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Storytelling Networks and Social Capital for Disaster Resilience: Empowering Narrative Agency in Diverse Communities

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Abstract

Prior studies have established the importance of social capital in fostering disaster resilience especially among diverse and marginalised populations. Yet, most have focused on its structural dimension, treating social capital as a pre-existing attribute. Limited attention has been given to its communicative underpinning—how shared meaning-making, particularly through storytelling networks as open and participatory spaces, actively constitutes social capital. Addressing this gap, this study draws on storytelling networks theory and the notion of narrative agency to examine how community self-organised storytelling networks, comprising agents, stories, and practices, shape collective sensemaking as the foundation of social capital. Based on 36 in-depth interviews with community members, emergency practitioners, and service providers, the study reconceptualises social capital through a participatory storytelling lens and advances a critical understanding of narrative agency amid power asymmetries. It also offers practical insights into how diverse storytelling agents co-make social capital and outlines directions for future research.

Keywords

disaster resilience; diverse communities; narrative agency; social capital; storytelling networks

1. Introduction

Social capital has proven important across all phases of disaster management (e.g., mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) in both disaster resilience (e.g., Meyer, 2017; Uekusa, 2020; Zhao et al., 2025) and risk communication research (e.g., Chu et al., 2021; Liu, 2022). Despite drawing on different theories from Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993), and Woolcock and Narayan (2000), scholars converge in defining social capital as either relationships/ties with associated resources, or as norms that facilitate

collective action and civic engagement (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011). Empirical studies show that social capital enables access to stage-specific information: from pre-disaster warnings, evacuation routes, and mitigation plans, to timely updates and response strategies during crises, to relief supplies, recovery programs, and community (re)building in the aftermath (Xiong & Li, 2024). Social capital is vital for diverse and marginalised populations who often rely on bonding ties with family, kin, and friends for information support, while lacking bridging capital (ties across groups) and linking capital (connections to power structures) in disasters (Panday et al., 2021).

However, most disaster research on social capital emphasises its "structural" or "relational" aspects by evaluating the strength of ties, density of networks, scale of relationships, and their "impact" on disaster-related outcomes (e.g., Cai, 2017; Liu, 2022; Xiong & Li, 2024). Social capital has long been treated as a fixed asset or property associated with resources accessible within networks and convertible into other forms of capital (e.g., economic, cultural). Even the communitarian view of social capital (Putnam, 2000) interprets trust, reciprocity, and public good—vital to disaster resilience—as "outcomes" of networks, associations, and group memberships. By contrast, limited attention has been given to the communicative underpinnings of social capital, namely, social capital accrued through communicative acts (Matheson & Jones, 2016). There is a synergy between social capital and communication (Rojas et al., 2011): Shared meaning-making both constitutes and is constructed by social ties. Therefore, a communicative approach to social capital shifts the focus from diffusion of information via social ties to the (co-)construction of shared meaning as the very basis of social capital. In this sense, communication is not instrumental but constitutive of social capital.

To address the under-examined communicative dimension of social capital in disaster contexts, this study examines storytelling as a communicative act in its making. Storytelling is approached as an open, fluid process of sensemaking among multiple agents, centred on the production/negotiation of shared meaning (Bietti et al., 2019; Copeland & de Moor, 2018). It foregrounds agency and improvisation, complementing structural social capital by capturing its evolving nature. As such, this study draws on storytelling network and narrative agency theories to analyse how storytelling dynamics shape bonding, bridging, and linking capital as co-constructed schemas for collaborative resilience. While storytelling networks, rooted in communication infrastructure theory (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006), traditionally identify three core agents—residents, community organisations, and media—this study reframes them as open, dynamic systems. Narrative agency (Lueg, 2023; Weder & Weaver, 2025), the capability to transport ideas across fields (e.g., from communities to authorities and vice versa) and to interact with other communicators, becomes crucial for the boundary-crossing and norm-negotiating that shape social capital.

Empirically, this study reports findings from a larger project examining how diverse communities perceive the role of storytelling as collective sensemaking in the (co-)making of social capital in disasters. In Australia, diverse communities, commonly referred to as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, comprise multicultural groups from non-Caucasian, non-English-speaking backgrounds (Hou et al., 2025). Fieldwork conducted in Cairns, an Australian regional city, involved 36 interviews with diverse community members, emergency practitioners, and service providers. On one level, our findings extend storytelling network theories by foregrounding the role of storytelling intermediaries (e.g., community leaders), incorporating both planned and emergent narratives, and revealing the multi-flow (e.g., top-down, peer-to-peer, bottom-up) of storytelling, all underpinning social capital as shared meaning-making.

On another level, the study enriches the under-theorised communicative dimension of social capital through a critical lens of narrative agency, recognising its potential to traverse power structures and build linkages through negotiated sensemaking among social agents.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Capital, Diverse Communities, and Disaster Resilience

Despite challenges in theoretically defining social capital and methodologically evaluating its cross-level (e.g., individual, collective) effects, most disaster research draws on two schools of thought. On the one hand, structural and relational social capital focuses on resources available to individuals within (formal or informal) networks of relationships (Bourdieu, 1985; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988). This school of thought conceptualises social capital as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998, p. 6). On the other hand, communitarian and cognitive social capital emphasises shared norms, trust, and civic virtue that facilitate collective action for the public good (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Unlike the former micro social capital, this macro approach links the vitality of civil society to the stock of social capital.

Both schools have been criticised for their limitations, especially the "dark side" of social capital. Structural social capital in closed networks can lead to social exclusion, corruption, or elite domination, while communitarian social capital rests on normative and nostalgic assumptions of pre-existing values (Meyer, 2017). Consequently, empirical research increasingly adopts a typology of social capital comprising: (a) bonding capital—close-knit relationships (e.g., family, friends, neighbours) that promote cohesion yet risk exclusivity and homogeneity; (b) bridging capital—outward connections across groups or communities that provide diverse resources but may further marginalisation; and (c) linking capital—vertical ties to those in power (e.g., authorities, institutions) that grant access to scarce resources while often reproducing inequalities (Aldrich, 2012; Panday et al., 2021).

Social capital plays a pivotal role in disaster resilience—the adaptive capacity of communities and systems to "bounce back" after adversity (Kanjilal et al., 2024). Although disaster research often concentrates on the "recovery" phase, scholars increasingly contend that resilience spans all stages of the disaster lifecycle. Robust social capital can facilitate access to critical information for pre-disaster preparedness (Shah et al., 2024), support coordinated responses during crises (Chu et al., 2021), and mobilise resources for sustained recovery and community wellbeing (Meyer, 2017). Yet, despite growing institutional recognition of social capital, authorities often struggle to build trust and meaningful relationships with communities (Xiong & Li, 2024). In contrast, community-based or grassroots-led disaster practices have gained prominence, drawing on local knowledge and networks to cultivate "constructive resilience" that emerges "alongside dominant societal structures that are either oppressive or ineffective" (Parker, 2019, p. 2).

Social capital is especially crucial for diverse and marginalised populations, who face systemic inequalities (e.g., socioeconomic divides, language barriers) yet lack resources during disasters (Uekusa, 2020). Ethnic minorities (e.g., Asian, Latin/Central American, and African communities) tend to value collectivist and family-oriented cultures and therefore rely heavily on bonding capital for immediate support. However, they often possess limited bridging and linking capital, constraining access to diverse resources and institutional

assistance needed for long-term recovery (Uekusa et al., 2022). Addressing these disparities requires deliberate efforts to cultivate, as Uekusa (2020) advocates, "disaster social capital"—a context-specific, experiential, and improvisational form of social capital. Unlike ordinary social capital, which is nurtured gradually through routine interactions, disaster social capital often emerges rapidly in response to emergencies and is shaped by a heightened sense of "common fate" among affected communities.

Despite these insights, much disaster resilience research privileges a structural view of social capital as a pre-existing attribute measurable by indicators such as tie strength, network density, and relationship scale (Cai, 2017; Liu, 2022; Xiong & Li, 2024). This approach risks overlooking how social capital comes into being. Essentially, at the heart of all conceptions of social capital lies the shared meaning-making through communicative acts (Rojas et al., 2011). Put simply, social capital is a communicative construct in constant flux. For diverse and marginalised communities, this communicative dimension is critical to disaster resilience. A more nuanced understanding is needed for the participatory process of social capital through which social agents co-construct meaning, negotiate power relations, and develop shared narratives. The following sections therefore turn to communicative approaches to social capital (2.2) and introduce the theoretical lenses of storytelling networks and narrative agency (2.3).

2.2. Communicative Approaches to Social Capital

Communication flows through social ties while constituting their communicative foundation. Coleman (1988) recognised this link: Information inheres in social relations. Similarly, Bourdieu (1985) emphasises the interplay between symbolic (e.g., reputation, image) and social capital, and Putnam (1993) conceptualises social capital as norms and civic engagement, both highlighting the communicative dimensions. Rojas et al. (2011) thus define communicative social capital as both a structural feature and information flow, whose interplay generates diverse pathways for the (co-)making of social capital. The interplay between social ties and communication is dialectical: Social ties gain mobilising potential when suffused with communicative practices; communication sustains social ties and fosters civic participation (Matheson & Jones, 2016). Essentially, communicative social capital foregrounds the construction of shared meaning—collective sensemaking—echoing pragmatist accounts of social interaction (Mead, 1967) and Habermasian (Habermas, 1984) communicative action. For this reason, this article cautions against reducing social capital to the number or quality of network ties but instead refocuses on their underlying communicative dynamics.

Nevertheless, much of the extant research bridging communication and social capital tends to emphasise the functionality or impact of communication as a conduit or channel for building social relationships. For example, community resilience scholars position communication and media as key attributes and critical infrastructure for strengthening local connectedness through information sharing (e.g., Hanson-Easey et al., 2018; Warburton et al., 2013). Other studies operationalise communication in terms of its forms (e.g., traditional, mass, or digital/social media) or levels (e.g., interpersonal, inter-group, or cross-cultural) to examine their contributions to social capital (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2013; C. Lee & Sohn, 2015; R. Lee & Jones, 2008). These perspectives, however, devote minimal attention to the communicative processes per se—how shared meaning-making develops through communicative acts.

Only a few studies examined the constitutive role of communication to social capital. Rojas et al. (2011) analysed how communication variables, such as news attention, media exposure, and conversational

frequency, interacted with structural features like network size and associational membership to foster civic/political participation. They conceptualise communication as fundamental to societal integration: at the system level through news consumption, at the individual level through interpersonal discussion, and both amplified through ties at the community level. They conclude that social capital is not merely a by-product of networks or media use but emerges from the interplay of institutional affiliations, interpersonal talk, mass media, and community ties.

Matheson and Jones' (2016) study of post-earthquake Christchurch offers another example of a communicative approach to social capital. They found that communicative social capital was unevenly distributed, or even experienced as deficient, among the most affected populations. By analysing communicative elements, such as gaining knowledge about disaster recovery, participating in public discussions, and creating shared cultural meaning, they demonstrated how social capital can be generated through mutual understanding and social learning that result from residential talk.

More recent work has empirically tested the positive correlations between communication and social capital among multi-ethnic communities in disasters (Cai, 2017; Liu, 2022). Drawing on communication ecology theory, Liu (2022) found ethnicity-based divergence in how communities linked to separate, rather than unified, communication networks, shaping social capital creation and disaster-coping outcomes. Cai (2017), using photovoice integrated with social media, showed how bridging and linking capital, often difficult to attain yet vital for vulnerable groups, could be cultivated across geographical and socioeconomic divides.

Yet inequalities in communicative capabilities and resources continue to constrain the (co-)making of social capital *among* and *by* diverse and marginalised populations. Uekusa (2019) introduces "linguistic capital," an institutionalised form of cultural capital, to capture the barriers minorities face in accessing information and support networks due to limited English proficiency. Without sufficient linguistic capital, minority communities struggle not only to communicate with broader society—hindering the development of bridging capital—but also to advocate for self-interests to policymakers and authorities, thereby limiting linking capital. These information asymmetries and communication inequalities underscore the need for inclusive approaches that enable the participatory making of social capital, whereby different social agents exercise agency in co-constructing shared meaning and values as the foundation for collective action (e.g., resilience-building). In this regard, storytelling networks and narrative agency, elaborated below, offer explanatory power for understanding the complex interplay between communicative acts and the (co-)making of social capital.

2.3. Storytelling Networks, Narrative Agency, and Social Capital

Differing from transmissive modes of communication, storytelling in this study refers to a dynamic exchange among the teller, the tale, and the audience, a socially constructed form of collective sensemaking that, in turn, constitutes the foundation of social capital (McDowell, 2021). As a collaborative process, storytelling embraces fragmented information and interactional moments through which tellers and listeners co-construct stories/narratives (Boje, 2013). When sudden disruptions occur within a cultural niche (e.g., disasters, pandemics), storytelling becomes a primary social activity of adaptive sensemaking. Multiple narratives emerge simultaneously across sites, producing what Boje (1995) calls "plurivocity." The adaptive value of storytelling lies in its capacity to create spaces where multiple agents make sense of uncertainty and

co-develop responses to wicked problems that none can solve alone (Bietti et al., 2019). Storytelling, especially digital storytelling—collaborative workshops for co-creating digital stories/videos—has thus gained traction in community-based participatory projects due to its connective potential across cultures (Copeland & de Moor, 2018).

Research has demonstrated the role of storytelling in building bonding, bridging, and linking capital. As social glue, storytelling brings community members together by fostering a sense of belonging, identity, and connectedness (Bietti et al., 2019). For example, *mehmani*—a type of Afghan intergenerational storytelling—helped refugee youth to maintain links with cultural legacy (Quirke & Howarth, 2018). Storytelling also enables boundary-crossing by carrying authentic voices across networks, thereby building bridging capital (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011). As communities of practice do not work automatically, storytelling plays a unifying role in mobilising diverse groups while mediating relationships towards collective action. Moreover, it holds potential for building linking capital with powerful sources. Copeland and de Moor (2018) identified digital storytelling as a much-used medium for conveying authentic experiences not only across horizontal civic networks but also vertically to reach upstream stakeholders.

More broadly, storytelling network, derived from communication infrastructure/ecology theories (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2012; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006), offers a framework for mapping the dynamics among social agents in a web of co-constructing shared meaning for social capital. It highlights three, locally embedded agents who draw resources from networks to participate in sensemaking, generate local knowledge, and mobilise civic action: (a) residents, engaging with family, friends, and neighbours; (b) community service organisations/nonprofits; and (c) media, especially participatory media (e.g., community radio, social platforms) that develop social relationships and community cohesion (Kanjilal et al., 2024; Matheson & Jones, 2016; Rojas et al., 2011). Liu (2022) extends this to include four components— interpersonal ties, media storytelling, community-based organisations, and official emergency management communication—as a storytelling network for navigating disaster-related challenges.

While storytelling network studies quantitatively measure the correlations between communication and civic participation (social capital), they offer limited insights into how multi-agent, multi-dimensional storytelling interplays to co-construct shared meaning. As such, Naughton (2014) recommends collecting narrative data—personal, reflective, and experiential accounts—about what might form social capital, to complement and reinvigorate structural network analyses. Lueg's (2023) typology of time-based narratives, drawing from Boje (1995, 2013), is illuminating for understanding multi-dimensional storytelling:

1. Planned narratives (oriented towards the past) are official tools for organisations to frame the history in ways that benefit themselves and prompt the subordinates to follow without criticism. In disaster contexts, it can be understood as the top-down, prescriptive disaster resilience narratives.
2. Living stories (created "on the go") are improvisational creation and construction between all sorts of agents as sensemaking of lived experiences.
3. Antenarratives (narratives-to-be) are provisional, contested storylines for guiding future sensemaking as a coherent narrative. They serve as a hub for co-telling living stories, where change agents negotiate what story can enter their own fields. In disaster contexts, this could be understood as the "resilience" antenarratives, where government-driven narratives interplay with community living stories to negotiate what counts as resilience.

This triad transforms storytelling networks into open systems where power dynamics evolve: Not all stories gain legitimacy or have equal chances to travel across fields (e.g., from communities to governments, and vice versa). In this regard, the notion of "narrative agency" is critical to shift focus from organisationally prescribed messaging to what diverse storytellers/agents do and construct as they negotiate frames, improvise fragments, and co-create resilience norms. "Narrative agency" thus refers to the capacity to move ideas across fields, translate or contest dominant narratives, and co-construct shared values (Lueg, 2023; Weder & Weaver, 2025). While Lueg sees narrative agency as contingent on a story's tellability and its capacity to resonate with core players in a target field, Weder and Weaver emphasise its reflexivity—co-constructing shared values through dialogue with other communicators/agents within broader, complex narrative environments.

Despite the analytical potential of juxtaposing storytelling networks with narrative agency, few empirical studies have fully unpacked the constitutive role of storytelling to the (co-)making of social capital in disasters. Chamlee-Wright and Storr's (2011) work is an exception, showing how social capital as shared narratives of a close-knit, family-oriented community shaped residents' recovery strategies following Hurricane Katrina. However, their analysis remains focused on the impact of social capital on recovery, rather than the constitutive relationships between storytelling and social capital. To address this gap, this study centres on diverse community storytellers who interact with other key players (e.g., emergency management authorities, community service providers) and multilayered narratives within storytelling networks to co-construct shared meaning of social capital that, in turn, informs resilience action. Thus, the key research question is:

> How do diverse community members engage with different agents, stories, and practices within storytelling networks to co-create shared meaning fundamental to social capital for disaster resilience?

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach to address the research question. Departing from structural network analysis, it examined how storytelling networks, as open, participatory sensemaking spaces, emerge through diverse community members' reflective accounts, complemented by insights from emergency management and community service representatives. We focused on the collective sensemaking in self-organising, emergent networks: *who* are storytellers, *what* is constructed, and *how* shared meaning develops in practice as integral to the (co-)making of social capital. Accordingly, resilience is understood as a socially negotiated construct (e.g., how "resilience" is continually contested or reconstructed through communicative practice), rather than as a prescriptive term defined by a set of measurements.

Fieldwork was conducted in Cairns, an Australian regional city prone to natural hazards (e.g., cyclones, floods) and characterised by cultural diversity, with Chinese/Mandarin, Japanese, and Nepali among the commonly spoken non-English languages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). As a migration city, Cairns exhibits strong bonding capital within cultural groups, while cross-cultural and institutional connections are facilitated through intermediaries (e.g., multicultural associations, service agencies; Hou et al., 2025). We developed partnerships with the local council and nonprofits to gain access to otherwise hard-to-reach communities. These partnerships helped to identify community leaders, both formal (e.g., bilingual caseworkers) and informal (e.g., respected individuals), who proved crucial in offering research support and cultural guidance.

Primary data comprised 36 interviews with members from Bhutanese, Congolese, Chinese, Colombian, Indonesian, Filipino, and Japanese groups (n = 28), alongside emergency practitioners and service providers (n = 8; see Table 1). Most interviews were conducted in English; in cases where participants preferred otherwise, bilingual community leaders served as interpreters. The interview guide framed questions about "storytelling networks" and "narrative agency" in accessible language: (a) Who do you usually seek information from or talk to during disasters? (b) What types of stories or information do you communicate, trust, or feel connected to? (c) How do you experience communications from governments, support agencies, and other community members in developing shared understanding or collective action in disasters? (d) Do you feel community voices are effectively communicated to broader, higher levels? And (e) What changes would you like to see or create through dialogue with others to foster better collaboration?

Table 1. Participant information.

Category	Code	Language	Gender	Age range (y/o)	Years in Australia	Role
Bhutanese	CL1	English; Nepali	Male	30–50	2–10	Community leader
	CM2	Nepali	Male	>50	10–20	Member
	CM3	English; Nepali	Male	<30	2–10	Member
	CM4	English; Nepali	Male	30–50	<2	Member
Chinese	CL5	English; Malay	Female	>50	>20	Community leader
	CM6	English; Chinese	Female	30–50	10–20	Member
	CM7	Chinese	Male	>50	2–10	Member
	CM8	Chinese	Male	30–50	10–20	Member
Colombian	CL9	English; Spanish	Male	<30	<2	Community leader
	CM10	Spanish	Male	<30	<2	Member
	CM11	Spanish	Female	<30	<2	Member
	CM12	Spanish	Female	<30	2–10	Member
Congolese	CL13	English; Swahili	Male	30–50	2–10	Community leader
	CM14	English; Swahili	Male	30–50	<2	Member
	CM15	Kinyarwanda	Female	>50	2–10	Member
	CM16	Swahili	Female	30–50	2–10	Member
Indonesian	CL17	English; Balinese	Female	>50	>20	Community leader
	CM18	English; Javanese	Female	>50	>20	Member
	CM19	English; Javanese	Female	30–50	10–20	Member
	CM20	English; Daya	Female	30–50	10–20	Member
Filipino	CL21	English; Samoan	Female	<30	>20	Community leader
	CM22	English; Filipino	Male	30–50	10–20	Member
	CM23	English; Filipino	Female	>50	>20	Member
	CM24	English; Tagalog	Female	<30	<2	Member
Japanese	CL25	English; Japanese	Female	30–50	10–20	Community leader
	CM26	Japanese	Female	30–50	>20	Member
	CM27	English; Japanese	Male	>50	>20	Member
	CM28	English; Japanese	Female	<30	10–20	Member

Table 1. (Cont.) Participant information.

Category	Code	Language	Gender	Age range (y/o)	Years in Australia	Role
Emergency Management	EM29	English; Chinese	Male	30–50	10–20	Police
	EM30	English	Male	30–50	>20	Police
	EM31	English; Hindi	Male	30–50	10–20	Official
	EM32	English	Female	30–50	>20	Practitioner
	EM33	English	Female	<30	>20	Officer
Service Provider	SP34	English; Spanish	Male	>50	>20	Consultant
	SP35	English; Spanish	Male	>50	10–20	Consultant
	SP36	English; Sinhala	Female	30–50	>20	Executive

Notes: CL = community leader; CM = community member; EM = emergency management; SP = service provider.

To capture the communicative dynamics inherent in social capital, our analysis adopted a relational lens—analysing how participants framed their perspectives in relation to others, that is, how meaning-making occurs across multiple agents. Informed by the preceding literature while attentive to grounded knowledge, three key components of storytelling networks emerged from the data: agents (storytellers), stories (multilayered narratives), and practices (approaches to developing shared understanding toward [co-]making social capital). Narrative agency was analysed in terms of initiatives taken by storytelling agents (e.g., communities, governments) to reconcile divergent narratives of resilience through integration, negotiation, or reconstruction.

4. Findings

While not devaluing direct messaging and scientific instructions for disaster resilience, participants described storytelling as one of the most accessible and inclusive ways of communication. As many explained, it lowers the barriers to joining public discussion, bridging isolated voices, and sharing ideas in less confrontational ways outside mainstream or official channels. A Congolese participant commented: "Storytelling is like music—it can be our shared language, although we do speak different ones" (CM14). A Colombian participant agreed: "A good story, whether it's through music, dance, or even football, can connect people from diverse backgrounds" (CM10). Likewise, a local council officer recalled an exhibition of refugee experiences that explicitly recognised storytelling as a communicative foundation of social capital:

> There were so many people there, migrants, families, and important leaders, even in the middle of a one-in-100-year flood. The Councillor said, "These creative things [storytelling, artworks] are what hold communities together. We can't lose that when disasters come, because they are creating the fabric of the safety net and social cohesion." (EM33)

4.1. Storytelling Networks: Open Yet Contested Spaces of Collective Sensemaking

Community participants did not use the term "storytelling networks" directly, but their accounts clearly pointed to the ways they self-organise or develop communicative networks during emergencies. These storytelling networks appear extensive, adaptable to contexts, and serve to cross boundaries for developing

shared understanding and exchanging local knowledge. The seven cultural/ethnic groups (see Table 1) described networks that were both convergent and divergent but collectively reflected shared needs and challenges.

4.1.1. Agents

Agents are trusted storytellers whom community members turn to for disaster communication and support networks. As found in prior studies (e.g., Cai, 2017; Liu, 2022; Uekusa et al., 2022), multi-ethnic communities heavily rely on bonding capital, while feeling limited in bridging and linking capital. Accordingly, our data revealed family and communities, community service providers, governments, and media as the main layers of storytelling agents, each carrying different weight in shaping community risk perceptions and resilience action.

Family, friends, and community peers were seen as the most immediate, trusted storytellers. One Japanese participant explained: "My own people, my own community—that's who I'd listen to first" (CM26). Children and the youth were seen as crucial messengers within migrant families. As one government official confirmed, "Kids often become the family's link to the outside world. They're the ones who pick up the language at school and can explain what's going on" (EM31). For migrants living alone, compatriots or fellow nationals became critical lifelines, often connected through cultural associations, social media groups, or informal gatherings. A Japanese single mother shared:

> Because of the language barrier, I don't have many friends here. But when I go to my child's playgroup, I meet other Japanese parents. That's where I feel connected and get my information. (CM26)

Community leaders, either formal (e.g., paid bilingual caseworkers) or informal (well-connected individuals), emerged as significant storytellers. They were simultaneously the bonding figures within communities and the intermediaries that build bridging and linking capital. Their intermediary role lies in seeking, translating, and contextualising official information into relatable messages to community members, while connecting them with essential support networks. Not only do communities regard them as the "boots on the ground," but emergency practitioners and service providers also wish to build "community leader networks" with them. A service provider commented:

> Community leaders are also cultural leaders. They're the go-to people—trusted connectors who "join the dots." Whether it's government or service agencies, if they want to engage the Sudanese community, for example, they need to know who that key person is. (SP36)

Other communities and community service organisations, such as Centacare Multicultural Services, Red Cross, and Cairns and Regional Multicultural Association (CARMA), were also considered as important storytellers. While some participants preferred to stay with their own groups, many recognised this to be self-limiting. Others emphasised the need for connecting with different cultures. Multicultural festivals and events were repeatedly mentioned as valuable platforms to share stories and build cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, participants praised Centacare's efforts to develop culturally diverse storytelling for disaster communication, including their self-produced multilingual cyclone safety videos (see https://www.youtube.com/@centacarefnq).

Governments and media were seen as authoritative storytellers, though often at a distance. Most community participants chose to follow instructions from the local council, the police, and emergency agencies, partly due to their cultural propensity to respect authority. Yet direct relationships with these institutions (linking capital) were rare. Still, community leaders and bilingual members acted as intermediaries, seeking information from official channels like the Bureau of Meteorology or the council's disaster dashboard and passing it on. Mainstream media (e.g., ABC) was valued for disaster updates but criticised for underrepresenting diverse communities as merely victims. Many therefore turned to community or ethnic media (e.g., WeChat for Chinese, Nichigo Press for Japanese), where they felt more fairly represented or could advocate self-needs.

Overall, the agents identified in communities' storytelling networks are neither fixed nor exhaustive but constantly shifting across contexts. When linking capital with Australian governments felt out of reach, diverse communities sometimes turned to their home-country consulates for guidance on making sense of official instructions. This dynamic shows that storytelling agents are deeply relational, yet with imbalanced power in collective sensemaking.

4.1.2. Stories

Within self-organising storytelling networks, participants reported multilayered stories/narratives including fragments or floating pieces of information, which flow through and are simultaneously (re)produced by storytelling agents. Corresponding to Lueg's (2023) typology, our data identified three types of stories: planned emergency narratives from governments, living stories from the ground, and antenarratives arising from the intersection of government prescription and community creation. Each of these stories offered a space for sensemaking of disaster resilience, carrying different implications for building bridging or linking capital.

Evidently, planned emergency narratives from governments penetrated various storytelling networks. Disseminated through all other agents, these "official" messages reflected a top-down, managerial logic—framing resilience for diverse or minority communities as "achieving the same recovery rate as the broader community" (EM30). Resilience was reduced to a checklist of measurable outcomes (e.g., houses rebuilt, losses recovered), overlooking practical cultural needs from diverse communities. For many, the lack of cultural sensitivity in standard narratives undermined meaningful relationship building with diverse communities. A Chinese participant shared:

> The [official] information feels vague and formal, with no cultural link or personal touch. It doesn't help build relationships. Instead on Facebook I see real stories and experiences. They're down-to-earth and much easier to connect with. (CM7)

As counter-narratives, living stories, rooted in lived experiences, seemed to powerfully bridge people across cultures. These stories offered both practical disaster-coping strategies and collective therapeutic effects. An Indonesian participant found stories like "how to eat pasta without fire, or how to wash when there's no hot water" (CM18) useful, while a Filipino participant described "Reading others' stories makes me feel we're all in this together" (CM23). In this regard, living stories became vital for building bridging capital, nurturing community spirit and solidarity. Further, some community leaders emphasised the importance of keeping

alive cultural resilience stories that connect disaster preparedness with cultural traditions. A Bhutanese leader shared stories about Hindu rituals to build resilience and harmony with nature:

> Our [Hindu/Vedic] rituals are not merely religious observances; they are profound expressions of our connection with nature, community, and the cosmic rhythm. For example, the biannual rituals of Ubhauli and Udhauli are practised among communities: Ubhauli, observed during the spring, marks the upward migration to the highlands and is a prayer for a good planting season; and Udhauli, in the winter, signifies the descent to the lowlands and is a thanksgiving for a successful harvest. These rituals acknowledge seasonal transitions and the uncertainty that comes with them—droughts, floods, or crop failure. By practising these rituals, communities psychologically prepare for potential hardships, reinforcing a sense of unity, foresight, and spiritual endurance. (CL1)

The contrast between planned emergency narratives (featuring prescribed behaviours) and community living stories (sharing lived experiences) gave rise to antenarratives—provisional, contested storylines around resilience in the making. The antenarrative thus became a salient site of negotiation, where both emergency management and communities sought to promote their own ideas, collectively shaping meaning-making of resilience as the foundation for potential collaboration. Consequently, a shared vision that emerges from the resilience antenarrative relates to place-based, culturally responsive approaches to resilience. A Congolese community leader illustrated:

> For communities, resilience isn't just infrastructure or technology. It's built on clear communication, cultural understanding, and trust. We can teach what a cyclone is, but only through community-driven efforts can people grasp what it really means and why it matters to get prepared. (CL13)

4.1.3. Practices

Given the multiplicity of agents and narratives within storytelling networks, storytelling practices—communicative approaches to meaning-making and trust building—appeared varied and adaptive. Echoing prior literature (e.g., Liu, 2022; Matheson & Jones, 2016; Rojas et al., 2011), our findings identified three prevailing modalities of storytelling: interpersonal, mediated, and organisational communication. Each mode served as a means of cultivating social capital in distinct yet interrelated ways.

Interpersonal storytelling, whether individual or collective, was consistently described as the most reliable, and even nostalgic, form of building bonding and bridging capital, particularly in a regional city like Cairns. It was especially important for newly arrived refugees and migrants unfamiliar with local climatic or natural environments. A Congolese participant asserted: "Talking to people is like creating a 'neighbourhood watch'—people share what's going on and look after each other. It's old-fashioned, but it works. Everyone comes together and listens to each other" (CM14).

Community leaders and service providers echoed that interpersonal storytelling, often enacted through home visits, was essential for reaching isolated or vulnerable members who may have limited means or avoid building social capital with outsiders. These personalised interactions helped establish a "circuit of care," connecting the vulnerable such as the elderly without English skills, migrants with disabilities, and single parents with small kids, to essential support networks. A Bhutanese community leader shared, "Our cultural

association has a 'Members Databank' to identify those in urgent need so they won't be left behind during emergencies'' (CL1).

Mediated communication typically emerged through community leaders' intermediary storytelling to disseminate or reinterpret official narratives. All seven community leaders agreed that official messages required not only linguistic translation but also cultural adaptation to resonate with diverse communities, laying a communicative foundation to social capital. Common practices included simplifying terminology, using visuals, and embedding culturally appropriate expressions. For instance, a Chinese community leader described adapting the official disaster preparedness campaign's key messaging, "Weather doesn't plan but you can," which, when translated literally, "sounded awkward" (CL5). Instead, she reframed it using a familiar Chinese proverb: "Unexpected storms arise in the sunny sky; Repair the roof before it rains" (*tianyoubucefengyun, weiyuchoumou*). Such reframing illustrated how cultural adaptation can transform templated messaging into shared moral wisdom.

Also, mediated communication manifested in using ethnic media and community radio for cross-cultural storytelling and norm-enacting (e.g., collectivism) toward collective sensemaking. One notable example was a WeChat group established by a Chinese police liaison in Cairns—"Police–Civilian Mutual Aid Group"—which effectively mitigated power hierarchies. The following quote underscored how mediated storytelling can humanise authority and build linking capital through culturally attuned engagement:

> The police officer regularly posted key messages in Chinese or shared official links with simple translation. People then discussed in the chat group, shared experiences, and offered help. Over time, trust grew between us and the police. Of course, this works well in Cairns, but things might be different in big cities like Brisbane. (CM6)

Organisational communication, led by emergency agencies and service providers, often took forms of community consultations and cultural events. Yet participants' responses revealed a clear divide. Consultations were frequently seen as extractive rather than participatory, reinforcing pre-determined agendas. One Indonesian participant shared frankly, "My house was gone in the floods. I can tell you my story, but if you're not going to help me rebuild or find accommodation, what's the point of telling my story?" (CM19). Such sentiments expose a trust deficit on governments, where community storytelling risks being instrumentalised for data collection rather than relationship building. Conversely, post-disaster cultural events organised by community service providers were seen as genuine spaces for collective storytelling and building connections. A CARMA executive explained:

> We host a multicultural festival every September to celebrate resilience and encourage people to share knowledge and regain strength. Everyone comes together like one big family. That's what CARMA is supposed to do. (CL17)

4.2. Uneven Narrative Agency in Co-Making Social Capital

The previous section illustrated storytelling networks as open yet contested spaces filled with multiple agents, narratives, and storytelling practices. Such plurivocity (Boje, 1995) generates multilayered, sometimes competing sensemaking around resilience, suggesting that social capital, based on shared

meaning and value, is not static but continually in the making. However, storytelling networks are never level playing fields: Powerful voices (e.g., governments) dominate the space while others (e.g., diverse communities) are marginalised. Such asymmetry foregrounds narrative agency: the capacity of narrators to transport their preferred meanings/ideas into other discursive fields in ways that resonate with existing norms, thereby co-creating shared meaning as a foundation for co-making social capital.

Since planned emergency narratives often lack cultural sensitivity, government narrative agency emerged through efforts to adapt standardised instructions to place-based, culturally diverse needs. As one community service provider observed, "The current emergency messaging system is very white. The disaster response space in Australia is generally not multicultural" (SP34). Another emergency practitioner echoed, "The federal agencies deliver a national model that rarely has a dedicated focus on diverse communities" (EM32). These comments reflect a persistent disconnect that hinders linking capital between government and diverse communities. Recognising this, some emergency agencies began experimenting with culturally embedded approaches to build shared understanding of disaster resilience. A local police liaison officer described how he exercised narrative agency by contextualising official messages for migrant learners:

> Tomorrow I'll go to a TAFE [Technical and Further Education] class to talk about emergency preparedness. Many students have limited English, so we work with teachers to create simple, interactive activities. For refugee groups from Africa or Bhutan, who might fear uniformed officers, we focus on showing them we're here to help, not to cause trouble. (EM29)

Beyond direct engagement, government agencies increasingly collaborate with community leaders and service providers to translate or reframe official narratives using community languages, visuals, trusted ethnic media, and multicultural events. Inclusivity, once peripheral, has thus become a guiding principle for narrative adaptation. An emergency practitioner reinforced, "We've got very limited staff. Outside the 9-to-5 working hours, it's communities that look after communities" (EM32). Yet, despite their intermediary role of connecting policies to people, community leaders' contributions remain largely under-recognised. The emergent "community leader networks" therefore function as a key, though under-resourced, pathway to building linking capital across institutional and cultural boundaries.

On the community side, narrative agency often begins with reconciling internal discrepancies in risk perceptions, where bonding capital may inadvertently constrain collective disaster preparedness. A Bhutanese community leader captured this tension:

> When we tried to prompt preparedness before cyclones, some members said, "We survived wild winds and rain in refugee camps with bamboo huts. Now we live in concrete buildings. Why should we worry?" This trauma-hardened sense of resilience, rooted in members' past displacement, can obscure awareness of natural hazards in Australia. (CL1)

In response, community leaders deploy narrative agency to localise and humanise risk communication, translating, filtering, and circulating official messages via multiple outlets (e.g., Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, home visits). As the Bhutanese leader explained, "People have different literacy levels. We filter the source of information, so we don't share irrelevant or untrue things. We translate updates, post them online, and make messages relatable" (CL1). Such selective translation and cultural sensemaking represents an

effort of reflexive storytelling, where community leaders act as storytelling intermediaries who reconstruct meaning, reinforce bonding capital, and pave the way for bridging and linking capital with external stakeholders.

Further, community narrative agency emerged in a more advocacy-oriented, bottom-up form, pushing diverse voices into policy agendas. Although this form of narrative agency remains nascent, participants expressed frustration at being excluded from decision-making. A Congolese community leader noted, "Many of our members feel invisible. We're transient, so our issues aren't followed through or seen as valued" (CL13). Similarly, a service provider added, "Multicultural communities feel really isolated. CARMA has only had one visit from the State member since the election—they feel forgotten" (SP36). It is therefore strongly felt among diverse communities that the dominant narrative privileging a rational and managerial logic of resilience must be disrupted and reimagined through co-creating resilience as culturally grounded practices. Only through such narrative reconstruction can shared understanding emerge to co-make social capital for collaborative resilience.

Two key frames emerged as the focus of community narrative agency: capacity building and place-(re)making. Community leaders advocated for resource investment to strengthen members' capabilities against disasters and for institutional recognition of their leadership. As one Filipino leader argued, "The current narrative emphasises self-resilience—more of a Western norm. In our collectivist culture, mutual help is how we survive" (CL21). She provided an example, "When evacuation alerts come, people without transport rely on us, the community leaders. We need resources to do that" (CL21). Elevating this frame (i.e., capacity building) into policy agenda could foster community leadership and develop diverse emergency workforces and inclusive support networks. In addition, diverse community members emphasised cultural preservation and place-(re)making as essential to social cohesion. An Indonesian participant commented:

> It's hard to find a place for our communities to meet. We go to libraries or halls, but they're often booked out. It'd be great to have a multicultural centre where people can connect, and where councils or governments could also visit us regularly [linking capital]. (CM18)

As noted above, while both management and communities exercised narrative agency to embed their priorities within each other's fields, their power asymmetry has profoundly shaped co-creative meaning-making. Notably, community-driven narrative agency remains largely individualised, reliant on the goodwill or initiative of a few leaders rather than on formally organised, collective approaches. Without systemic support, their voices cannot yet reach a "critical mass" capable of reshaping dominant narratives or influencing policy frameworks. To enable more equitable co-making of social capital, institutional recognition and resourcing are urgently needed to strengthen community leaders' narrative agency, support service providers and NGOs as linkage-makers, and advance storytelling networks as engines of social capital development.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Departing from traditional emphases on structural social capital in disaster resilience research (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Meyer, 2017), this study advances a communicative perspective by examining storytelling networks as open, participatory spaces of sensemaking among multiple agents.

It foregrounds the act of storytelling as a dynamic, relational practice through which shared meanings, and thus the foundation to social capital, are continually co-created. Building on emerging literature on communicative social capital (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2013; Matheson & Jones, 2016; Rojas et al., 2011), this study empirically demonstrates how multi-agent, multilayered storytelling underpins the development of social capital. Because both storytelling and social capital are participatory and adaptive, storytelling's generative capacity for sensemaking amid uncertainty positions social capital as in the making, rather than a static property. This resonates with Uekusa et al.'s (2022) notion of disaster social capital—contextual, experiential, and improvisational forms of social connections that emerge through disasters and may also generate opportunities.

Specifically, the study revealed the synergy between storytelling and social capital: Storytelling both constitutes and is shaped by social ties, especially within diverse communities navigating disaster contexts. Community members self-organised storytelling networks by prioritising different agents—family, friends, peers, community leaders, service providers, governments, and media—as relevant storytellers. Their interactions revealed uneven social capital: strong bonding capital (close ties), limited bridging capital (cross-community linkages), and deficient linking capital (connections with authorities). Drawing on Lueg's (2023) triad of stories, namely, government-planned emergency narratives, community-generated living stories, and resilience antenarratives in this study, participants made sense of resilience through interpersonal, mediated, and organisational storytelling practices. These communicative processes sustain and are shaped by social capital. For example, through connections with service providers and community leaders, emergency practitioners adapted templated narratives to better meet culturally specific needs.

Central to this process are community leaders who acted as key intermediaries of storytelling and relationship building. Whether formally or informally positioned, they actively filtered, translated, and reframed official narratives into culturally resonant messages while connecting vulnerable members to essential support networks. Their trusted leadership has been acknowledged by emergency practitioners and service providers, though rarely institutionalised or formally supported. Importantly, these leaders strived to balance integration into Australian systems with preservation of their own cultural heritage, which is critical for sustaining societal social capital (Putnam, 2000). In this regard, the findings usefully addressed the under-examined role of community leaders as key meaning-makers in disaster resilience research (Hanson-Easey et al., 2018).

Further, this study identifies narrative agency as a critical factor shaping participatory sensemaking and thus the co-making of social capital across unequal power relations. As scholars explain (Lueg, 2023; Weder & Weaver, 2025), narrative agency concerns narrators' capacity to move ideas across fields (e.g., from governments to communities, and vice versa) while interacting with other storytellers within broader, complex narrative environments. In this study, the dominant managerial logic embedded in planned emergency narratives often overshadowed community voices. Communities with limited linguistic capital (i.e., English; Uekusa, 2019) struggled to negotiate dominant narratives or articulate self-needs, though some exercised narrative agency by filtering or reframing official messages to enhance community relevance. However, this agency largely operated at an individual level, typically through a few bi-/multi-lingual community leaders, rather than adopting organised, collective approaches. Empowering community narrative agency, therefore, requires systemic support, sustained resourcing, and inclusive communicative platforms that foster genuine dialogue between authorities and communities. For example, creating spaces

for multimodal storytelling (e.g., visual, oral, digital) from grassroots, leveraging ethnic media for policy input, and strengthening community leaders' advocacy capacity are all critical steps toward enhancing narrative agency among linguistic minorities.

Overall, this study contributes to the intersecting literatures on social capital, communication, and disaster resilience in several ways. First, it narrows the theoretical gap in communicative understanding of social capital by moving beyond network-structural approaches that assume pre-existing ties. Instead, it conceptualises social capital as continuously co-constructed through agents' storytelling practices within open yet contested meaning-making spaces. By highlighting the plurivocity (Boje, 1995) of storytelling, it foregrounds how power asymmetries shape the (co-)making of social capital. Second, it illuminates the under-recognised role of storytelling intermediaries, particularly community leaders, in driving information flow, mediating divergent narratives, and facilitating bridging and linking capital. Their emerging narrative agency underscores the need to embed community voices and leadership into institutional frameworks for collaborative resilience. Third, it offers a methodological contribution by advocating a narrative lens to trace the communicative pathways to social capital building. The tripartite framework of agents, stories, and practices provides analytical dimensions for examining how shared meaning-making and social capital develop through storytelling networks.

Practically, this study demonstrated the value of storytelling as a boundary-crossing tool for building social capital among emergency agencies, service providers, and diverse communities. Echoing Copeland and de Moor (2018), storytelling should be integrated into community participatory projects as an ongoing, co-creative practice, replacing extractive consultations. Crucially, community leaders must be recognised, resourced, and rewarded for their intermediary role. While their linguistic capital (i.e., English proficiency) is important, their agency extends far beyond translation: They contextualise information, build trust, mediate risk perceptions, and mobilise collective action. Targeted training and leadership development can strengthen their narrative agency, enabling them to participate meaningfully in government-led planning while advocating for community interests. Their narrative-building work may in fact be undertaken in community languages, underscoring the distinction between simple linguistic capital and narrative agency. Through such empowerment, social capital can grow over time at the interface between communication and relationship.

Finally, this exploratory study has limitations that point to directions for future research. As it relied primarily on interview data, it mainly captured participants' perceptions of the role of storytelling, rather than the actual content or impact of stories shaping collective sensemaking. Future research could incorporate narrative examples (e.g., texts, videos, digital posts) and case studies to examine how storytelling networks take shape, evolve, and contribute to bonding, bridging, and linking capital across relational and cognitive dimensions. Also, the intermediary role of community leaders warrants deeper theorisation as a mechanism for building level-transcending social capital. Longitudinal and ethnographic studies could further unpack how everyday storytelling practices in diverse communities generate, sustain, and reconfigure social capital across both emergency situations and longer-term resilience-building.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ian Somerville (University of Leicester).

Data Availability

Data are kept confidential in accordance with the ethics approval.

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