# When Words Become Weapons: Volunteer Communication Tactics to Combat Drugs at The Grassroots

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| Informasi Artikel | Abstract |
|---|---|
| | *This study investigates the communicative practices of youth volunteers involved in Surabaya's Kelurahan Bersinar anti-drug initiative, highlighting the role of grassroots messaging in shaping public health discourse. Grounded in framing theory, narrative theory, and social capital theory, the research explores how volunteers construct persuasive anti-drug messages through culturally rooted storytelling, emotional framing, and symbolic communication. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interviews, focus groups, observations, and campaign materials with 18 youth volunteers. The findings reveal that volunteers effectively used personal experiences and local narratives to foster trust and collective identity, transforming individual challenges into shared stories of hope and resistance. Emotional strategies, such as gain-framed and fear-based appeals, were deliberately crafted to trigger empathy and promote behavioral change. Volunteers also capitalized on their deep integration within community networks to enhance message credibility and reach, cultivating both bonding and bridging social capital. The study challenges top-down approaches in health campaigns, illustrating the power of peer-led, culturally resonant communication. It contributes a layered communication model for grassroots health advocacy and underscores the transformative impact of narrative-driven volunteer engagement. The study recommends integrating cultural framing in training programs and exploring digital channels to scale grassroots messaging in future research.* |
| **Keywords:**<br>grassroots communication, volunteer advocacy, against drugs, communication | |

*Abstrak*

Penelitian ini mengkaji praktik komunikasi relawan muda dalam inisiatif anti-narkoba Kelurahan Bersinar di Surabaya, dengan menyoroti peran pesan grassroots dalam membentuk wacana kesehatan publik. Berdasarkan teori framing, teori naratif, dan teori modal sosial, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana relawan membangun pesan anti-narkoba yang persuasif melalui narasi budaya, pembingkaian emosional, dan komunikasi simbolik. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, diskusi kelompok, observasi, dan materi kampanye yang melibatkan 18 relawan muda. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa relawan menggunakan pengalaman pribadi dan cerita lokal untuk membangun kepercayaan dan identitas kolektif, mengubah tantangan individu menjadi narasi harapan dan perlawanan bersama. Strategi emosional, seperti pesan berbasis keuntungan dan ketakutan, dirancang secara cermat untuk membangkitkan empati dan mendorong perubahan perilaku. Para relawan juga memanfaatkan keterikatan mereka dalam jaringan komunitas untuk memperkuat kredibilitas dan jangkauan pesan, sekaligus membangun modal sosial bonding dan bridging. Studi ini menantang pendekatan kampanye kesehatan dari atas ke bawah, dan menunjukkan efektivitas komunikasi berbasis teman sebaya yang sesuai secara budaya. Penelitian ini menawarkan model komunikasi berlapis untuk advokasi kesehatan grassroots dan menegaskan potensi transformatif dari keterlibatan relawan berbasis narasi. Rekomendasi mencakup integrasi narasi budaya dalam pelatihan relawan dan eksplorasi saluran digital untuk memperluas pesan grassroots.

**Kata Kunci** : Komunitas akar rumput, Advokasi relawan, Anti-narkoba, Komunikasi

## INTRODUCTION

The discourse of drug prevention has evolved significantly, with language emerging as a central tool in shaping public perceptions and mobilizing community action. In particular, grassroots campaigns increasingly utilize volunteer-led communication strategies, underscoring the potent role of narrative in confronting substance abuse. The metaphor of "language as a weapon" aptly encapsulates the capacity of words to instigate action, foster resilience, and construct collective identities, especially in volatile or under-resourced communities (Risi & Proctor, 2019). This understanding resonates in anti-drug campaigns where communicative framing not only conveys information but also redefines social realities. Scholars such as Kabakhidze et al. (2021) and Kotwas & Kubík (2022) argue that ideological constructs embedded in language can shape societal narratives, revealing the strategic importance of storytelling in drug prevention efforts.

Grassroots activism against drugs relies on the immersive participation of volunteers who act as both communicators and community representatives. These individuals are uniquely positioned to cultivate trust, disseminate culturally resonant messages, and galvanize support from within their communities (Teti et al., 2021). Communication tactics range from educational workshops to digital media outreach, with storytelling, advocacy, and visual campaigns forming the core of intervention strategies. These multidimensional tactics draw upon community norms and local dialects to construct persuasive narratives that challenge drug culture and promote preventive behaviors (Jothieswari et al., 2023). Furthermore, narrative and framing theories illustrate how the selective emphasis on specific themes—such as hope, recovery, or fear—can alter perceptions and influence behavioral outcomes (Florence et al., 2022; Reyna et al., 2021). With the study by (Riduan et al., n.d.), which examined the implementation of the Broadband Learning Centre (BLC) Programme in Surabaya. Their research highlights how community-based approaches and volunteer engagement significantly contribute to public service effectiveness, particularly in reaching marginalized populations and promoting digital literacy. Similarly, the communication model employed by the Balongsari Youth Organization illustrates the transformative potential of peer-led, culturally grounded advocacy in addressing public health concerns.

Recent developments in social capital theory further elucidate how interpersonal networks and trust underpin effective grassroots communication. Community volunteers, by virtue of their embeddedness within local networks, serve as conduits for both structural and cognitive social capital, facilitating the flow of information and reinforcing collective norms (Lu et al., 2020). Their ability to mobilize communities through shared values and interpersonal trust enhances the reach and sustainability of anti-drug initiatives. Given the increasing reliance on non-institutional actors to address public health concerns, there is a pressing need to analyze how volunteer-driven messaging frameworks are constructed, received, and adapted in real-world settings.



**Figure 1. Participants Activity**

Despite the widespread implementation of volunteer-led anti-drug initiatives, there remains a significant gap in understanding the nuanced communication practices these efforts entail. Most existing research tends to prioritize institutional approaches, overlooking the contextual richness and grassroots dynamics of informal volunteer strategies. Particularly in urban settings like Surabaya, where the Clean Neighborhood from Drugs (Kelurahan Bersinar) program is being launched, the potential of volunteer communicators as change agents is underexamined. Questions persist regarding how these individuals frame anti-drug narratives, engage audiences, and navigate socio-cultural barriers.

Addressing this void requires a shift toward qualitative, context-sensitive inquiries that capture the lived experiences and discursive practices of community volunteers. The current study responds to this need by adopting a qualitative case study design focused on the Balongsari Youth Organization in Surabaya. Through thematic analysis of interviews, focus groups, and campaign materials, the research explores how language becomes a vehicle for resistance, solidarity, and social transformation. By identifying effective communication models and the obstacles volunteers face, the study aims to enhance the efficacy and sustainability of grassroots anti-drug campaigns.

Framing theory provides a foundational lens for interpreting how volunteers construct and disseminate anti-drug messages. Central to this theory is the notion that message framing significantly influences how audiences interpret and respond to information. For instance, positive framing (e.g., recovery success stories) can evoke hope and action, whereas fear-based framing may prompt avoidance or denial (Reyna et al., 2021). Strategic frame selection thus plays a critical role in shaping community engagement, as demonstrated in studies examining political and public health communication (Florence et al., 2022; Nicholls & Culpepper, 2020).

Narrative theory complements this by examining the structural and functional elements of storytelling in social contexts. It emphasizes how personal and collective narratives serve as mechanisms for constructing meaning and identity (Bolshunov et al., 2021; Mohlin & Bernhardsson, 2021). In the realm of drug prevention, volunteers often draw upon their own experiences or local stories to build emotionally resonant and culturally grounded counter-narratives. These stories challenge stigmatizing discourses around addiction and cultivate empathy and solidarity, enhancing the persuasive power of grassroots messages (Crouchman et al., 2022; Wills et al., 2019).

Social capital theory further informs the study by contextualizing communication within networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms. Volunteers function as brokers of social capital, leveraging their interpersonal relationships to amplify message credibility and participation (Lu et al., 2020). Particularly in community-centered initiatives, bonding and bridging social capital are pivotal in ensuring message dissemination across diverse social strata (Wang et al., 2022). These theoretical frameworks collectively offer a robust foundation for analyzing how language, narrative, and social structures converge to shape grassroots communication efficacy.

Current literature provides valuable insights into institutional anti-drug communication and mass media campaigns, but empirical studies focused on volunteer-driven grassroots strategies are comparatively scarce. For example, while mass media campaigns like the FDA's "Real Cost" are well-documented for their behavioral impacts (Duke et al., 2019), less is known about how similar messaging strategies are adapted for community settings by unpaid, non-professional communicators. Similarly, digital outreach has gained prominence in health promotion, yet few studies have evaluated how volunteers tailor online content to resonate with local audiences (Lundberg & Grahn, 2022).

Research by Teti et al. (2021) and Jothieswari et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of community engagement in prevention, but often treats volunteers as passive disseminators rather than active constructors of narratives. Moreover, while narrative and framing theories have been extensively applied to institutional communications, their application in grassroots contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, is underdeveloped. This oversight limits our understanding of how sociocultural factors influence narrative construction and reception at the local level.

Additionally, there is limited research on the emotional labor and identity work involved in volunteer communication, particularly in stigmatized contexts like drug prevention. Volunteers often navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, balancing advocacy with sensitivity. The lived experiences of

these individuals—how they interpret their roles, encounter resistance, and adapt their messages—remain largely undocumented. This study addresses these critical gaps by centering the voices of volunteers and analyzing their communicative practices through the lens of framing, narrative, and social capital theories.

This study aims to explore how volunteers construct, deliver, and interpret anti-drug messages within grassroots communication campaigns. Specifically, it examines the experiences, narratives, and framing strategies employed by members of the Balongsari Youth Organization in Surabaya, Indonesia. Through in-depth qualitative methods, the study uncovers how language serves as a form of resistance, solidarity, and social influence in community-driven anti-drug efforts.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary integration of framing, narrative, and social capital theories to analyze grassroots volunteer communication. Unlike previous studies that focus on top-down or institutional approaches, this study foregrounds the agency of volunteers as active communicators and change agents. Geographically bounded to urban high-risk communities and temporally focused on recent campaigns, the research provides culturally grounded insights that can inform future training programs and policy frameworks for volunteer-based drug prevention initiatives.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the communication strategies used by volunteers in the Balongsari Youth Organization, Surabaya, under the Kelurahan Bersinar anti-drug initiative. Informed by framing theory, narrative theory, and social capital theory, the research utilized semi-structured interview guides, focus group protocols, observation checklists, and campaign artifacts such as posters, videos, and social media content. The five-stage research process included ethical preparation, purposive sampling of 18 youth volunteers, multi-method data collection, narrative analysis, and theory-informed synthesis. Consistent with Miles and Huberman's qualitative analysis framework, triangulation was applied at three levels: data source triangulation (interviews, FGDs, observations, and content analysis), investigator triangulation (multiple researchers involved in coding and interpretation), and theory triangulation (integrating three theoretical frameworks to analyze findings), enhancing the credibility and robustness of the research (Miles et al., 2014). Over eight weeks of fieldwork, interviews and FGDs captured individual and collective narratives, observations recorded live communicative practices, and content analysis assessed framing in media materials. Data were transcribed, translated, and analyzed using narrative analysis involving coding of narrative blocks, thematic grouping, structural modeling (setting, characters, plot), and re-storying. Findings were validated through participant checks and cross-method comparison, revealing how language and storytelling function as mechanisms of identity, resistance, and community cohesion in grassroots drug prevention.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The narratives shared by volunteers in the *Kelurahan Bersinar* initiative reveal a powerful constellation of communicative strategies grounded in personal experience, cultural resonance, and emotional authenticity.

**Table 1. Themes and Quotes from Volunteer Anti-Drug Communicators**

| Participant Code | Theme | Excerpt from Participants |
|---|---|---|
| P01 | Narrative Identity | *I tell my story so others don't feel alone. I've been through it, and I came back.* |
| P02 | Lived Experience | *My cousin's addiction tore our family apart. That's why I'm here talking about it.* |
| P03 | Framing Strategies | *We frame the message to say: you have a future, not just fear of consequences.* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| P04 | Hope and Fear | *Sometimes we use fear, but mostly hope people need to believe change is possible.* |
| P05 | Volunteer as Messenger | *We are not just telling people what to do; we talk like we are part of them.* |
| P06 | Cultural Sensitivity | *I always use our local sayings, they understand better that way.* |
| P07 | Language of Resistance | *Words can fight we use them to fight the drug culture, not just drugs.* |
| P08 | Stigmatization Challenge | *People think addicts are bad. We change that image through our words.* |
| P09 | Emotional Storytelling | *When I cried telling that story, they cried too that's when they really listened.* |
| P10 | Social Bonding | *We share meals, jokes, and stories they feel we are one of them, not outsiders.* |
| P11 | Message Personalization | *I choose stories from our kampung; it makes them listen more closely.* |
| P12 | Community Trust | *They trust me because they see me every day, not some stranger in a uniform.* |
| P13 | Narrative Techniques | *I use a story arc beginning, struggle, and change just like in the movies.* |
| P14 | Recovery Journey | *Recovery stories show it's possible to bounce back and that inspires people.* |
| P15 | Relational Dynamics | *They talk to us, cry with us sometimes it's like therapy for both sides.* |
| P16 | Community Engagement | *We visit homes, sit in their kitchens, talk with their elders it makes a big difference.* |
| P17 | Campaign Visibility | *Now our posters are all over the kelurahan people stop and ask about them.* |
| P18 | Visual Communication | *Visuals matter our videos show real people, not actors. It feels authentic.* |

From deeply personal stories of addiction and recovery (P01, P02, P14) to carefully framed messages of hope and agency (P03, P04), these volunteers demonstrate an acute awareness of how language shapes perception and influences behavior. Communication is not merely instructional but deeply relational, as exemplified by those who emphasize speaking "as part of the community" rather than from above it (P05, P12, P16). Volunteers tailor messages using familiar idioms (P06), local narratives (P11), and emotional storytelling (P09) to reduce stigma (P08) and encourage dialogue. Their approach incorporates narrative techniques (P13), visual authenticity (P18), and symbolic resistance (P07), constructing compelling counter-narratives that reframe addiction and recovery within a context of solidarity and transformation. These efforts, made visible through community posters and digital media (P17), collectively exemplify how volunteers are not just communicators but embedded agents of cultural change, using language as a tool for healing, resistance, and collective empowerment.

**Figure 2. Word Cloud**

The word cloud reveals that volunteer communication in grassroots anti-drug efforts is deeply rooted in personal storytelling, emotional resonance, and cultural authenticity. The utilization of prevalent terms such as "people," "story," "feel," "tell," and "change" underscores the volunteers' employment of narrative to cultivate connection, instill hope, and encourage recovery. The repeated use of terms such as "fight," "frame," "message," and "fear" signifies a deliberate strategy to reshape public perceptions and counteract stigma. In contrast, terms like "local," "kampung," and "authentic" underscore the significance of messaging that is firmly rooted in cultural nuances. The visualization affirms that volunteers rely on emotionally compelling, community-embedded narratives to build trust, challenge stereotypes, and mobilize collective action against drug abuse.

### Constructing Narrative Identity through Experience

Participants demonstrated a strong tendency to construct their narrative identities around personal or vicarious experiences with drug abuse. As Participant P01 expressed, "I tell my story so others don't feel alone. I've been through it, and I came back." This quote reflects the transformative use of narrative to reposition personal adversity into a communal asset, resonating with the narrative theory's premise that stories are tools for identity construction and social influence (Mohlin & Bernhardsson, 2021). Similarly, Participant P02 shared, "My cousin's addiction tore our family apart. That's why I'm here talking about it" Here, the communication is rooted in emotional authenticity and moral responsibility, enhancing the credibility of the message. Such personal storytelling fosters empathy, reinforces shared values, and positions volunteers as credible messengers grounded in lived experience (Wills et al., 2019). The emergence of these narratives aligns with the concept of cultural resonance, where individual stories mirror the broader community's struggles, thereby enhancing collective engagement and social solidarity.
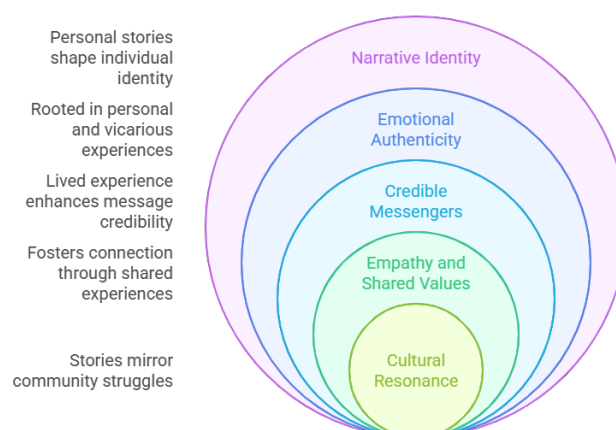


**Figure 3. Narrative identity and social impact experience**

The diagram presents a layered framework that illustrates how narrative identity in volunteer communication is built from the inside out, beginning with cultural resonance and extending to broader narrative identity. Effective messaging, at its core, must reflect the struggles of the community to achieve cultural resonance, thereby fostering empathy and shared values. These phenomena, in turn, facilitate the emergence of credible messengers whose lived experiences and emotional authenticity enhance

trust and relatability. The aforementioned elements coalesce to form a narrative identity, wherein personal and communal stories intersect to shape collective understanding and social influence. This model underscores that grassroots communication that is impactful is rooted in authenticity, shared experience, and cultural alignment.

### *Framing Strategies and Emotive Appeals in Communication*

Volunteers displayed deliberate framing strategies to shape audience perception, often emphasizing empowerment and redemption. Participant P03 noted, "We frame the message to say: you have a future, not just fear of consequences." This exemplifies gain-framed messaging aimed at promoting agency and hope—consistent with framing theory's emphasis on outcome-oriented persuasion (Florence et al., 2022; Reyna et al., 2021). The dual use of hope and fear was highlighted by Participant P04: "Sometimes we use fear, but mostly hope – people need to believe change is possible." This dual framing technique reflects a nuanced understanding of audience psychology, where fear might attract attention, but hope sustains behavioral change (Nicholls & Culpepper, 2020). Volunteers tailored messages to specific contexts, balancing emotional intensity with motivational clarity, thereby enhancing the relevance and relatability of their narratives.
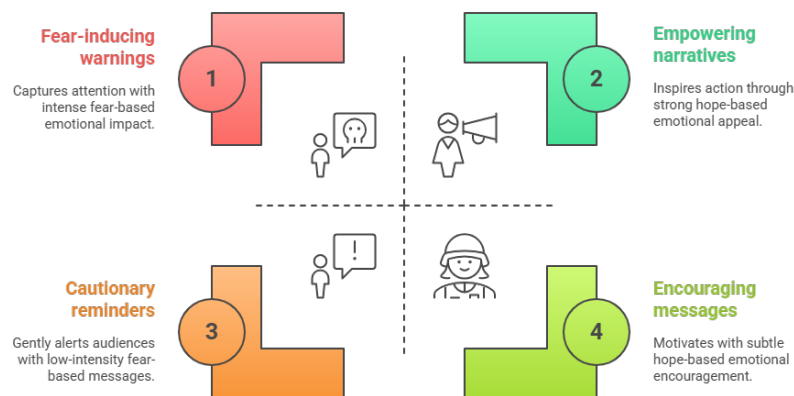


**Figure 4. Framing Strategies in Volunteering Communication**

The diagram presents a strategic framework for the framing of emotional messages. This framework is based on the categorization of communication approaches into four types, which are differentiated based on the intensity and emotional direction of the message—fear or hope. High-intensity fear appeals, also known as fear-inducing warnings, are designed to capture attention through emotional shock. In contrast, empowering narratives utilize strong hope to inspire proactive behavior. Conversely, cautionary reminders delicately advise the utilization of low-level fear to circumvent panic, while encouraging messages proffer nuanced hope to sustain ongoing motivation. This model underscores the significance of aligning emotional tone and intensity with the intended behavioral outcome in public messaging.

### *Volunteers as Message Bearers and Social Catalysts*

The role of volunteers transcended mere dissemination of information; they positioned themselves as relational mediators and transformative agents. Participant P05 articulated, "we talk like we are part of them." This statement underlines the relational foundation of grassroots communication, which is central to social capital theory (Lu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Volunteers operate within networks of trust and shared norms, allowing them to mobilize community engagement more effectively than external actors. Their presence in everyday interactions imbues their messages with authenticity and cultural specificity, reinforcing their function as brokers of both information and solidarity. This capacity to embody the message—what social capital scholars term "symbolic capital"—transforms volunteers into role models whose behavior legitimizes their advocacy.
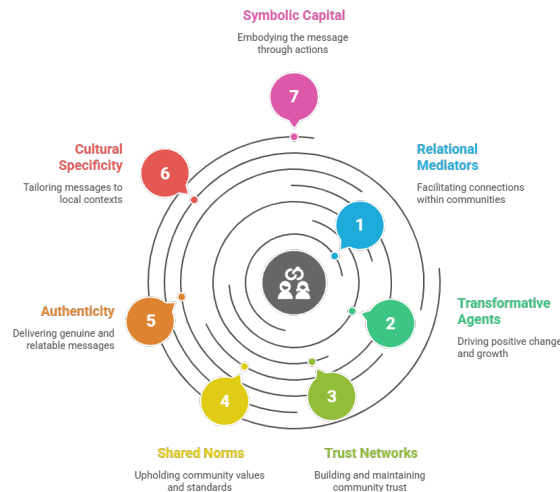
**Figure 5. Multifaceted Rule of Volunteers**

The diagram presents a seven-part framework that illustrates the key roles and capacities of community volunteers in effective grassroots communication, particularly in drug prevention campaigns. At the foundation, volunteers function as relational mediators (1) and transformative agents (2), thereby bridging relationships and initiating change within communities. The credibility of these entities is anchored in trust networks (3) and is further reinforced by their alignment with shared norms (4), thereby reflecting the community's values. Volunteers are able to gain influence by delivering authentic (5) and culturally specific (6) messages that resonate with local audiences. At the highest level, they embody the cause through symbolic capital (7), serving as visible and trusted figures whose actions reflect their message. This layered model underscores the notion that interpersonal trust, cultural congruence, and moral integrity empower volunteers to function as effective agents of social transformation.

## Cultural Adaptation and Local Resonance in Messaging

Volunteers consistently emphasized the importance of culturally resonant communication strategies. Participant P06 stated, "We use local slang and stories so that people don't feel lectured but included." This insight reflects the strategic cultural framing of messages to ensure they align with local norms and linguistic preferences. Such efforts underscore the adaptive communication capacity of volunteers, supporting the framing theory assertion that message framing must align with audience expectations to achieve cognitive and emotional engagement (Florence et al., 2022; Reyna et al., 2021). Additionally, P07 noted, "We even use traditional Javanese symbols to make the messages feel closer to home." These practices reflect what narrative theorists define as "local authenticity," wherein the inclusion of familiar symbols and idioms enhances message credibility and acceptance (Mohlin & Bernhardsson, 2021). Thus, the grassroots strategy is not merely about content delivery but about embedding the message within the cultural and emotional landscape of the target community.
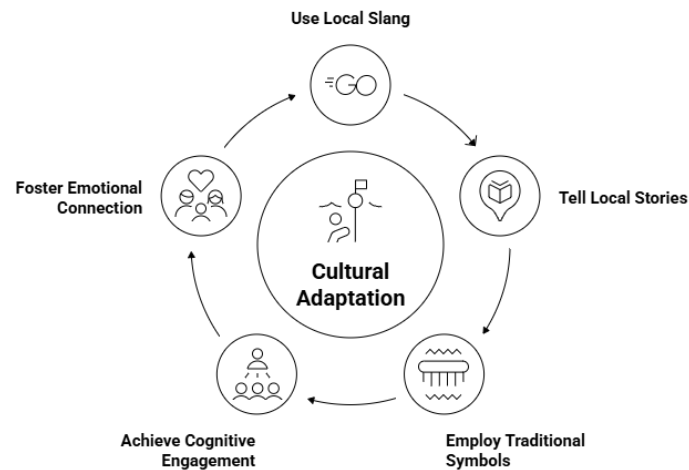
**Figure 6. Cycle of Culturally Resonant Communication**

The following diagram illustrates a model of volunteer grassroots communication strategies that blend narrative and framing elements to create persuasive, community-based messages in anti-drug campaigns. At the core of the model is the utilization of volunteers who draw from their lived experience and shared cultural values to develop messages that are emotionally resonant, socially credible, and contextually relevant. The process entails three fundamental dynamics: (1) the utilization of personal narratives and emotional authenticity to imbue drug prevention with humanity, (2) the employment of message framing techniques (e.g., hope vs. fear) to influence audience perception and engagement, and (3) the exploitation of community embeddedness—trust, shared norms, and visual symbolism—to establish credibility and galvanize collective action. This layered approach demonstrates that volunteers function not merely as conduits of information but as transformative communicators embedded in the social fabric of their communities.

### Use of Storytelling in Advocacy and Healing

Storytelling emerged as both an advocacy tool and a method of personal and communal healing. Participant P08 reflected, "People things addicts are bad. We change that image through our words." This dual impact supports Crouchman et al.'s (2022) observation that narratives not only persuade but also empower the storytellers by allowing emotional expression and cognitive reordering of past experiences. Likewise, P09 noted, "When I cried telling that story, they cried too that's when they really listened." This highlights storytelling's role in breaking emotional and communicative barriers, reaffirming its effectiveness as a medium of affective engagement. Such narratives are structured not just to inform but to evoke empathy, inspire transformation, and create shared meaning—principles foundational to narrative theory. By framing personal struggles as collective learning, these stories bridge the gap between individual experience and community mobilization.
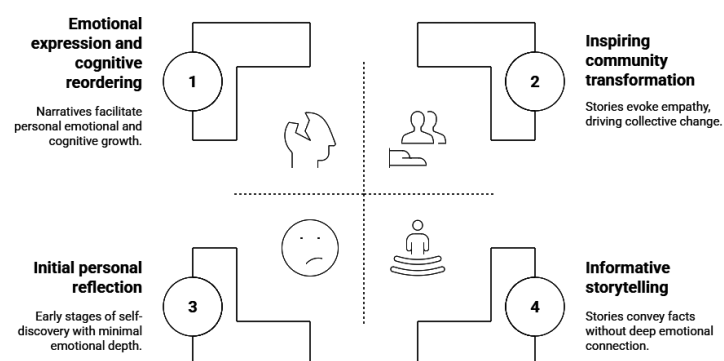


**Figure 7. Impact of Storytelling in Advocacy and Healing**

This diagram illustrates how community-based volunteers in anti-drug campaigns utilize a layered strategy of engagement grounded in three interrelated dimensions: symbolic, structural, and performative. At the symbolic level, messages are infused with cultural resonance, emotional authenticity, and personal meaning—often conveyed through narratives and visual elements. The structural level highlights how volunteers are embedded in the social fabric through trust networks, shared norms, and relational positioning, which grants legitimacy and enhances message acceptance. Finally, the performative level captures how communication is enacted—through storytelling, personalized delivery, and participatory engagement—emphasizing the volunteer's role as a credible messenger and active community member. Together, these dimensions show that effective grassroots communication is not just about transmitting content, but about embodying values, building relationships, and transforming social narratives through lived action.

### Symbolic Framing and Social Capital in Volunteer-Led Health Communication

The volunteers in the *Kelurahan Bersinar* initiative effectively utilized emotional framing and symbolic communication to establish deep resonance with their audiences, embedding trust and authenticity into their narratives. Through the strategic use of storytelling, metaphors, and cultural symbols, participants transformed personal and community experiences into emotionally compelling messages that inspired action.



**Figure 8. Factors Enhancing Community Engagement**

These communication strategies aligned closely with symbolic capital and framing theory, while also reinforcing social capital at both bonding and bridging levels. Trust emerged as a core mechanism, cultivated through daily presence, empathetic dialogue, and peer-level engagement—allowing volunteers to act as credible messengers in stigmatized contexts like drug prevention. Moreover, their grassroots outreach expanded beyond message delivery, activating decentralized networks and fostering collective ownership through campaign visibility and community interaction. These efforts not only amplified the reach and credibility of the campaign but also exemplified how relational trust, shared norms, and participatory visibility form the foundation for sustainable, community-led health communication.

### CONCLUSION

This study underscores the powerful role of volunteers in grassroots anti-drug campaigns, revealing how their use of personal narratives, emotional framing, and cultural resonance fosters trust, reshapes stigmatizing discourses, and enhances message effectiveness within the community. The integration of narrative, framing, and social capital theories in the research underscores communication not merely as a process of transmission but as a transformative practice rooted in empathy, authenticity, and relational trust. The findings of this study call into question conventional, top-down health

messaging approaches, advocating for culturally grounded, peer-led strategies that empower local actors. Subsequent research endeavors should delve deeper into the long-term behavioral ramifications of these volunteer-led narratives. Additionally, they should investigate how digital tools and emotional labor influence grassroots health communication across various sociocultural contexts.

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