Research Article

From Feed To Book: Communication Practices in Publishing Instagram Romance Alternative Universes As Novels

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Abstract

Stories created by social media users increasingly move from digital platforms into the publishing industry, yet the communication through which such works are transformed into books remains largely invisible behind the final product. This study examines the communication practices involved in developing romance Alternative Universe (AU) stories, a form of multimodal fan fiction published in serial posts on Instagram, into novels at Penerbit Akad, an Indonesian publisher. A qualitative case study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with the publisher's chief executive, head of production, an editor, and head of marketing and promotion, together with two AU creators whose works were developed into novels, supported by documentation of Instagram content, messaging records, and published books. The analysis was organised around three stages of production. In pre-production, communication linked internal publishing needs with story hunting on Instagram, moved from direct messages to WhatsApp, formalised cooperation through contract drafts, and opened editorial dialogue through story forms, plotting, and manuscript reviews. In production, communication took the form of editorial feedback accompanied by reasons, creators' explanations of narrative intentions, negotiation over sensitive romantic scenes, and coordination of delays through follow-up messages and telephone calls. In post-production, communication shifted toward cross-team coordination, pre-order announcements, and promotion on Instagram, the same platform where the stories first appeared. The transformation of an Instagram story into a novel is therefore a negotiated social process rather than a transfer of content between media. Structured collaboration tools, documented feedback, and joint promotion with creators are required to strengthen this process.

Keywords: User-Generated Content; Editorial Communication; Digital Publishing; Fan Fiction; Creator–Publisher Collaboration.

1 Introduction

Digital platforms have changed not only how stories are distributed but also where and by whom they are created. Users of social media now produce narratives, images, and serialised content that circulate widely before any institution is involved, and research on user-generated content identifies a wide range of motivations, from self-expression and recognition to community participation, behind this production (Zhang et al., 2024). Creative workers increasingly build careers through platforms, but they experience content production as demanding, metric-driven, and ambivalent, and often combine platform work with independent projects to spread risk (Hylland et al., 2024). Creative entrepreneurs use Instagram to develop, market, and sell their work, while its metrics and algorithms push them to balance artistic vision against business considerations (Repenning & Oechslen, 2023).

Instagram has become a particularly important space for such creative production. Its visual, interactive, and serial features allow creators to tell stories through images, captions, stories, and comments, and research on Instagram Stories shows that creating content generates both positive emotions and psychological dependence among users (Lu & Lin, 2022). Followers develop parasocial relationships with the people whose content they follow, which deepens attachment and engagement (Zhou et al., 2024), and engagement depends on the persuasive power of posts and the type of creator rather than on appearance alone (Eslami et al., 2024). Online fan practices also create affinity spaces in which audiences share enjoyment, imitate characters, and learn from the stories they follow (Dynel & Ross, 2022).

Alternative Universe (AU) stories are one form of creative production that has flourished in this environment. An AU is a type of fan fiction that places known characters or figures in alternative worlds with different identities, settings, and relationships, and on Instagram it is often told through fake chat screenshots, simulated social media posts, images, and links in a series of posts. Romance AUs, which focus on the development of relationships, emotional dynamics, and conflict between characters, have attracted large readerships. Fandom-

driven engagement can spread content far beyond its original community, as shown by fan networks that amplified public messages to audiences that mainstream campaigns rarely reached (Chang et al., 2023), and diffusion through networks of similar users is reinforced when the same content is encountered repeatedly from several contacts (Tur et al., 2024).

Some AU stories do not remain digital content but enter the publishing industry. Indonesian publishers have begun to publish AU stories as printed novels, turning works that were created freely by users into commercial products. Creators who move from platforms into commercial arrangements face a tension between authenticity and monetisation, which successful creators resolve partly by shifting toward co-creation with commercial partners (Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024). Decentralised and centralised platforms offer creators different degrees of control over monetisation and content (Khobzi et al., 2025), and the creative economy in Indonesia depends on digital literacy and entrepreneurial attitudes among creators (Wardana et al., 2023). The movement of an AU from Instagram into publishing therefore involves new actors, considerations, and forms of communication.

Penerbit Akad, founded on 11 January 2021, is one of the Indonesian publishers that has developed romance AU stories from social media into novels, with titles such as Di Tanah Berhala, Sirah Cinta Tanah Baghdad, Tangisan Senja di Sudut Rumah Sakit, In The Kiln of Us, Cross The Line, Last Seen, To Be Loved Is to Be Known, Bunga Merah dan Prajurit Bumi Perbatasan, and Make a Wish. The publisher was established to provide space for works with distinctive ideas and potential for development without treating popularity as the only measure of publishability. Its production process involves the publisher's leadership, a production team, editors, and a marketing and promotion team, together with the creators of the stories. A published novel, however, shows only the end result; the communication through which ideas were discussed, feedback given, differences negotiated, and agreements reached remains hidden behind the final product.

Previous studies have examined the narrative capacity of Instagram, the intertextual and community dimensions of AU and fan fiction, and the changing position of publishers in the digital environment, but the communication between AU creators and publishers during the production of a novel has not been examined in depth. This study addresses this gap by drawing on the social construction of reality, which explains how meanings are produced through externalisation, objectivated into shared forms, and internalised by actors as part of their understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), supported by the concept of user-generated content as material created and voluntarily contributed by ordinary users (Krumm et al., 2008). The study aims to analyse the communication practices in the production of romance AU content from Instagram into novels at Penerbit Akad across the pre-production, production, and post-production stages.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen to understand the meanings that actors attach to their practices in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the case study design was suited to examining a contemporary phenomenon in depth when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The case was bounded to the communication practices in developing romance AU stories from Instagram into novels at Penerbit Akad. Informants were selected purposively according to their direct involvement in the development, editing, coordination, or publication of AU novels, and comprised six persons: the publisher's chief executive officer, the head of the production team, an editor, the head of the marketing and promotion team, and two AU creators whose works had been developed into novels with the publisher. The number of informants was determined by the adequacy of information across the three stages of production.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by the three stages of pre-production, production, and post-production, and through documentation of AU content on Instagram, published novels, messaging records of communication between creators and the publisher, and promotional materials, used with the informants' permission. Data were analysed with the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014), and were interpreted through the concepts of externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation, which were used as interpretive tools rather than as linear stages. Credibility was ensured through source triangulation between the publisher and creators, method triangulation between interviews and documentation, and member checking with informants.

3. RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the three stages of production. The stages are not formal divisions applied by the publisher but analytical contexts that reveal how communication changes as a work moves from Instagram toward the market: pre-production establishes the relationship and the direction of development, production negotiates the content of the novel, and post-production carries the finished book back to the audience.

3.1 Communication Practices in Pre-Production: From Discovery to a Shared Direction

Communication in pre-production begins inside the publisher before any creator is contacted. The leadership determines publishing needs for a given period, including the type of romance story to be developed and the readership to be reached, and the production team translates these needs into operational criteria covering genre, reader segment, character, conflict, and narrative direction. These criteria guide the story hunters who search Instagram for AU content, and the results of their search are returned to the team for review. The flow of information from leadership to production team to story hunters and back to the team keeps the search tied to organisational decisions rather than to personal preferences or to whatever content is currently popular. Audience responses such as comments and likes are observed as signals of reception, but popularity alone does not determine whether a story is pursued; distinctive ideas and potential for development remain the decisive considerations.

Identification on Instagram requires the publisher to read stories that are dispersed across many serial posts. Editors assess whether a story told in fragments can be developed into a coherent novel, considering whether characters' motivations can be deepened, conflicts strengthened, and relationships built gradually. Once a work is judged promising, an editor or story hunter contacts the creator through an Instagram direct message, introducing the publisher and explaining the reason for contact with reference to the specific work. Creators first seek to understand which work is meant and what the publi sher intends before deciding whether to continue. When the conversation becomes more serious, communication moves to WhatsApp, which is considered more direct and better suited to exchanging information and documents. Instagram thus functions as both the space of discovery and the point of first contact, while WhatsApp becomes the channel for structured follow-up.

The relationship then becomes formal through the discussion of cooperation. The publisher sends a draft contract covering royalties and other terms of publication, and creators study the document before giving their consent. The contract turns earlier conversational exchanges into a written form that both parties can examine, marking a shift from communication oriented toward interest to communication oriented toward obligations. After agreement, the focus moves to the story itself: creators complete a form describing their manuscript and concept, and the editor and creator conduct plotting sessions and manuscript reviews (bedah naskah) that examine plot, characters, conflict, structure, and possible plot holes. Editors give feedback accompanied by reasons, while creators explain the intentions behind scenes they consider essential, so that the parts to be retained, clarified, or developed are identified before full writing begins. Table 1 summarises this sequence.

Table 1. Communication practices in the pre-production stage

Activity	Actors	Channel or medium	Communicative function
Planning publishing needs	Leadership and production team	Internal coordination	Defining genre, reader segment, and story criteria
Searching and identifying AU content	Story hunters, production team, editor	Instagram observation; internal review	Linking criteria to discovered works; assessing development potential
Initial contact with the creator	Editor or story hunter; creator	Instagram direct message	Introducing the publisher and stating interest in a specific work
Follow-up conversation	Publisher and creator	WhatsApp	Clarifying intentions and exchanging information and documents
Discussing cooperation	Leadership and creator	Draft contract	Formalising terms, including royalties, before consent

Activity	Actors	Channel or medium	Communicative function
Concept development	Editor and creator	Story form, plotting sessions, manuscript review	Identifying parts to retain, clarify, or develop before writing

Source: Interviews and documentation, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings show that communication in pre-production transforms a user's creative expression into a shared plan for a publishable novel. From the perspective of the social construction of reality, the AU on Instagram is a product of externalisation, through which a creator's ideas, characters, and conflicts take a form that others can read and evaluate (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The AU is also user-generated content in the strict sense, created and voluntarily contributed by an ordinary user before any institution is involved (Krumm et al., 2008). Pre-production adds a second layer of externalisation, as the publisher's criteria and the creator's intentions are expressed to each other through direct messages, contract drafts, story forms, and manuscript reviews. The written contract and the results of plotting become the first objectivated forms of the collaboration, providing a common reference for both parties, yet they do not settle the final shape of the novel. The publisher should formalise pre-production as an explicit co-creation phase in which creators' narrative intentions are documented alongside editorial considerations, since shifting from transactional arrangements to co-creation has been shown to help creators preserve authenticity while entering commercial partnerships (Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024).

3.2 Communication Practices in Production: Negotiating the Story

The direction agreed in pre-production becomes the starting point for writing, but it is reopened continuously as the manuscript develops. Creators remain the main developers of the story, rewriting serial posts into a continuous narrative and expanding characters and conflicts, while the production team and editors follow the progress of the manuscript. Editorial reading concerns not only sentences but also how the story moves from beginning to end, how scenes connect with one another, and whether characters develop consistently. When an inconsistency appears, it becomes a topic of discussion rather than a correction imposed on the manuscript. Creators emphasise that a single change can affect characters, relationships, and conflicts elsewhere in the story, so both parties discuss the consequences of a revision for the whole narrative before deciding on it.

Feedback in production is therefore a two-way process of reasons and explanations. Editors explain where they see a problem and why a change is needed, while creators explain the purpose of a scene, the reasons for retaining certain elements, and the intentions behind the portrayal of characters. Differences of opinion arise when an editor considers that part of a story should change while the creator regards it as essential to character development or to the message of the story. These differences do not take the form of open conflict but of negotiation over options: retaining a part, adjusting it, clarifying its portrayal, or finding an alternative. Negotiation is particularly important in romance stories, where some scenes depict behaviour between characters that may be understood problematically by readers; in such cases the discussion turns to how the scene is presented while keeping its narrative function. Research on collaborative creativity shows that creative outcomes emerge from tensions across individual, social, and material dimensions of collaboration (Wong et al., 2021), and co-production creates value when the contributions of both the organisation and its external partners are recognised in the final output (Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

Production also requires coordination of work beyond the content of the story. The production team monitors the progress of the manuscript, and the main obstacles are delays in completing the manuscript and difficulty in obtaining news from creators about their progress. When information is lacking, the team follows up through messages and, where necessary, telephone calls to understand the causes of delay, and possible solutions include additional time, mentoring, or supporting facilities. Creators, for their part, regard telling the publisher about their difficulties as a way of ensuring that delays are understood rather than judged. After writing, the manuscript is edited and checked for consistency, clarity, and language, and the work moves into layout and cover design, which are coordinated through WhatsApp between the editorial and production sides. Creativity and innovation models are well developed in theory but rarely applied to the small-scale processes of individual and team creative work (de Barros et al., 2025), which makes these everyday practices of feedback and coordination central to understanding production. Table 2 summarises these practices.

Table 2. Communication practices in the production stage

Practice	Form of communication	Outcome for the manuscript
Developing the concept into a manuscript	Progress updates and follow-up discussions	Serial posts rewritten as a continuous narrative
Editorial feedback	Feedback accompanied by reasons; creators' explanations of intentions	Parts identified for clarification while core elements are preserved
Negotiating story changes	Discussion of options for scenes and character behaviour	Decision to retain, adjust, clarify, or find an alternative
Coordinating writing and resolving delays	Follow-up messages and telephone calls	Additional time, mentoring, or supporting facilities
Editing and checking	Communication of editing results and required revisions	Consistent, clear, and linguistically correct manuscript
Preparing the book form	Coordination of layout and cover design via WhatsApp	Manuscript linked to the physical identity of the book

Source: Interviews and documentation, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings show that production is the stage in which the meaning of the story is most actively negotiated and objectivated. In the social construction of reality, objectivation occurs when the products of human activity acquire a form that confronts their producers as something external and shared (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The edited manuscript, layout, and cover are such forms: they are no longer the creator's private ideas but a jointly produced object that both parties recognise. At the same time, the negotiation of feedback reveals internalisation, as creators come to understand editorial reasoning and editors come to understand the intentions behind scenes, so that each party adjusts its subjective understanding of the work. The findings also refine the notion of user-generated content, since the creator's authorship is not replaced by the publisher but continues within an institutional process that reshapes the work. Whether this negotiation is fully balanced cannot be concluded from the data, because the final authority over disputed decisions was not documented in detail. The publisher should adopt shared manuscript tools with documented comments, the reasons behind each requested change, and scheduled progress check-ins, since collaborative creativity has been shown to depend on the interplay of social interaction and the material tools that mediate it (Wong et al., 2021).

3.3 Communication Practices in Post-Production: Returning the Story to Its Audience

Once the manuscript and the book form are complete, communication shifts from the content of the story to the readiness of the product and its introduction to readers. The production team ensures that the manuscript, layout, cover, and any supporting products for the order programme are ready, and this information is passed to the marketing and promotion team as the basis for promotional materials. Coordination between production and marketing is necessary because the two teams handle different tasks that converge in the launch of the book, and promotional information must match the product that has actually been prepared. Communication with the creator becomes less intensive at this stage, as the focus moves from developing the story to confirming its completion and preparing it for the market.

The pre-order announcement is the main communicative event of post-production. Through it, the publisher informs readers that the book is available to order and shows the result of the writing, editing, and design processes. The announcement is published on Instagram, the same platform on which the AU first appeared, so that readers who knew the story in its serial form can recognise it in its new form. Instagram thus changes function across the life of the work: in pre-production it is a space of discovery and first contact, and in post-production it becomes a channel of promotion. Promotional content requires coordination so that the cover, description, and supporting products presented to readers are consistent with the book, and research shows that information credibility shapes whether online content influences purchase intention (Ngo et al., 2024), while trust remains the strongest determinant of online purchasing decisions (Handoyo, 2024). Consumers increasingly search social media for word of mouth before buying (Bartschat et al., 2022), and time-limited offers such as pre-orders can draw on followers' fear of missing out, which mediates the influence of social media figures on consumption (Dinh & Lee, 2024).

Post-production also links promotion with sales and evaluation. Information about the readiness of the book and the order programme is coordinated with the team handling sales so that the information given to consumers is consistent. The publisher evaluates each publication by reviewing the manuscript process, team coordination, promotion, and sales, and these reviews inform the next publication. The data, however, do not show that audience responses to promotional content systematically influenced marketing decisions or later editorial choices, nor do they document creators' involvement in promotion. Electronic word of mouth on short-video platforms strongly shapes Indonesian consumers' purchase intentions (Indrawati et al., 2023), and Indonesian Generation Z consumers in social commerce are driven by information quality and subjective norms (Huwaida et al., 2024). Customer engagement in social commerce also drives repurchase intention (Herzallah et al., 2025), and the credibility of the person presenting a product builds trust and emotional attachment to it (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the promotional potential of the creator's existing readership is not yet fully used. Table 3 summarises these practices.

Table 3. Communication practices in the post-production stage

Activity	Actors	Channel	Communicative function
Product preparation	Production and marketing teams	Internal coordination	Aligning information on the manuscript, cover, and supporting products
Pre-order announcement	Marketing and promotion team	Instagram	Informing readers that the novel can be ordered
Promo tion through content	Marketing and promotion team	Instagram posts	Introducing the novel to readers who knew the AU
Sales communication	Marketing and sales functions; consumers	Ordering channels	Providing consistent information on availability and orders
Publication evaluation	Leadership and teams	Internal review	Reviewing manuscript work, coordination, promotion, and sales

Source: Interviews and documentation, processed by the authors (2026).

These findings show that post-production completes the objectivation of the work and returns it to the public sphere from which it came. The published novel, with its cover, layout, and description, is an objectivated product that can be recognised and accessed by readers independently of the relationship between creator and publisher (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Its promotion on Instagram closes a circle, as the platform that hosted the user-generated story becomes the channel through which its institutional version is introduced to the same readership. This circularity confirms that user-generated content can enter organised production and marketing without losing its connection to the audience that first engaged with it, although the roles of creator as producer of the story and publisher as promoter of the book remain distinct. The weak link lies in the limited use of audience responses and of the creator's own following in promotion and evaluation, which leaves the communicative capital built during the AU's serial life underexploited. The publisher should develop joint promotion with creators through their own Instagram accounts, using visual content featuring the creators and their characters, since content from smaller creators has been shown to generate higher engagement per follower and images featuring people further increase engagement (van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

The development of romance Alternative Universe stories from Instagram into novels at Penerbit Akad is a negotiated social process rather than a transfer of content from one medium to another. In pre-production, communication links internal publishing needs with the search for stories on Instagram, moves from direct messages to WhatsApp, formalises cooperation through contract drafts, and builds a shared direction through story forms, plotting, and manuscript reviews. In production, communication takes the form of feedback accompanied by reasons, explanations of narrative intentions by creators, negotiation over scenes and character behaviour, and coordination of delays through follow-up messages and telephone calls, ending with editing,

layout, and cover design. In post-production, communication shifts to cross-team coordination, pre-order announcements, promotion on Instagram, sales information, and evaluation, so that the platform where the story first appeared becomes the channel for introducing the novel.

The communication between creators and the publisher thus shapes the final form of the novel at every stage, but its potential is not yet fully realised. Documenting creators' narrative intentions in pre-production, using shared manuscript tools with recorded reasons for revisions in production, and involving creators and their readerships in promotion and evaluation in post-production would strengthen both the quality of the novels and the relationship between creators and the publisher. This study is limited to a single publisher and a small number of informants, and it did not document how final authority over disputed revisions was exercised. Further research should compare several publishers of digital-origin fiction and examine the balance of power between creators and editors in decisions about the content of published works.

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