

Reimagining News: Does Interactive Storytelling Foster Empathy and Trust in Gen Z Readers?

This study examines how interactivity in multimedia news storytelling influences empathy and trust among Generation Z readers. While prior research has explored how games and immersive media evoke empathy through narrative transportation, empirical work on how interactive journalism shapes emotional connection and perceived credibility remains limited. To address this gap, we redesigned a first-person environmental advocacy article, originally published by Greenpeace about plastic pollution, using Genially as a digital storytelling tool. The article was selected for its narrative richness, relevance to Gen Z audiences, adaptability to a “beaded” (yo-yo) structure, and the author’s perceived non-partisan standing, which minimized reader preconceptions.

The redesigned version integrates video, audio, images, and decision points that invite ethical or empathetic reflection while maintaining narrative coherence and introducing reader agency. Participants—Gen Z college students in the U.S.—read both the linear and interactive versions of the story. Responses are measured using adapted versions of the State Empathy Scale (Shen, 2010), the Transportation Scale Short Form (Appel et al., 2015), and the News Trust Scale (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), distinguishing between cognitive and emotional empathy. Trust is operationalized as perceived accuracy, fairness, and integrity of the content.

This study investigates: (1) whether interactive formats elicit higher empathy than traditional versions; (2) how interactivity shapes attitudes and behavioral intentions; and (3) how participants describe their subjective experiences of trust, empathy, and engagement across formats. Findings provide empirical insight into how interactive narrative design influences reader response and contribute to emerging understandings of how Gen Z engages with complex news content.

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