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Resilience as Process: Rethinking Adaptation and Agency After a Catastrophe.

The Case of the Inhabitants' Resilience After the Beirut Port explosion (4th August 2020)

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Abstract

Resilience has become a key concept in understanding how individuals, communities, and systems respond to adversity. Often framed in policy and popular discourse as the innate capacity to "bounce back" from disruption, this paper argues for a more nuanced and critical approach. Rather than a static trait, resilience is a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by historical, structural, and relational factors. It is better understood as a social practice involving negotiation, adaptation, and sometimes resistance. This paper critiques the neoliberal framing of resilience, which emphasizes individual responsibility and self-governance, often in the context of limited state intervention. It suggests that resilience, as currently invoked, shifts the burden of recovery onto individuals and communities amid structural neglect. Hence, a more political and human-centered understanding of survival and transformation in times of crisis has been suggested. Focusing on the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, the paper examines how individuals and families navigate trauma and uncertainty through adaptive strategies. It frames resilience as both a lived experience and a political discourse, embedded in everyday realities, survival tactics, and acts of resistance. The role of NGOs and grassroots initiatives, often first responders in the absence of effective state support, is highlighted as central to sustaining community resilience. The study employs qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews with those directly affected, critically engaging with collective and community-based dimensions of resilience.

Keywords: resilience, disaster studies, the Beirut Port explosion, agency

1. Introduction

Beirut is the coastal capital of Lebanon, a small country located in the Eastern Mediterranean. The political instability in Lebanon, alongside the crisis and its impacts on the economy,

deepened due to the economic recession that followed a series of civil protests beginning on October 17, 2019. Eventually, the civil uprising escalated into a revolution, leading to the government's resignation. On July 28, 2020, Charif Majdalani (2021) describes the situation in the country: *''Covid-19, the economic crisis, the bankruptcy of the government, the stifling heat coming unusually early this year, along with the electricity cuts and the distressing noise like lawn mowers of Israeli drones overhead, the Damocles' sword of war permanently hanging over us.''*

''The sword of Damocles'', referring to a constantly looming threat of danger or disaster, descended upon the city's inhabitants and ended up as an unprecedented event that no one could even imagine on the 4th of August 2020, at 06:07 pm. The explosion, centered at the Port of Beirut, was caused by the ignition of 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive material. It was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, resulting in massive devastation, deaths, and severe injuries. The blast occurred in one of the city's oldest and most vibrant districts. It resulted in at least 218 deaths, over 7,000 injuries, 77,000 apartments damaged, and hundreds of thousands of people homeless. Historical areas and heritage buildings were severely damaged, altering the unique urban and cultural fabric of the neighborhood. This ''catastrophe'' caused around $3 billion in damage, severely impacting housing, healthcare, education, businesses, and cultural heritage (Human Rights Watch, 2021;Sakr, 2022; Dib, 2022).

Resilience has its roots in adversity and an interest in how adverse life experiences harmfully impact people. The concept of resilience originated in materials science, describing a substance's ability to return to its original form after stress. Over the decades, this concept evolved as it was applied to other ecosystems. The term applies to materials, ecosystems, individuals, communities, organizations, and nations. However, there are significant differences in how the concept is interpreted across the social science disciplines. In a general definition, it is an ability of something or someone to recover and return to ''normality'' after confronting an abnormal, alarming and unexpected threat (McAslan, 2010). In the following parts, I will also be questioning the concept of normality to be able to conceptualize a healthy process for recovering from an adversity in the scope of social systems.

Resilience is a complex construct, and it may be defined differently in the context of individuals, families, organizations, societies, and cultures. Today, resilience is mostly defined as a concept of healthy, adaptive, or integrated positive functioning with time in the aftermath of adversity for individuals. This can help to open new understandings of how people in the resource-constrained environment work for their growth and development, and how social structures of inequality and opportunity can be mobilized to cultivate a society (Davoudi et al.,2012; Dahlberg, 2015). In other words, resilience is the innate capacity to "bounce back" from disruption, and it has been defined as a process where people harness their tangible and intangible resources to reach better-than-expected outcomes (Van Breda, 2018).

One significant aspect of observing this phenomenon in the context of Lebanon is that both the country itself and its inhabitants have long been familiar with this concept, so much so that many Lebanese no longer even see it as a positive trait (NYTimes, 2020; ARAB News, 2022; WashingtonMonthly, 2024). Many news outlets have referred to Lebanon as ''resilient" in their headlines and reports, especially in the wake of the civil war, the 2006 war, and the various challenges faced by the people in the country. Recently, the Beirut Port explosion has once again brought forth similar discussions about resilience, a notion frequently encountered in both academic literature and media discourse (Al Jazeera, 2020; BBC, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2021; L'Orient Today, 2023; Reuters, 2025).

The primary objective of this paper is to understand how a specific catastrophic event shaped the lived experiences, social structures and dynamics of affected populations. This aims to explore the diverse ways in which people respond to, cope with, and adapt to the challenges posed by catastrophic occurrences. In this sense, it tries to grasp how Lebanese construct narratives around responsibility, victimhood, and resilience in the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion and how resilience is portrayed among those who have experienced the explosion firsthand. Does resilience have a transformative impact on a country and its citizens? Or can it instead serve as a representation that places immense responsibility on individuals while leaving the state's obligations unaddressed? How does the perpetuation of prepackaged resilience narratives deliberately or inadvertently undermine the need for accountability?

1.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Max Weber (1864–1920) emphasized the importance of the subjective dimension of social life and individual social actions. He argued that sociology should center on the social contexts of individuals and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences. His focus on ideas and their power to shape reality profoundly influenced later sociologists. Building on this legacy, scholars such as George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), and Erving Goffman (1922–1982) developed what is now known as symbolic interactionism, a theoretical approach concerned with micro-level social phenomena. Symbolic interactionism investigates how individuals produce meaning through everyday interactions, proposing that society emerges from these interactions and that shared realities are constructed collectively. From this perspective, society arises from routine interactions between individuals, through which people co-create meaning. Social interaction, defined as the way individuals act and respond in relation to others, is central to this process. A key component of interaction is the use of symbols, which are objects, gestures, or terms that carry specific, widely understood meanings (Giddens & Sutton, 2021). This highlights the constructed nature of reality, which depends on how people interpret and give meaning to events and objects, rather than on objective facts alone.

Every social interaction unfolds within a broader social structure, which both shapes and limits individual behaviors. These interactions are influenced by shared expectations, which are tied to social status – an individual's recognized position within a social group or society. Social status plays a key role in identity formation and in shaping interpersonal relations. It encompasses various identifiers such as gender, race, sexual orientation, parental status, citizenship, and profession. Individuals simultaneously occupy multiple statuses, forming what is known as a status set. This set provides insight into a person's social position, especially considering that statuses are arranged hierarchically, with some being more socially valued than others.

While status refers to a person's social position, role refers to the behaviors, duties, and privileges expected of someone in that position. One occupies a status but enacts a role. These roles are shaped by cultural norms, personal experiences, and the socialization process through which individuals learn appropriate behaviors for various contexts. Symbolic interactionism, with its focus on meaning-making through interaction, also extends to the understanding of roles. When applied to disaster studies, this theoretical lens provides insight into how people and communities interpret and respond to catastrophic events. It shifts attention from purely structural or material consequences to how individuals and groups process and make sense of disasters. The approach offers a micro-sociological perspective, emphasizing identity construction, daily experiences, and the meanings people attribute to what they endure. It reveals how survivors interpret and communicate the disaster through shared symbols and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Šaras & Perez-Felkner, 2018; Darmon, 2023).

Blumer's (1986) framework of symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for examining how people perceive and react to disasters – not only as material disruptions but as socially and symbolically experienced events. This perspective helps us understand the personal and collective impacts of disasters such as earthquakes, explosions, or floods.

Meaning making after disaster: Survivors often assign individual and collective meanings to the events. For instance, one might interpret the disaster as divine punishment, while another may see it as evidence of governmental failure.

Interaction and identity: Disasters can transform social identities (e.g., from "resident" to "victim" or "activist") and roles (e.g., women assuming new responsibilities after losing male family member).

Symbolic importance of place: Damaged or destroyed places (such as a port or neighborhood) hold symbolic value. Their loss or restoration shapes how individuals relate to their community and collective history.

Shared narratives and memory: Through dialogue, memorials, and media representation, communities form collective narratives that help define what occurred, assign blame, and interpret the disaster's societal impact.

Erikson's (1976) landmark study on the Buffalo Creek flood introduced the concept of "collective trauma," showing how the event disrupted the symbolic foundations of community identity. Similarly, Fine and Fields (2008) explored how survivors use storytelling to reassert agency and rebuild identities, portraying narrative as a means of social recovery. Tierney (1989) examined how survivors may be stigmatized when their actions do not align with normative expectations, highlighting the power of social labeling (such as being identified as a "victim," "resilient person," or "citizen"). These labels affect both individual self-conception and institutional responses. Furthermore, identity categories inform collective experiences and foster shared identities among those with similar labels.

In short, symbolic interactionism can help to shed light on how individuals interpret catastrophes and how these interpretations influence emotions, choices, coping mechanisms, and relationships – areas that are often overlooked by approaches focusing solely on structure or resources. The experience of disaster is mediated through daily language, practices, and rituals. Each perspective contributes distinct insights to the study of disasters. In this context, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the subjective and interpersonal dimensions of disaster experience and allows us to identify discursive strategies, examine different perspectives, and develop alternative discourses.

2. Methods

The scientific method, as applied to social sciences, includes a variety of research approaches, tools, and techniques, for collecting and analyzing data. What research method to employ for collecting data is to address the research questions of interest (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014). Utilizing a qualitative approach, a comprehensive field study will be conducted in the neighborhood, focusing specifically on individuals who experienced the explosion firsthand that were part of reorganization of the area. The methods will include using and analyzing texts, archives and administering interviews to document the narratives of this unprecedented event.

Qualitative data analysis is the process of examining and interpreting non-numerical and unstructured data to understand what it represents. Since text and image data are so dense and rich, all the information cannot be used in a qualitative study. Hence, reducing data without losing meaning might be one of the main concerns. Thus, data should be winnowed in the

analysis. This process is to aggregate data into a small number of themes that are typically broader than the specific words or phrases used in content analysis which focuses on quantifying the presence of certain words, phrases, or concepts to identify frequency patterns and trends (Creswell, 2014).

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The study employs ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with individuals who were affected firsthand by the explosion, and analysis of secondary data, including media archives and reports. It examines news articles, TV reports, and social media discourse from local Lebanese outlets (L'Orient-Le Jour, L'Orient Today, ARAB News) and international sources (Al Jazeera, The New York Times, WASHINGTON Monthly, Reuters, BBC). Finally, following an ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews have been conducted.

Discourse analysis is a valuable method for studying language and its role in shaping identity. Discourses, shared patterns of thinking and talking about a topic, are the tools people use in social interactions to achieve their goals. This research takes a discursive approach, focusing on what people do with language in specific interactions and the discursive resources they use to construct their identities. It also adopts a critical perspective, examining two key aspects of language: its ideological nature, influenced by the power dynamics at play, and its rhetorical and dilemmatic nature, which allows speakers to present multiple versions of events (Aloneftis, 2017).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be considered a form of textual analysis, but it extends beyond traditional textual analysis to include broader socio-cultural dimensions. Their focuses on how language in texts reflects and reinforces power relations and social structures, making it an interdisciplinary method that bridges different disciplines. The methodology of CDA is rooted in relationism, which emphasizes the connections and interactions between social relations rather than focusing on isolated entities or individual actions. This perspective sees discourse and power as fundamental components of social relations, shaped through an ongoing process of articulation. In this process, different aspects or ''moments'' of society (such as culture, economy, or politics) interact dynamically without being separate from one another (Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010).

CDA typically involves the analysis of texts, such as written or spoken language, with a focus on identifying how particular linguistic features are used to construct meaning and convey social, cultural, and political messages. It has been used to study a wide range of social and political phenomena, including media representations of race and gender, political discourse, and corporate communication. It is often used in interdisciplinary fields such as linguistics, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. This involves examining not only the content of the text, but also the social and political contexts in which it was produced and received. (van Dijk 1993; Gee 2014).

In this way, I would be able to begin to identify the real meaning of resilience without my own intervention or particular interest. Then, I could compare these findings with media articles, and NGO reports, to see if these reflect the priorities. Finally, by conducting CDA on the free narratives would help to explore alternative discourses on a specific event.

2.2 Population

Using non-random sampling for representativeness (Žikić 2007; Genzuk 2003), the study will aim to recruit easiest, most available individuals at the beginning and then to approach key informants during ongoing observations. Since the area is limited to explosion-affected areas,

micro-social settings can be feasible for finding key informants. This is particularly useful when the researcher needs to study hard-to-reach or hidden populations.

Existing study subjects help to reach future subjects among their acquaintances or neighbors. In this sense, the process begins by identifying and contacting a small number of initial subjects who meet the criteria for inclusion in the study. Then, each subject is asked to refer other individuals who also meet the study criteria. These referred individuals are then contacted and asked to participate in the study. Thus, the sample grows as more participants are recruited through referrals, creating a chain of participants and through door-to-door calls for interviews in the affected area.

Fieldwork focused on a 1 km radius around the explosion site to capture diverse experiences based on geography and social class (See Figure 1 below). In this sense, the research was conducted in a part of the residential area in Mar Mikhael, a neighborhood close to the port, severely affected by the blast. Both old and new residents were interviewed.

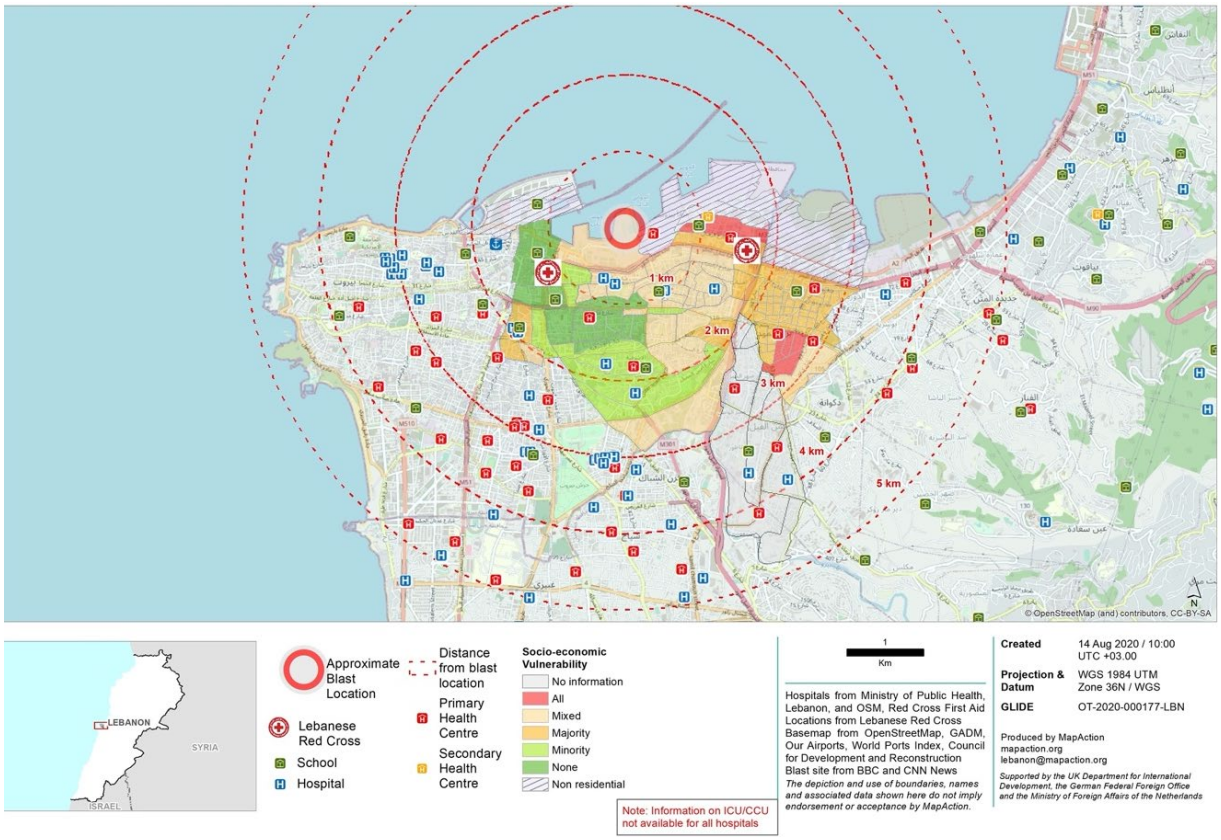

Figure 1: Disaster zone

3. Results

This part will present a qualitative approach anchored in CDA that analyzes the combination of interviews and media discourse. The corpus for analysis includes news headlines from local and international media outlets and semi-structured interviews with women and men in neighborhoods near the port. It emphasizes collecting diverse perspectives across class and gender. Eventually, this will help to identify discursive strategies by presenting comparative and critical insights. Then, I will try to pinpoint the differences in discourses and ascertain alternative categories informed by collective experiences.

This section presents findings from CDA of field interviews conducted with residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the Beirut Port. The narratives gathered reveal how discourses of resilience, responsibility, and memory are negotiated in the everyday aftermath of catastrophe, and how such narratives are deeply moralized. The data also exposes the shifting burden from state structures to individual subjects, pointing to the political function of "resilience" as a discourse that may obscure systemic failure.

3.1 Identifying Discursive Strategies in the Media

Considering the findings of these studies, a discursive analysis would provide a valuable perspective on how participants navigate this identity in social interactions. This approach aims to uncover what they are trying to achieve through their conversations, how they position themselves within the dominant social narratives around hearing voices, and the impact on their sense of self (Aloneftis, 2017). This approach can help to detect how discourse constructs and frame social impact on individuals around responsibility, blame, victimhood, and agency. In this sense, it will examine lexical choices and framing, metaphors and symbolism, actor and agency in media articles and individuals' experiences.

"Resilience," "rebuild," "hope," "corruption," and "collapse" are frequently used terms in media discourses. Some Lebanese and international outlets argue that the prevailing narrative of resilience can conceal the depth of trauma and emotional fragmentation. They critique this framing as a "myth". They note that talk of resilience has reached a breaking point, anger and despair often overpower resilience and become a call for justice (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2021). Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) also documents the steadfastness of Lebanese journalists as a form of resilience during the crisis: "heartbreaking steadiness" amidst chaos (CJR,2020). Though resilience is often invoked in stories of civic building and rebuilding, it is notably absent in explicit justice-advocacy or pressure campaigns linked to the port blast. This raises doubts over whether "resilience" glosses over real collective trauma and paints resilience as fractured anger and despair prevailed and fatigue over constant recovery (ICJF, 2021).

Terms like "trauma," "post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)," and "psychological scars" dominate both local and international literature (Maalouf et al, 2022; El Hajj, 2023; Bou Sanayeh 2022; Reuters, 2024). However, resilience strategies such as community support networks or grassroots mental health initiatives receive less attention. Lastly, very few articles explicitly use resilience in the advocacy context related to justice, or any direct mentions of resilience in justice-seeking narratives about the explosion.

3.2 3.2 Alternative Discourses from the Field

26 interviews (15 female, 11 male) were conducted in Arabic, French, and English with old and new residents living close to the explosion site. Based on testimonies and observations, the neighborhood's social texture has changed. Many long-term residents left, especially the younger generation, and some of the renovated buildings have been rented to expats, temporary renters, and Airbnb guests. It is observed that three distinguished patterns come forward among the experiences of the residents who were affected by the explosion: religious symbolism, trauma from the past, and demand for justice.

Religious coping has implications for the development of psychopathology in the aftermath of traumatic events. Religious coping may be better construed as a set of religious-based assessments of event causality. Higher scores on measures of negative religious coping were associated with higher levels of PTSD (Grey et al, 2024). The residents in the neighborhood consist mostly of elderly Christians. Almost every home contains religious symbols and

pictures of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, Saint Maron, the founder of the Maronite Church, and Saint Charbel, a Maronite monk and priest. They mention that miracle-like situations happened during the explosion. Many point out that while their homes were destroyed, religious items remained intact or untouched. Some of them comment that their religion and beliefs have helped them to recover mentally.

In the immediate aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion on August 4, 2020, numerous individuals reported believing that the catastrophe was the result of an Israeli airstrike. Some witnesses even claimed to have seen or heard planes just before the explosion, despite the absence of any empirical evidence confirming aerial involvement (HRW, 2020; France 24, 2020). These perceptions, although unsubstantiated, may be understood through the lens of trauma psychology and collective memory.

Cognitive psychology suggests that exposure to high-stress, life-threatening events – such as sudden explosions, can lead to trauma-induced memory distortions. In such cases, individuals may misattribute sensory details or even fabricate aspects of the event, especially when under duress or attempting to construct a coherent narrative in chaotic situations (Morgan et al., 2004; Schacter, 2012). These false memories are not necessarily intentional but can reflect the mind's effort to make sense of the incomprehensible.

Additionally, collective memory and political context play crucial roles in shaping individual perceptions. Lebanon's historical memory is marked by repeated Israeli military operations, such as the 1982 invasion and the 2006 war. As a result, there is a deep-seated societal fear of Israeli aggression, which may predispose individuals to interpret traumatic events within that framework. This phenomenon reflects what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs describes as the social framing of memory, where individual recollections are shaped by collective narratives and cultural schemas (Halbwachs, 1992 [1950]). Thus, while no evidence has emerged supporting the theory of an Israeli strike, the persistence of this belief may be understood not as misinformation alone, but as a socially and psychologically embedded narrative, reflecting both past trauma and ongoing insecurity.

When resilience is mentioned, residents became vocal about justice and accountability, fair investigation, and holding the state accountable, instead of strength or endurance. Several interlocutors suggest that being resilient is not getting used to adversities or being strong but being able to move forward to construct a fair and equitable life.

Table 1: Summary of Discursive Themes

Theme	Description
Resilience as endurance	Often spiritualized or moralized; constructed as perseverance, masking structural neglect.
Erosion of trust	State absence and NGO inefficacy foreground individual narratives of abandonment.
Memory as resistance	Survivor narratives challenge normalization and foster grassroots efforts to remember and heal.
Resilience vs. justice	Resilience is framed as a substitute for political accountability and systemic redress among residents.
Gendered labor	Women disproportionately responsible for emotional, domestic, and recovery labor.

3.3 Constructing Resilience and Negotiating Rupture

A dominant discourse among respondents constructs resilience as an internal, almost spiritual attribute. An 80-year-old social worker frames resilience through Christian imagery: *"He covered me with his feathers,"* [referencing the Bible]. Her narrative spiritualizes survival, suggesting divine protection, yet she simultaneously locates resilience in personal perseverance: *"Resilience is just to restart again and again and not to resign."* Similarly, other participants invoke acceptance and gratitude as coping strategies, emphasizing survival over structural change.

This moralization of resilience constructs it as a virtue of the good citizen, not as a political right. As another respondent articulates, "*In Lebanon, we understand resilience as getting used to or moving on. Resilience is not moving on, it is changing."* Her critique disrupts the hegemonic narrative by repositioning resilience as transformation rather than acquiescence. In doing so, she challenges the way resilience is used as a euphemism for abandonment, normalizing precarity, and perpetuating a cycle of non-accountability.

Several participants explicitly describe a collapse of trust in both the state and non-governmental aid networks. An interviewee offers a striking statement: *"A huge number of NGOs came and took our IDs, and a lot of info, but nothing happened. NGOs were mostly propaganda."* This aligns with broader critiques in post-disaster literature that expose how aid becomes a spectacle rather than a sustainable mechanism for justice or recovery.

Many of them describe the explosion as a rupture that forced life-altering decisions. A 33-year-old interviewee moved to Mexico, later reconfiguring his career path to become a florist. His narrative offers an alternative framing of resilience, not as stoic endurance but as radical self-reinvention. Yet even here, the political economy of catastrophe remains. He notes being excluded from aid and concludes, "*Maybe because I left."*

These moments show that transformation is not always liberatory; it is often entangled with precarity. For others, physical injury, loss of livelihood, and altered cognitive capacities were permanent; for example, someone's inability to play music again due to injury is a symbolic death of pre-explosion identity.

Similarly, the notion that *"no one apologized"* and *"there are no people in jail"* was a recurring theme. Participants repeatedly expressed that the explosion has not led to political reckoning or accountability, reinforcing a sentiment that justice is inaccessible. As a respondent articulates, the disaster "aged him overnight," pointing to the temporal violence of unacknowledged trauma.

3.4 Gendered Dimensions of Resilience and Responsibility

Across interviews, women disproportionately bore the affective and logistical labor of recovery. A respondent, who navigated housing insecurity, employment loss, and caregiving, embodies the gendered burden of post-crisis resilience. She states, "*I took the full responsibility of arranging the house and arranging the house of my mom."* Similarly, another one, caring for a disabled husband and coordinating psychological support for her daughter, describes herself as the primary decision-maker post-blast. A woman's statement, *"had I been a man, things might have been easier,"* reflects a recognition of structural gender asymmetries in access to post-disaster resources and autonomy.

These narratives show how resilience is not only individualized but feminized, expected from women in the form of emotional endurance, unpaid caregiving, and home reconstruction. The responsibility for holding together fractured households and neighborhoods is subtly but powerfully transferred onto female subjects. Narratives from women who turned personal loss

into activism (founding initiatives and pushing for accountability highlight resilience as ongoing resistance).

The explosion is a lingering presence in the participants' lives, not a discrete past event. *"It is there in our souls,"* a respondent notes, suggesting a collective mnemonic that resists closure. The initiative she founded with her little son, "Box of Hope," is emblematic of this struggle: a community-led act of care and memory that simultaneously helps her children process trauma and serves as quiet resistance against erasure. Also, in another example, a community kitchen led by women with disabilities, where participants regained agency, solidarity, and self-worth, embodies resilience in rebuilding identity and livelihoods (UN Women Lebanon,2022).

However, such efforts, while commendable, also highlight the privatization of recovery. Acts of collective care, like distributing toys, fixing homes, or founding initiatives, substitute for formal reparations. This privatization is not accidental. It is the outcome of a state that evacuates its responsibilities and of international actors who instrumentalize resilience to signal progress without addressing root causes.

4. Discussion

The Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, introduced a new dimension to Lebanon's already complex situation. Some international reports portray Lebanese people as passive victims, using phrases like "helpless residents" or just ''resilient'' rather than acknowledging their activism. As if being resilient must be an ingrained skill for the people who were born in a specific land. This, I believe, dehumanizes those who suffer from a preventable event and contributes to the authorities' negligence and irresponsibility. Also, framing it as a *"humanitarian crisis"*, requiring foreign aid, reinforce dependency narratives.

Activist-driven media, on the other hand, disrupt these narratives by emphasizing grassroots mobilization and demands for justice. Local media and social media activism highlight Beirut's survivors rebuilding their city, shifting the discourse toward agency. Beyond the immediate destruction and its broader political repercussions, the blast reshaped how much of the media discusses the country's socio-political landscape. This shift affected how the struggles of ordinary citizens are portrayed and intensified criticism of the authorities and the sectarian political system. Within the media sector, some platforms (Megaphone News and Daraj Media, along with programs on more traditional channels such as Al-Jadeed) began pioneering a wave of investigative journalism. These efforts aimed to uncover the deeper causes of the explosion and the ongoing economic crisis. In doing so, they opened up innovative avenues for agency to contribute to a more meaningful debates (ICJF, 2021; MOM, 2024).

Through interviews and fieldwork observations, it becomes evident that the alternative discourses adopted by various media platforms present narratives of responsibility, victimhood, and resilience that diverge significantly from dominant or mainstream conceptualizations. Rather than treating these categories as fixed or universally understood, the media sources examined (particularly those operating outside traditional state-aligned frameworks) construct these terms in ways that challenge conventional power structures and hegemonic interpretations.

For instance, *responsibility* in mainstream narratives is often individualized, focusing on citizens' actions, preparedness, or coping mechanisms. However, in alternative discourses, responsibility is more frequently attributed to systemic failures, state negligence, and entrenched corruption, thus repositioning the locus of accountability from the individual to the institutions of power. Similarly, *victimhood* is reframed, not as a passive state of suffering but as a politically charged identity shaped by unequal access to resources, public recognition, and

justice mechanisms. These counter-narratives expose how some communities or individuals are rendered more ‘‘grievable’’ or visible than others, reflecting broader patterns of marginalization (TIME, 2022).

When it comes to *resilience*, the divergence is even more pronounced. While mainstream definitions often valorize resilience as a positive, apolitical quality (emphasizing individuals’ capacity to bounce back to ‘‘normality’’ after confronting an abnormality), alternative representations treat it as a double-edged concept. Here, resilience is portrayed not only as an expression of community strength and solidarity but also as a burden strategically placed on citizens by the state and prepackaged narratives by the media. In this framing, the invocation of resilience becomes a tool for offloading governmental responsibility, depoliticizing suffering, and masking the structural causes of vulnerability. Therefore, the expectation to be resilient risks becoming a form of symbolic violence, demanding endurance without restitution or change. Additionally, this ‘‘normality’’ has not been clearly defined. Even before the explosion, we could have discussed and questioned the normalcy in Lebanon under the conditions of political instability and an economic crisis that coincided with a global pandemic, and even before.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that the discourse of resilience operates as a form of neoliberal governance, where individual perseverance is celebrated while the structural accountability of the state remains obscured or absent (Al-rawiya, 2024). These alternative discourses thus serve a dual function: they resist dominant narratives and also re-politicize the post-disaster landscape, re-centering discussions on justice, responsibility, and the right to dignified recovery.

5. Conclusion

CDA shows that discourse around the explosion is not neutral – it shapes public understanding of victimhood, responsibility, and resilience. While local narratives emphasize corruption and outrage, some international accounts depoliticize the event. This critical discourse analysis reveals that in post-blast Beirut, resilience functions as both a survival strategy and a contested signifier. While it empowers some to rebuild lives and communities, it also operates as a discursive tool that absolves the state of its responsibilities. Rather than fostering collective healing or transformative justice, prepackaged narratives of resilience may individualize suffering and depoliticize disaster. True resilience, as several interlocutors suggest, cannot be equated with mere adaptation; it must entail structural change, memory, and accountability. Lastly, Resilience is not a binary state but a fluid spectrum – shaped by shifting conditions, histories, and responses. It is neither linear nor fixed and cannot be used to definitively characterize a place or its people.

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