Exploring the Lived Experiences of Fire Survivors: Through Photovoice

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges and experiences of fire survivors in the aftermath of fire incidents, examining the physical, emotional, and social impacts of these traumatic events, as well as the support systems and resources available to aid their recovery. The study utilized a Photovoice methodology, with eight (8) participants purposefully selecting fire survivors and collecting photographs to capture their lived experiences. Analysis of these data revealed four key themes: (1) Fragility and Resilience of Life, (2) Loss and Rebuilding, (3) Tangible and Intangible Losses, and (4) Community and Shared Responsibility. The research highlights the need to address both practical and emotional needs during recovery, acknowledging the profound emotional toll of fire. Despite facing significant losses, survivors demonstrate remarkable strength in rebuilding their lives. The study emphasizes the importance of proactive measures, including improved fire safety education and preparedness, to minimize vulnerabilities and enhance community resilience in the face of fire emergencies. The study recommends a comprehensive plan to strengthen fire resilience, emphasizing community-based fire safety education, robust support systems for survivors, integrated psychological support in recovery plans, strengthened fire prevention policies, and collaborative efforts between government, NGOs, and communities. Additionally, the study calls for further research on the long-term psychological impacts of fire disasters to inform targeted interventions and support systems for survivors.

Keywords: Community Support, Emotional Resilience, Fire, Fire Survivors, Psychological Impact of Fire, Tangible and Intangible Losses

INTRODUCTION

A fire survivor is someone who has survived and lived through a fire-related incident, often experiencing physical, emotional, and psychological difficulties as a result. These survivors are human beings; they feel vulnerable because they face physical injuries, sadness, and fear after the fire. According to the World Health Organization's annual report, which usually takes place in developing countries, around 180,000 deaths worldwide are estimated to be caused by fire (WHO, 2023). In the first two months of 2024, the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) recorded 2,742 fire incidents in the Philippines. These fire incidents are either natural or manmade. Among the deaths, there are family members or relatives who are living the life of a survivor (Kurata et al., 2023). Understanding what these survivors go through is essential since this can help in providing them with better support while also learning from their experiences. By looking closely at their stories and feelings, valuable insights can be gained on how people cope with such traumatic events. Because in any incident involving fire, the victims are definitely the lowest denominator (Allanic et al., 2021).

When talking about the impact of fire incidents, it refers to how they affect people in many ways. These fire incidents are one of the most damaging elements and can cause much damage, not just to buildings but also to people's lives (Qin et al., 2022). Survivors of fires often go through a lot emotionally and mentally. They might feel scared, sad, or even angry. Some might have trouble sleeping or eating. The aftermath of fires can bring many challenges, too, like finding a new place to live or dealing with insurance (Belleville et al., 2019). All these things can add to the stress and worry that survivors already feel. Understanding these impacts is important for helping survivors recover and rebuild their lives after such difficult times.

These fire survivors endure the physical and emotional trauma after surviving a fire, and they are fighters, showing their strength and determination in rebuilding their lives after the fire incident. After surviving a fire, individuals have no choice but to continue their lives for them to live. It may involve finding new housing, replacing belongings, and dealing with insurance claims. Fire survivors demonstrate resilience and determination as they work toward recovery and rebuilding. Underinsured homeowners took it upon themselves to rebuild their houses in the recovery process after a fire disaster (Richards, 2019). Some will manage to rebuild their homes, and some will suffer in the aftermath. A Fire survivor needs the support and help of their families and friends to overcome the difficulties after the fire incident and have a faster recovery (McEntire, 2021). Studying the life of someone who survived a fire is important because it provides ideas about how fires affect people's feelings and lives (Kalogiannidis et al., 2023).

Conducting a study on the lives of fire survivors is crucial because it helps us understand how people cope with and recover from traumatic events like fires. By learning about their experiences, we can find ways to better support survivors during their recovery journey. Ultimately, studying fire survivors can contribute to creating safer communities and enhancing our ability to assist those affected by similar tragedies. This research can offer valuable insights into how people deal with traumatic events, such as fires. It can help us understand what support survivors need during their recovery. By exploring the lived experiences of fire survivors in the Philippines, this study can contribute valuable knowledge to various areas. It can offer insights into the psychological and emotional effects of surviving a fire, helping mental health professionals provide better support and counseling. Further, it can inform emergency responders or government agencies on how to improve evacuation procedures and post-fire support services. Moreover, it can empower communities to better understand the resilience and strength of survivors, fostering empathy and solidarity among neighbors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a transcendental phenomenology (TPh) approach combined with photovoice, enabling participants to utilize photography and accompanying narratives to highlight and articulate issues that mattered to them. This method allowed researchers to attain a deeper comprehension of the subject matter under study. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (TPh) approach is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology that seeks to explain human experience. Transcendental phenomenology with photovoice will be employed to give fire survivors, who often have limited societal influence, a platform to be heard. This approach allowed participants to capture and share photos that document their community's needs or strengths, encouraging meaningful discussions about these images among participants. This research design is a suitable strategy to explore and understand the lived experiences of fire survivors.

This study was conducted in one of the Municipalities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. Located in the Northern Region of Mindanao, it is a charming and progressive municipality characterized by a combination of coastal and inland environments. From Dapitan City, one would pass through the Municipality of Sapang Dalaga before reaching the destination. Conversely, if someone were traveling from Oroquieta City, they would first reach Plaridel before reaching their destination.

The study included eight fire survivors who are residing in the municipality of Calamba, province of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. The criteria for the selection of the participants included the following: 1) fire survivors, 2) personally gained damage and property damage., and 3) willing to participate in the study. This

study utilized an interview guide using SHOWeD technique developed by Wang and Burris (1997) as the data-gathering instrument. These are the following: S (What do you See?), H (What is Really Happening?), O (How does this relate to Our lives?), We (Why does this condition Exist?), D (What can we Do about it?).

It combines taking photos and telling stories to highlight the voices of people and communities, especially those often overlooked. It involves participants directly, giving a true picture of their experiences and viewpoints, and helps them speak up for themselves. By discussing the photos together, photovoice encourages conversation, reflection, and group action. This method has shown itself to be a powerful and inspiring research tool, especially where traditional methods fall short in capturing the full range of people's lives. Photovoice can help communities come together and push for change. Its visual nature makes it easier for more people to understand and connect with the findings, which can lead to greater awareness, empathy, and even changes in policy.

Before the actual interviews, the researcher sought permission from the Dean of the College of Criminology to conduct the study, and a request letter was submitted to the Calamba Municipal Fire Station, where the participants' data was collected. The potential participants were identified and were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study and the interview process. Informed consent was obtained from each participating fire survivor, who understood that their photographs and perspectives would be used for research purposes, ensuring their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's objectives.

Participants were provided with training in photography techniques and the use of cameras. They learned how to capture images that reflect their experiences and perspectives. The researcher then introduces the concept of Photovoice, emphasizing its goals and how participant photographs will be utilized in the research process. Participants were equipped with cameras or smartphones to capture images related to the research topic. The researcher offered ongoing support, answered questions, and provided guidance to participants throughout the data collection period. The participants were advised that they may keep written field notes to accompany their photographs, providing context and explanations for each image taken.

During the interviews, the researcher utilized a voice recorder and took notes to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the responses provided by the fire survivor participants. These techniques were employed to maintain the integrity of the data collected. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and measures will be implemented to protect their privacy and anonymity. In compliance with ethical principles, the researcher will follow the guidelines established by Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the "Data Privacy Act of 2012," to safeguard the privacy and security of the fire survivors' personal information and data.

Addressing ethical considerations in research ensures that the researchers are conducting a study that respects the rights and well-being of the participants. Researchers obtained approval to survey the board of ethics, ensuring that they meet ethical standards and comply with all regulations and guidelines. The participants were given a consent form to indicate whether they would like to take part in this research study or not. They have the right to decline without any consequences. Participants were also informed about the study's purpose, risks, benefits, and their rights as participants. Additionally, the researchers need to guarantee that their methods and findings are both transparent and considerate of the participant's experiences.

The following ethical considerations were strictly followed during the research period: First, ensure the participant's privacy and personal stories by safeguarding any private data they will provide for the study. The researchers avoided sharing any personal information in a presentation or publication. Second, the participants should be allowed to talk about their experiences freely and in their own words. Researchers refrained from asking leading questions or forcing their own opinions on participants' stories. Lastly, reduce any possible harm or discomfort brought on by talking about traumatic experiences and providing participants with counseling to take care of any emotional problems that might come up during or after the study. These actions

were taken to protect the rights and well-being of research participants as well as to meet the ethical considerations of the study.

In this study, the photovoice method developed by Wang and Burris (1997) was used. The following are the six phases of the photovoice method: 1) Initial focus group; 2) taking the photographs; 3) Follow-up semi-structured interview; 4) Second focus group; 5) Summarizing the participants' key photographs and accompanying captions; and 6) Disseminate the findings.

The initial focus group: Participants are introduced to the method, photography, and ethical training. Then, they will receive digital cameras and be oriented to the phenomenon to be explored. They will be asked to photograph aspects related to the study. The photography task is kept very general. Participants are left free to take any objects/person/place related to the study.

Taking photographs: Participants will take photographs over a week.

Follow-up semi-structured interview: Semi-structured interviews are conducted. During the interview, photographs are displayed on a laptop or any similar devices and shown to each participant, who is requested to select the most meaningful topic to discuss in a subsequent focus group. Each participant discusses the meaning of the photographs using the SHOWeD technique, which consists of different questions that relate to the photograph: What do you see here? What's really happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem, concern, or strength Exist? What can we Do about it?

Second focus group: Participants discuss their photographs during a second focus group. At the end of the focus group, participants are asked how they will experience the photovoice method and what could be improved in future studies.

Summarizing the participants' key photographs and accompanying captions: A summary is written based on the participants' original description of the photograph (from the interview and focus group transcripts).

Disseminate the findings: A photo exhibition will be conducted. The exhibition aims to provide a forum to disseminate study findings, encourage critical dialogue among invited participants, stakeholders, researchers, and members of the community, and influence policy and social change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants of the study shared their personal experiences as fire survivors with their chosen photographs and descriptions. The eight participants of this study were identified as fire survivors. This study generated the following themes: (1) Fragility and Resilience of Life; (2) Loss and Rebuilding; (3) Tangible and Intangible Losses; and (4) Community and Shared Responsibility.

Fragility and Resilience of Life

The first theme describes how the fire exposed fire survivors' fragility, vulnerability, and the suddenness of losing everything. At the same time, they express resilience, hope, and determination to rebuild. They learned to adapt and find strength in starting over despite the hardships.

Participants reflected on the fragility of life and the emotional toll that fire incidents impose. They shared how the sudden and destructive nature of fires heightened their sense of vulnerability but also revealed their capacity for resilience. Participant 1 shared, *"You know when I see those wires, it is not just about the fire. It is about all of us who have lost something big. It is about how fragile things are and how quickly life can change. But it's also about how strong we can be. We all have to rebuild because after the fire, our lives were essentially back to zero."* (see figure 1)

Figure 1 (Electrical Wires)

Participant 3 stated, *"It can show us that even when things are really bad, hope can still grow."* She discussed this with pride in her voice, emphasizing that her garden acknowledges the ability to rebuild and create something positive from the destruction.

Figure 2 (Garden)

The experience of a fire survivor shows how life can be both fragile and strong at the same time. One participant shared how they created a garden on the land where their house once stood. Although the garden reminds them of the home they lost, it also shows that life can start over. The fire took away their belongings and peace, but it also gave them the chance to rebuild and create something new. The garden symbolizes hope

and strength, proving that even after a big loss, it is possible to grow again. Survivors like this show that while fire can destroy a lot, it also helps people find the strength to move forward and rebuild their lives.

Fire exposes the fragility of life by swiftly disrupting routines, possessions, and a sense of security (Canter, 2024). However, it also ignites a profound sense of resilience, as survivors like Participant 1 and Participant 3 demonstrate through their reflections. While the fear and trauma of loss may linger, it is clear that the human spirit possesses a remarkable capacity to rebuild and find hope even in the aftermath of devastation. This duality of being vulnerable yet capable of overcoming reflects the complexity of recovery, where individuals not only navigate the loss of material possessions but also rebuild their sense of self, relying on inner strength and community support to move forward (Van Metre, 2022).

The study highlighted the dual nature of human experience in the aftermath of a fire. It implies that while life is inherently fragile and easily disrupted by unexpected tragedies, such as fires, there is also a remarkable resilience within individuals. Survivors face significant challenges, including emotional trauma, material loss, and disruption of routine, yet they find ways to rebuild and regain hope.

The reflections of survivors illustrate this balance between vulnerability and strength. Recovery is depicted as a complex process involving not just material rebuilding but also emotional and psychological restoration. It underscores the importance of personal resilience in overcoming trauma and reclaiming a sense of self (Saul, 2022). Ultimately, the paragraph suggests that even in the face of devastation, human beings possess an extraordinary capacity for renewal and perseverance.

Loss and Rebuilding

The second theme describes the aftermath of a fire characterized by profound loss, spanning material possessions, routines, and even personal identities. Survivors struggled to adapt to their altered realities, emphasizing the emotional and financial difficulties of starting over. This was emphasized by the statement given by the study participants.

In the face of profound loss, Participant 2 demonstrates resilience and determination, as seen in their decision to sell the burned motorcycle and use the experience as an opportunity to rebuild and move forward. They note, *"I am planning to sell the burned motorcycle at a junk shop. It also shows how strong I can be, how I can think positively even in that situation, and how I can rebuild and find a way to keep going."*

Figure 3 (Burned Motorcycle)

Despite the overwhelming sense of loss, the determination to rebuild remains strong, as survivors like Participant 4 continue to find the strength to move forward, piece by piece, in the face of such destruction, saying *"Although it is overwhelming, we are holding on to whatever strength we can muster to rebuild."* She reflects while glancing at the photograph of her burned room. (see figure 4)

Figure 4 (Burned Room)

The process of rebuilding involves more than just replacing physical belongings; it is about rebuilding a sense of security, community, and purpose. As Participant 6 shared, *"Loss of belongings and property, I do not lose hope, so what I do is find ways to heal and move forward."* It reflects the emotional toll that losing a kitchen can have, as well as the determination to overcome the setback. The survivor's resilience highlights that, while the loss of such a crucial part of the home is deeply felt, the journey of rebuilding is driven by hope and perseverance. The loss of the kitchen, in this context, becomes a powerful representation of both loss and the possibility of renewal as survivors work toward restoring their lives with hard work and determination.

Figure 5 (Burned Kitchen)

The experiences of fire survivors, it becomes clear that the journey of rebuilding after such a loss is driven by resilience and hope. Participant 2's decision to sell a burned motorcycle and use the money to move forward highlights the strength to remain positive even in the face of hardship. This determination to rebuild is echoed by Participant 4, who, despite feeling overwhelmed, continues to hold on to whatever strength she can to start over. Her reflection on a photo of her burned room underscores the emotional weight of the loss, yet also her commitment to rebuilding piece by piece.

Similarly, Participant 6 demonstrates how the loss of belongings, such as a kitchen, can deeply affect survivors. However, their focus on healing and moving forward shows that the process of rebuilding goes beyond replacing physical items, it involves restoring a sense of security, purpose, and community. These stories

reveal that while the emotional toll of losing a home is significant, the process of rebuilding is fuelled by perseverance and the desire for renewal.

The process of rebuilding after a loss goes far beyond merely replacing what was physically destroyed or damaged. While the reconstruction of homes, buildings, and infrastructure is essential for restoring normalcy, the true recovery lies in addressing the psychological and emotional impacts of the loss (Thoresen et al., 2019). The destruction of physical space often symbolizes a deeper loss, one that affects the community's sense of security and well-being. Rebuilding in this context requires more than construction materials; it demands the restoration of trust, connection, and resilience.

These experiences highlight the crucial role of external support in facilitating recovery, as the survivors often lacked the resources to rebuild independently (Schumann III et al., 2020). They also highlight the significant challenges faced by fire survivors in rebuilding their lives, both materially and emotionally. Losing a home or livelihood in a fire disrupts daily life and long-term plans, leaving individuals struggling to regain stability (Humphrey, 2021).

It implies that while the loss experienced by fire survivors is deeply emotional and overwhelming, the process of rebuilding is driven by resilience, determination, and hope. It suggests that survivors are not only focused on replacing material possessions but are also rebuilding their sense of security, purpose, and community. Through the participants' examples, it highlights the strength and perseverance that emerge in the face of hardship, showing that the emotional journey of recovery involves both personal growth and the desire to move forward despite the challenges.

Tangible and Intangible Losses

The third theme provides insight into the layered impact of fire, illustrating how it disrupts both the material and emotional fabric of survivors' lives. Tangible losses, such as food, clothing, and belongings, reflect the immediate challenges of survival and recovery. These basic needs become critical priorities as survivors work to regain stability. On the other hand, intangible losses, including the erosion of comfort, safety, and normalcy, reveal the deep emotional scars left by such a traumatic event.

One of the most immediate and pressing tangible losses faced by fire survivors is the lack of basic necessities, such as clothing, which becomes a significant challenge in the aftermath of the disaster. Without access to their belongings, survivors often rely on donations to meet their needs, highlighting the importance of community support during recovery. Participant 7 described, *"Luckily, there are donated clothes that also help us. The real challenge after the fire is that we really need clothes."* These lines emphasize physical and material losses such as clothing and possessions, emphasizing the immediate practical challenges survivors face. (see figure 6)

Figure 6 (Clothes)

Participant 8 shared, *"After the fire, our rice was completely consumed. Rice is important because people really need to eat."* Participant 8 also shared, *"We were really worried because we were hungry, and the next day there would be nothing to eat since the rice was all gone."* (see figure 7)

Figure 7 (Rice)

The loss of necessities like rice and clothes vividly illustrates the theme of tangible and intangible losses experienced by fire survivors. Tangibly, the destruction of essential items such as food and clothing reflects the immediate challenges of survival, as these are critical for meeting basic human needs. Participant 8's worry over the lack of rice underscores the pressing need for sustenance, while Participant 7's struggle to find clothes reflects the difficulty of maintaining dignity and hygiene in the aftermath. Intangibly, these losses evoke profound emotional and psychological impacts, including anxiety, uncertainty, and a diminished sense of stability. The reliance on donations and community support becomes not only a means of addressing physical needs but also a source of emotional reassurance and resilience. Together, these experiences show how the loss of material possessions is deeply intertwined with the emotional journey of recovery, underscoring the multifaceted challenges fire survivors face in rebuilding their lives.

In the immediate aftermath of a fire, the loss of personal belongings may seem superficial at first, but for survivors, items like clothes represent much more than just fabric (Wen et al., 2023). Clothes are tied to a sense of personal identity, comfort, and normalcy. When these items are lost, survivors not only face practical difficulties but also experience a deeper emotional disruption. The need for clean clothes becomes a symbol of the broader challenges of regaining control over a life that has been abruptly interrupted.

For Participant 7, the absence of clean clothes speaks to the larger feeling of being displaced physically, emotionally, and socially. Without clothing to change into, there is an immediate loss of dignity and comfort, further reinforcing the sense of vulnerability and instability. This struggle emphasizes that the trauma of fire is not only about the destruction of material possessions but also about how such losses affect survivors' ability to feel normal and grounded in their own lives (Dudley, 2020).

Participant 8's account of losing rice underscores the vulnerability and urgency tied to meeting fundamental human needs. A basic staple in many households is more than just food; it represents survival and stability. The loss not only highlights the immediate need for sustenance but also amplifies the emotional distress that comes from the uncertainty of not knowing where the next meal will come from. This tangible loss points to the broader challenges faced by survivors in the aftermath of a fire, where even the most basic needs become urgent priorities. Beyond these material losses, participants also emphasize the intangible toll of fire, including the loss of peace, safety, and emotional stability (Çay, 2024).

These feelings of insecurity can be just as damaging as physical destruction as survivors grapple with the psychological scars of their experience. As they rebuild their lives, it becomes clear that recovery involves

more than just repairing homes. It also requires healing emotional wounds and restoring a sense of normalcy (Mika & Kelman, 2020). The stories shared by participants suggest that true recovery must address both practical and emotional needs. It highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems, where community aid, empathy, and resilience-building initiatives play a crucial role in helping survivors navigate the complex journey of recovery.

Community and Shared Responsibility

The last theme shows how important it is for people to come together after a fire. Surviving a fire is not something you face alone; it often takes the support of others to recover and rebuild. Communities help by giving essentials like food and clothes and offering emotional support to those affected. This theme also reminds us that everyone has a role to play in preventing future fires by staying prepared and working together. It shows how helping each other and being responsible can make recovery easier and strengthen the community for the future.

As Participant 5 shared, *"It is good to gather a meeting in our community, especially in narrow houses and lack of resources, to increase the knowledge of many people."* (see figure 8)

Figure 8 (Community)

It features the importance of working together to overcome the challenges of recovery and prevent future disasters. The idea of gathering a meeting in the community, especially in areas with narrow houses and limited resources, underscores the need to increase awareness about fire safety. By sharing knowledge and experiences, community members can learn how to protect themselves and their families from similar tragedies (Hoffman, 2019). This collective effort helps ensure that everyone is informed and prepared, creating a sense of shared Responsibility for each other's safety.

For the fire survivors, this sense of community support becomes even more vital. Sharing personal experiences, as seen in Participant 5's reflection, can have a profound impact on others, offering both practical advice and emotional encouragement. By actively participating in these discussions, survivors not only help raise awareness but also contribute to the collective resilience of their community. Survivors who have gone through the trauma of a fire can play a pivotal role in teaching others about fire prevention and safety, reinforcing the importance of shared Responsibility within the community (Walls et al., 2020). When individuals who have experienced a fire come together to share their stories, they foster a culture of mutual care and preparedness (Cooper et al., 2020). This sense of collective Responsibility strengthens the community by reducing the risk of future fires and creating a support system that benefits everyone. It helps build resilience, not just for the survivors but for the entire community, ensuring that future generations are better equipped to handle such disasters (Fu, 2024).

Ultimately, the participants' experiences show how fires affect people in many ways, making them feel both vulnerable and strong. While fires cause major losses, they also show the ability to rebuild, both physically and emotionally (Eriksen & de Vet, 2021). The importance of community support, education, and safety measures is clear, as recovery is not just about fixing homes but also healing emotional scars and finding stability again. This shared effort helps everyone heal and makes the community more prepared for future disasters, creating a stronger, safer environment for all.

CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of fire survivors, emphasizing both the physical destruction and the emotional and psychological toll on survivors. Despite their inherent vulnerability to such sudden and life-altering events, survivors demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting and rebuilding their lives with the aid of financial support, emotional encouragement, and community involvement. Effective recovery requires addressing both material needs, such as housing and necessities, and intangible aspects, such as emotional well-being and security. Additionally, the study underscored the importance of community action, education, and awareness in preventing fires and fostering a supportive environment for sustainable recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the result of the study, it is recommended that the implementation of widespread fire safety education programs targeting all age groups, particularly in high-risk communities, be strengthened through schools, community centers, and media platforms. Strengthening community support systems is essential for recovery, including establishing support groups, providing mental health services, and offering financial aid and job training. Recovery plans should integrate psychological support, involve mental health professionals in disaster response teams, and encourage survivors to engage in counseling. Fire prevention policies should be updated to include fire-resistant materials, enforce regular inspections, and conduct community fire drills. Collaboration among governments, NGOs, and local communities is vital to enhance fire resilience through unified efforts in awareness, prevention, and emergency response. Lastly, future researchers should explore the long-term psychological impacts of fire disasters to develop targeted interventions for diverse demographic groups, ensuring comprehensive recovery.

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