital storytelling, which include community engagement, knowledge sharing, amplification of marginalized voices, building of empathy and understanding, and fostering creativity. Saponaro (2014) postulates that digital storytelling empowers people to be confident communicators and is a powerful tool for community development.

According to Uduodum and Ifeanyi (2023), digital storytelling formats and processes can be powerful means of engaging diverse stakeholders in urban development, thus empowering slum dwellers to shape their own future. Richardson and Wilson (2024) found that digital storytelling helped develop digital competencies among participants and built relationships, with participants developing a sense of solidarity. The participants gained when they learned video production skills, improved their self-esteem, and developed the desire to apply new skills and create social impact.

Steele (2021) argues that black women began a relationship with technology long before social media appeared. According to the author, black feminist techno-culture's history in America could decenter white supremacy and patriarchy in a discussion on technology's future. The women subjects displayed communicative expertise, entrepreneurial acumen, and technical skills. According to Uduodum and Ifeanyi

(2023), the process of digital storytelling considers key elements/techniques which include: point of view, plot (storyline), characters, conflict, setting, theme, media, audience, and interactivity.

The challenges of digital storytelling include power dynamics (other voices being prioritized at the expense of the marginalized), issues of representation, digital divide, language barriers, digital illiteracy, limited resources, and sustainability (Uduodom & Ifeanyi, 2023). West et al (2022) identify ethical concerns, theoretical inconsistencies, and diverse positioning in analysis as significant challenges in digital storytelling. Uduodom and Ifeanyi (2023) further elaborate on the ethical challenges associated with digital storytelling, such as accuracy and truthfulness, respect for privacy, harm caused, cultural sensitivity, transparency and attribution, and engagement with the community.

The digital transformation landscape in Kenya has significantly contributed to the rise of digital storytellers who create high-quality content. The high mobile penetration rate in the country and increasing internet connectivity provide women with new avenues to share their experiences and advocate for change. The Kenya National ICT Policy (2020) emphasizes the importance of digital inclusion and highlights the necessity of empowering women through technology (Kenya Ministry of ICT, 2020). Besides, contrary to popular belief, even Kenyans in informal settlements have shifted to the second divide, where the internet can be accessed; in fact, other digital divides exist in informal settlements, such as the parent-child digital divide, and not necessarily access as a divide (Eboi et al., 2024).

This study was guided by the narrative paradigm, a concept in communication theory developed by Walter Fisher, who believes that all meaningful communication occurs in the form of storytelling (EBSCO, n.d.). Verbal and non-verbal interpretations, often influenced by experiences and other past factors, are organized logically to create meaning in narrative theory. Coherence and fidelity comprise the two principles in this theory. In coherence, an effective story will have a structure, credible characters, and resemblance between stories. For a story to attain fidelity, it must respond to certain questions: if the story has factual events, has no distortions, follows reasoning patterns, the argument impacts decision-making, and the story is important. While critics posit that not all communication is narrative, this study finds support in the fact that digital storytelling is itself narrative.

The study examined the lives of two digital content creators, Tareasa Johnson and Rose Mary Adikin. Tareasa Johnson (Reesa Teesa) is the American lady from Marietta, Georgia, whose 50-part TikTok series, *Who TF Did I Marry?* went viral and made international news, garnering over 400 million impressions in three weeks. In the videos, Tareasa narrated the traumatic experience of unknowingly marrying a pathological liar. In 21 days, Tareasa had attracted over 3.6 million followers and has since become a sought-after speaker on mental health, reclaiming one's narrative, dating and relationships (Creative Artists Agency, 2026).

Rose is a Ugandan national from Tororo whose global fame came through vlogging about her life in rural China. She married a Chinese farmer named Wu Jianyun in 2015 and, together with their son, resides in Suichang County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province. She is fluent in Mandarin, a language she learned in just one year, and has even adopted the local village accent. Rose is best known for her viral cooking tutorials and videos showcasing cross-cultural family life. She runs the popular social media brand Rose & Anzai Country Life (named after herself and her son). In the videos, she documents daily rural life, from cooking fresh meals sourced directly from the farm to sharing her Ugandan heritage. Rose has attracted millions of

followers across platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Douyin (Chinese TikTok). Besides vlogging, Rose works as a live streamer, selling goods from both China and Africa (Bach, 2025).

The literature documents the efforts that organisations have made towards women's empowerment, such as the United Nations Women (n.d.), the Akili Dada initiatives, AWiM's efforts, the World Bank's new Gender Strategy, Kenya's Ministry of ICT, and several others. However, these efforts are far from realizing the desired empowered woman across the world. Nevertheless, scholars continue to document the power inherent in digital storytelling that women can use for empowerment. Hence, this study joins that path by exploring how digital storytelling can serve as a tool for women's economic, social, and cultural empowerment across Africa.

Thus, this study's objectives included:

- To document Tareasa and Rose's lived experiences as content creators for empowerment
- To examine digital storytelling techniques in the two women's videos
- To uncover the challenges these women face in digital storytelling for empowerment

Methods

This study was anchored in the social constructivism paradigm, which holds that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed through interaction and interpretation within specific contexts (EBSCO, 2020). This paradigm is particularly well-suited for qualitative investigation into digital storytelling, as it prioritizes the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences. Creswell (2007) notes that qualitative research is grounded in the exploration of the participants' perspectives in order to better understand the social world.

A phenomenological design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of two women content creators, Tareasa and Rose, who engage in digital storytelling on social media. These two were purposively sampled due to the richness, reach, and resonance of their narratives. Their stories are not only emotionally compelling but have also attracted large and engaged audiences, making them ideal for examining the power and impact of digital storytelling in women's empowerment.

We were guided by the following criteria: (1) content richness and narrative depth; (2) audience engagement as evidenced by likes, comments, and shares; and (3) thematic variety across personal storytelling, community interaction, and public response. This strategic sampling allowed us to capture the story arc and evolution of each woman's digital narrative.

Data was gathered through content analysis, where patterns, themes, narrative techniques, audience responses, and the use of visual and audio elements were recorded. The sample size included all 50 episodes by Tareasa and 5 videos by Rose. To complement primary data, we undertook a content analysis of six newspaper stories related to the two women's digital storytelling engagements for additional context and triangulation of findings. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including respecting copyright laws, ensuring proper attribution of sources, and maintaining sensitivity to the personal nature of the stories analyzed.

We employed thematic analysis, an inductive and interpretive method of analyzing qualitative data that allows for the identification, examination, and reporting of patterns or themes within the dataset. This

approach was particularly appropriate for the study, as it provides flexibility and depth in exploring subjective experiences, narrative structures, and social meanings conveyed through digital storytelling.

The analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. We took detailed notes from the videos and noted initial impressions. This step helped us to develop an intimate understanding of the visual material.

We then conducted open coding, tagging segments of the data that appeared meaningful or recurring. These codes included aspects such as storytelling tone, emotional content, audience engagement such as comments or likes, cultural references, and visual or audio techniques. Through constant comparison, codes were then grouped into broader categories based on shared characteristics. The codes were collated into potential themes, examining how these themes captured key patterns across both participants' narratives. The themes were reviewed, refined, and tested for coherence, internal consistency, and relevance to the research objectives. Throughout the process, we maintained a reflexive approach, documenting analytical decisions and staying attuned to the socio-cultural positioning of the storytellers and audiences.

Findings

This section presents the results of content analysis conducted on the digital narratives of Tareasa Johnson and Rose Adikin. Six key themes, namely, cultural adaptation and identity, community building, economic empowerment, emotional resilience, challenges in digital storytelling, and production techniques, emerged from the analysis, each highlighting distinct dimensions of women's empowerment through digital storytelling. These themes have captured the essence of how digital storytelling can serve as a vehicle for empowerment.

Table 1: Key Themes in Digital Storytelling by Case

Theme	Tareasa Johnson	Rose Adikin
Cultural adaptation and identity	Black American woman navigating love trauma and toxic marriage	A Ugandan woman embracing Chinese culture even as she tries to preserve her own
Community building	Builds a viral and supportive TikTok community	Establishes a global audience and multicultural support on YouTube and TikTok
Economic empowerment	\$5,000 earnings; Misses early monetization opportunity but gains mainstream media exposure and a talent agency deal	Monetizes through brand partnerships, AdSense income, and online business
Emotional resilience	Shares personal trauma as a tool for healing and connection	Copes with cultural distance; Demonstrates strength in navigating intercultural motherhood and diaspora identity
Challenges in digital storytelling	Overcoming online harassment/public backlash, including ex-husband's defamation threat	Overcoming algorithmic bias, privacy concerns, and language barriers
Production techniques	Is aware of production values to enhance storytelling, e.g., spontaneous narration while driving to work; using TikTok, dividing 8 hours into 50 episodes of 10 minutes	Fluent Chinese language use is captivating; videomaking using a phone; natural, conversational style; use of subtitles.

Cultural Adaptation and Identity

Both Tareasa and Rose use digital platforms to reflect and reconstruct personal identity within unique socio-cultural contexts. In Rose's case, cultural adaptation is central. Originally from Mbale, Uganda, Rose married Wu Jianyun, a Chinese man. Their relationship began through introductions by Wu's sister in 2014, which led to phone communications before Rose eventually traveled to China to meet Wu in person. Despite initial challenges, including cultural differences and financial constraints, Rose adapted to her new environment, became fluent in Mandarin, and embraced Chinese culture (Bach, 2025). Rose's approach to storytelling is deeply rooted in authenticity, vulnerability, and a profound connection to the lived experiences of many African women who are married into other cultures. One of the most compelling aspects of Rose's work is her ability to challenge societal norms and inspire change.

Her YouTube channel, *Rose & Anzai Country Life*, documents and reflects on her daily experiences as a Ugandan woman married into a Chinese family. Through cooking, parenting, and participating in local customs, Rose articulates a hybrid identity that bridges African and Chinese cultures. For example, in the episode titled *"It's been eight years since I got married in rural China. Cooked some noodles for Anzai today,"* Rose affirms her transformation while remaining grounded in her heritage. The video captures her routine of preparing meals for her son while discussing the cultural shifts she has undergone over the years. In *"My Ugandan family held a welcome ceremony for my Chinese husband and son,"* Rose documents her return to Uganda, where her family welcomes her husband and son through traditional Ugandan customs. The video highlights the significance of cultural preservation, acceptance, and the blending of identities within an intercultural marriage. Lastly, in *"Saying goodbye to my Ugandan family again, I promise not to stay away too long,"* Rose shares an emotional farewell as she departs from Uganda. This episode reflects on the challenges of living far from one's homeland while maintaining strong familial bonds.

Leveraging her unique cross-cultural experiences, Rose began sharing about her life in rural China on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. In July 2023, *Pulse Uganda* covered Rose's return to Uganda with her husband, Wu, and their son, Anzai. The article highlighted her growing popularity on Chinese social media platforms, emphasizing her fluency in Mandarin and her engaging content that showcases rural Chinese life. As per the article, Rose's storytelling has played a significant role in reshaping narratives about cross-cultural relationships and promoting a broader understanding of African identity in the global digital space.

Conversely, Tareasa's digital narrative focuses on personal identity recovery after emotional betrayal. Tareasa is an African-American woman who decided to chronicle her heartbreaking love story on TikTok. Her videos detail how she met, dated, married, and divorced a man she dubbed a 'pathological liar.' Tareasa reveals that her ex-husband lied about being the vice president of a condiment company, his family members, previous marriages, criminal record, and financial status. Her TikTok series, *Who TF Did I Marry?* Chronicles a toxic marriage, and in doing so, Tareasa reclaims her voice and challenges social norms about love, trust, and vulnerability in relationships. The storytelling process becomes a tool for identity healing and affirmation.

According to Tareasa, she decided to share her story to inspire other women to watch out for red flags and exit toxic relationships, and it seems to have paid off, as per the following quotes from different media:

I've had a lot of messages from people who were telling me, 'You know, I went through something very similar. Your story has helped me make decisions in my own relationship.' (CNN)

There are layers to the story. I initially started this story and told my experience. But since then, other people have also come out with (their own) experiences. So, it's almost like this story can be a catalyst for even more things (Time Magazine).

Overall, her story was incredibly relatable and sad in the sense that most of us- I don't want to speak universally- but I think that most of us have ignored red flags because, as she said, we were lonely or we were searching for companionship (Reign, cited in The Guardian).

I think a lot of people can relate to making poor decisions from a place of pain and later gaining the courage to let go of a relationship that was never meant to last a lifetime. I think she was trying to encourage people to listen to their intuition, trust themselves, be aware of the signs of a toxic relationship, and that it is OK to be alone. (Berry, cited in The Guardian).

These media accounts cement the notion of identity for many more in similar situations to Tareasa's who realize that they may have lost their identity through unworthy love relationships.

Community Building

Community emerged as a critical theme, particularly through digital interaction and shared experiences. Tareasa's storytelling sparked global engagement, with her TikTok audience swelling from 8,000 to 3.6 million followers in just three weeks. Audience comments, duets, and reposts show how users found comfort, resonance, and solidarity with her story. Many shared their own experiences of toxic relationships, signaling the emergence of a support-based digital community.

Similarly, Rose's content has attracted thousands of followers across multiple platforms. She has cultivated a transnational community of Africans in the diaspora, intercultural families, and women interested in rural life and homemaking. Her videos function not just as lifestyle content but as nodes for intercultural exchange and communal learning.

Economic Empowerment

The third theme involves economic agency through content monetization and brand development. Rose has successfully monetized her storytelling through YouTube AdSense, brand collaborations, and online business initiatives. Her digital work reflects how social media platforms can be leveraged for income generation, especially by women in non-traditional locations and intercultural marriages.

Tareasa earned \$5000 from TikTok, a sum that is considered low because she was ignorant of TikTok's registration policies when her story aired. She reveals that monetary gain was not her motivation. One needs to apply to be a member of TikTok's Creator Fund before uploading content. When she applied, she had already posted about six videos, for which she did not earn any money. TikTok considers published videos and eligible views before payout.

Beyond immediate financial gain, Tareasa's exhilarating and riveting story was picked up by several major news outlets, which included *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, CNN, *USA Today*, *Time Magazine*, *Forbes*, *The Guardian*, among others. Her story also resulted in financial opportunities such as a partnership with a talent agency (CAA), media appearances (e.g., *Good Morning America* hosted by Robin Roberts), and the likelihood of turning her story into a book, documentary, TV series, and movie. She was also featured on the talk show hosted by Tamron Hall. Despite the meagre earnings, the exposure

enhanced her status as a content creator and storyteller. Some fans asked Tyler Perry to consider a movie. Besides, she grew her TikTok account instantly, from 8,000 followers to 3.6 million, with her story accumulating over 400 million views in 21 days. Additionally, she became a highly sought-after content creator, and celebrities like *Ghosts*' star Danielle Pinnock publicly expressed their desire to play Tareasa's part in a movie. Tareasa's story extended to X (formerly Twitter), with one user's summary of the story attracting 50,000 likes.

Emotional Resilience

Both women displayed remarkable emotional resilience, using storytelling to process trauma and encourage others. Tareasa's candid narration of betrayal and emotional manipulation turned private pain into public pedagogy. Audience testimonials revealed that her story helped many viewers recognize red flags and find the courage to leave harmful relationships.

In Rose's case, resilience manifests in her navigation of cultural expectations, motherhood, and digital visibility. Her farewell video, "*Saying goodbye to my Ugandan family again...*" captures the emotional toll of separation and the strength required for cross-border familial bonds. Through her transparency, she normalizes vulnerability and positions it as a foundation for strength. Through digital storytelling, Rose provides emotional support and encouragement to women navigating intercultural marriages, migration, and motherhood. Her content offers a platform for conversations on maintaining resilience in the face of cultural and geographical transitions. She inspires women to embrace their identities and find strength in their personal journeys when she shares her struggles and triumphs.

Challenges in Digital Storytelling

Despite its vast potential, digital storytelling in Africa is not without challenges. Both women encounter platform limitations, online harassment, economic gatekeeping, and the risk of reputational harm. Rose has faced several other obstacles, such as algorithmic biases that limit content visibility and economic constraints in producing high-quality content. Besides, Rose has to grapple with language barriers as she tries to satisfy both an African and a Chinese audience.

On her part, Tareasa understands that online fame comes with disadvantages. Although she did not identify her ex-husband (she instead simply called him 'Legion'), he revealed his identity (McCoy) and refuted her story. McCoy accused her of unfaithfulness, alleging that theirs was a simple divorce that Tareasa was capitalizing on for fame and fortune. Nevertheless, Tareasa took a philosophical stance in her response:

This kind of...goes back to knowing that I put this on social media, so there has to be a level of ownership that I had to have. I'm the one who told my story. I'm the one who shared my experience, and I shared it on a very big platform.

Tareasa's response reveals the risks associated with the digital storytelling of sensitive stories. One includes a defamation suit that McCoy threatened to institute, while Rose has to navigate algorithmic invisibility and the emotional toll of hyper-visibility.

Production Techniques

About Tareasa, TikTok comes off as an easier storytelling channel because it is free and comes with shareable content across other platforms. While TikTok thrives on extremely short videos from a few

seconds to a minute, and with scroll time being 6 to 10 seconds, Tareasa's videos were unprecedented and lasted 10 minutes, running to 50 episodes. Viewers became obsessed with her videos due to the natural way she told her story, which had all the hallmarks of a dramatic reality show. She told her story while driving to work as she applied makeup and curled her hair. Tareasa was engaging in her style, used a conversational tone, and shared intimate details. Other factors that caused the quick buy-in were that Tareasa was sharing a relatable story and that she had a startling title for each one of her videos.

Meanwhile, Rose has mastered storytelling techniques that captivate her audiences. For instance, she speaks fluent Chinese in the midst of only Chinese people, while she remains the only black person in the video. She also uses a phone to record her videos, which are done in a natural, rural Chinese village. The use of subtitles also enhances her storytelling abilities.

Discussion

The study set out to document the lived experiences of two women, Tareasa Johnson and Rose Adikin, through their digital storytelling journeys; examine digital storytelling techniques; and uncover the challenges they faced. A thematic analysis yielded six key themes: cultural adaptation and identity, community building, economic empowerment, emotional resilience, challenges in digital storytelling, and production techniques.

The participants' narratives demonstrate how digital storytelling facilitates identity formation and redefinition. Rose uses YouTube to document her cultural transitions and blended identity as a Ugandan woman living in rural China. Her videos reflect a continuous negotiation of belonging, family roles, and heritage, affirming Uduodom and Ifeanyi's (2023) view that digital storytelling enables people to reflect on and reframe their lived experiences. Similarly, Tareasa's TikTok series serves as a space for personal reclamation. By narrating her traumatic marital experiences, she reclaims her narrative agency and repositions herself from victim to empowered narrator. These experiences uphold the relevance of constructivist theory, which posits that meaning is co-constructed through personal and social interaction (EBSCO, 2020).

Both women transformed their personal stories into collective experiences through audience interaction. Tareasa's viral TikTok story drew responses from thousands of users who identified with her trauma, creating a dynamic digital support group. This aligns with Hlalele and Brexa's (2015) findings that digital storytelling fosters engagement and participatory solidarity, especially for marginalized voices, and Mendez's (2024) findings on Tareasa's storytelling prowess. Rose's YouTube community similarly illustrates how digital platforms can become hubs of cross-cultural exchange and mutual learning. In both cases, digital storytelling fostered social capital - the network of relationships that support emotional and practical empowerment. Secondly, through community building, Rose successfully assembles global communities through digital platforms, with her online presence becoming a space where individuals from diverse backgrounds connect, share, and learn from each other's experiences. By promoting these global conversations, she promotes cultural exchange and a sense of belonging, which aligns with the principles of digital storytelling as a tool for social empowerment (Hlalele & Brexa, 2015).

The study further illustrates the economic potential embedded in digital storytelling. Rose's experience reflects how women can monetize content and create sustainable online brands, echoing Niroo and Crompton's (2022) findings that digital platforms are enabling tools for women's financial independence.

While Tareasa's case reveals initial gaps in digital monetization knowledge, it also underscores the value of visibility and virality in creating downstream economic opportunities (e.g., interviews, talent management, publishing deals). These findings support Uduodom and Ifeanyi's (2023) argument that storytelling can offer economic agency for urban and diaspora-based women when accompanied by digital literacy. Thirdly, beyond cultural expectations, Rose demonstrates economic empowerment through digital platforms. She shares her personal experience of starting an online business and discusses barriers like limited access to capital and societal discouragement that many women face. Through her content, she provides practical advice on financial literacy, online business models, and networking, reinforcing the importance of digital inclusion in fostering women's economic independence (Kenya Ministry of ICT, 2020). Additionally, Rose has leveraged monetization opportunities, including YouTube AdSense, brand partnerships, and crowdfunding. These avenues have contributed significantly to her financial independence, demonstrating the economic potential of digital storytelling as a sustainable career path for women content creators (Uduodom & Ifeanyi, 2023).

One of the most profound contributions of digital storytelling in this study is emotional empowerment. Both Tareasa and Rose use personal stories to nurture resilience not only for themselves but for others navigating similar challenges. Tareasa's raw, confessional style resonates with survivors of emotional abuse, serving as a cautionary tale and an inspirational recovery arc. Rose's gentle, reflective storytelling on family, motherhood, and separation demonstrates inner strength shaped by migration and cultural integration. These findings align with Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, particularly the concept of *narrative fidelity*, which holds that stories resonate most when they reflect real experiences and shared truths (EBSCO, n.d.).

These findings reflect the practical relevance of the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Both women actively constructed their own knowledge and identity (Constructivism) by using digital platforms to reflect and reinterpret their lived experiences. Their storytelling techniques, rich in emotion, structure, and audience resonance, align with Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, which asserts that humans are essentially storytellers and that persuasive communication relies on coherence and fidelity. The narratives shared by Tareasa and Rose were not only relatable and structured but also grounded in shared cultural logics, making them credible and impactful to their audiences.

Despite its transformative potential, the study also reveals persistent challenges. Ethical concerns, digital illiteracy, and limited access to resources remain significant barriers (West et al., 2022). Rose has encountered several of these obstacles, including online harassment, algorithmic bias that limits content visibility, and economic constraints in producing high-quality content. West et al. (2022) emphasize the ethical and representational dilemmas in digital storytelling, which this study corroborates.

However, the opportunities presented by digital storytelling far outweigh the challenges. Women like Rose leverage digital platforms to gain financial independence. Moreover, digital storytelling nurtures the creation of supportive online communities where women share knowledge, build resilience, and inspire one another (Eboi, 2025; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015). Additionally, storytelling serves as a vital advocacy tool, enabling women to influence policy by augmenting their voices on issues such as gender equality and human rights (Tacchi, 2009).

These findings suggest that digital storytelling, when strategically leveraged, can be a powerful avenue for social, emotional, and economic empowerment among African women. As digital access expands across the continent, there is an urgent need for policy frameworks that support women's participation in digital spaces. Training programs in storytelling, digital monetization, and online safety will enable more women to craft narratives that are not only heard but also respected, supported, and valued.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tareasa's rise to digital prominence epitomizes the power of storytelling in the digital age. Her raw, engaging, and deeply personal TikTok videos connected with millions of viewers, sparking critical conversations on identity, relationships, emotional resilience, and self-worth. Her story accentuates the potential of digital platforms to augment women's voices, enabling them to reclaim agency, build community, and access new forms of financial, emotional, and social empowerment. At the same time, Tareasa's experience reveals the challenges of digital visibility, including privacy breaches, online harassment, and the complexities of content monetization that must be addressed to make digital spaces safer and more inclusive.

Similarly, Rose's work illustrates how African women creatively leverage digital storytelling to document their lives, share cross-cultural experiences, and inspire others. Her YouTube content centres around themes of cultural adaptation, emotional strength, and financial independence, making her a relatable and empowering figure for many African women. Her story reflects the potential of everyday narratives to nurture cultural exchange, build resilient communities, and reshape public perceptions. As more women access digital platforms, their capacity to shape discourse and influence social norms grows significantly.

Tareasa continues to produce content following the viral success of *Who TF Did I Marry*, while Rose consistently updates her audience about life in rural China. Both women have embraced storytelling as a lifelong tool for connection and empowerment.

To maximize the broader impact of digital storytelling, governments, media organizations, and NGOs must recognize it as a strategic tool for grassroots empowerment and policy engagement. Policymakers should prioritize investments in digital infrastructure, digital literacy programs for women, and the creation of safe, inclusive online spaces. Such structural support will ensure that more women like Tareasa and Rose can meaningfully participate in the digital economy, reclaim their narratives, and contribute to social change at both community and national levels despite the existing challenges. Future research should investigate how digital storytelling can influence not only individual empowerment but also institutional reform and community development in African contexts.

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