

Fire, Grief, and Resilience: A Case Study of a Restaurant Tragedy in Bangladesh

Mamunor Rashid
Rubaiya Zannat
Hasan Mahmud Faisal
Mohammad ASaduzzaman
Sherin Farhana Moni
Salauddin Ahmed

University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, USA

Abstract: This case study examines the tragic fire incident at Bailey Road, Dhaka, Bangladesh, on February 29, 2024, which claimed 46 lives and injured 75 others. The fire, originating in the Green Cozy Cottage shopping mall, highlighted significant safety lapses and regulatory failures, including unlicensed operations, lack of emergency exits, and improper gas cylinder management. The study focuses on Khacchi Bhai Restaurant, located on the second floor, which faced reputational challenges despite investigations suggesting the fire began elsewhere. Using theories like Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Restoration Theory (IRT), and Narrative Theory, the analysis explores the restaurant's crisis response strategies, including transparent communication, empathy, safety improvements, and rebranding efforts. Khacchi Bhai utilized social media and press releases to deny responsibility, express condolences, and clarify misconceptions about the fire's origin. Government investigations revealed systemic issues such as inadequate building codes and enforcement, prompting calls for stricter regulations. The study underscores the importance of proactive crisis management, community engagement, and regulatory compliance in mitigating risks and rebuilding trust. It also identifies limitations, such as insufficient pre-crisis preparedness and long-term impact assessments, offering enhanced safety measures and stakeholder collaboration recommendations. This research provides insights into addressing fire hazards and fostering resilience in densely populated urban areas.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Fire Incident, Khacchi Bhai Restaurant, Reputation Restoration

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INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, the increasing frequency and severity of fire accidents have emerged as a major concern, providing considerable difficulties to public safety and disaster management. Recent assessments produced by Bangladesh's Fire Service and Civil Defense Department have highlighted the intensity of the crisis, demonstrating significant human casualties and massive property damage caused between 2020 and 2023. These records show a frightening 1376 deaths and an estimated 1.5 million US dollars in property destruction among almost 100,000 reported fire occurrences (Fire Service & Civil Defense, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). These worrying statistics highlight the critical need to assess the effectiveness of catastrophe management policies and public awareness efforts.

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The frequency of fire-related dangers in Bangladesh is due to several causes, including the country's dense population and the development of new constructions with poor safety systems. Notably, broken gas cylinders, poor electrical wiring, and malfunctioning air conditioning systems have been recognized as recurring causes of fires and explosions. Specific tragedies are offered as moving examples of the devastation caused by fire outbreaks in Bangladesh. For example, a disastrous fire at a food processing company in 2021 resulted in the unfortunate deaths of 54 people [1]. Similarly, in 2019, another fire killed at least 70 people, showing Bangladesh's vulnerability to similar disasters. Furthermore, the disastrous fire at a garment factory in 2012, which claimed at least 117 lives, is imprinted in the collective consciousness as a sharp reminder of the critical necessity for strong fire prevention and mitigation procedures [2].

However, the increasing frequency of fire dangers in Bangladesh highlights the vital need for improved disaster preparedness and proactive steps to reduce the negative impact of such accidents on human life and property. Effective enforcement of safety rules, comprehensive public education programs, and investments in fire suppression infrastructure are identified as critical methods for addressing this important public safety issue. On the evening of February 29, 2024, a fire broke out at a seven-story shopping complex on New Bailey Road in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing 46 people. The event occurred around 21:50 BST in the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall, which mostly houses restaurants as well as clothes and mobile phone stores [3]. The fire started on the first floor, notably within the Kacchi Bhai biryani restaurant, and quickly spread to surrounding floors, trapping many people inside. According to fire officials, a gas leak or a malfunctioning stove may have sparked the firestorm, which was aggravated by the presence of gas cylinders in the culinary businesses. The spread of smoke within the building's stairs hampered evacuation operations. The impacted building, which was seven stories tall, featured a broad range of commercial establishments, including the 'Kacchi Bhai' food shop on the second floor and further eateries on higher floors [4, 5].

These dining venues often had increased attendance in the evenings, attracting both families and individuals. When the fire broke out, emergency personnel quickly responded, sending thirteen firefighting units to the area. Their collaborative efforts included the use of cranes to rescue people trapped on the building's higher levels and roof. Despite the heroic efforts of rescue professionals, casualties occurred, with one survivor detailing horrific attempts to traverse the dangerous surroundings and facilitate evacuation. Tragically, the fire took the lives of a cashier and a server who bravely attempted to direct customers to safety. The fire was eventually extinguished after a two-hour effort, with firemen safely evacuating 75 people from the scene. The joint efforts of emergency personnel resulted in the successful containment of the fire but at a high human cost and severe property damage [5].

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the aftermath of the tragic fire incident that occurred on February 29th at the Green Cozy building, claiming the lives of 46 individuals. The chosen methodological framework centers on content analysis, focusing primarily on document examination [1]. The research delves into the events surrounding the fire, particularly the allegations implicating Khacchi Bhai restaurant, located on the building's second floor, as the source of the blaze. Khacchi Bhai promptly responded to these accusations by disseminating clarifications via its official website and various social media platforms, vehemently denying any responsibility for the fire. To comprehensively analyze the restoration efforts undertaken by Khacchi Bhai to salvage its reputation in the wake of the tragedy, this study meticulously examines a variety of documentary sources.

These sources including documents retrieved from the restaurant's website provided us insights into the official statements, press releases, or any other pertinent information disseminated by Khacchi Bhai to refute the allegations and mitigate reputational damage. Data Collection period 1 March to 20 April 2024. Additionally, the study scrutinized Khacchi Bhai's activity on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, analyzing the content, tone, and timing of their posts addressing the fire incident. Additionally, interactions with followers and responses to public inquiries or accusations were examined to gauge their communication strategy's effectiveness. Besides, reports and articles published by reputable media organizations regarding the fire incident and its aftermath were analyzed to understand the broader public discourse surrounding Khacchi Bhai's involvement and the subsequent efforts to restore its image. Finally, reports from Rajdhani Unnoyan Kotripokkho (RajuK) and The Bangladesh Fire Brigade Service were used to get valuable insights into the investigative findings regarding the origin and cause of the fire, as well as any regulatory actions or recommendations proposed in response to the incident.

This study employs Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Restoration Theory (IRT), and Narrative Theory to analyze the Baily Road fire and its impact on Khacchi Bhai Restaurant. SCCT examines stakeholder perceptions of responsibility, guiding crisis response strategies [6]. IRT explores denial, minimization, corrective actions, and apologies to restore reputation. Narrative Theory highlights storytelling to shape public perception, emphasizing safety, resilience, and community support [7]. The study investigates the fire's causes, casualties, and the restaurant's efforts to rebuild trust through transparent communication, empathy, and safety

improvements. It evaluates Khacchi Bhai's crisis management approach in mitigating reputational damage and fostering stakeholder confidence post-incident [8].

RESULTS

Khacchi Bhai responded to the Bailey Road fire incident with a series of communications aimed at clarifying its position and addressing public concerns. In its first press release on social media, the restaurant expressed deep sorrow over the tragedy, describing February 29th as a night of unimaginable loss where lives and livelihoods were reduced to ashes (Facebook Post; Source: <https://www.facebook.com/KacchiBhaiOfficial>). The post emphasized the emotional scars left by the incident while refuting claims that the fire originated from their branch. Khacchi Bhai shared images of their kitchen post-fire, asserting that the fire did not start in their area and explaining that their gas cylinders were stored safely in the building's basement. A second press release reiterated the horror of the event but clarified that the fire began on the lower floor, not within their premises (Facebook Post; Source: <https://www.facebook.com/KacchiBhaiOfficial>). These statements sought to dispel misinformation and demonstrate transparency in the wake of the crisis.

In addition to social media posts, Kacchi Bhai's manager addressed the issue during a media interview. Despite widespread belief that the fire started at their restaurant on the second floor, the manager stated he could not confirm the origin of the fire. Present at the scene during the incident, he recounted his experience of seeing smoke rise and attempting to extinguish the flames before evacuating. While he admitted uncertainty about the fire's source, he highlighted the bravery of two staff members who lost their lives while trying to save others (Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQjiulE9RIA>). This narrative aimed to humanize the restaurant's response, showcasing empathy and accountability while countering allegations about their role in the disaster [2].

DISCUSSION

Khacchi Bhai demonstrated a multifaceted approach to restoring trust and mitigating reputational damage following the Bailey Road fire [9]. Transparency was central to their strategy, as they provided regular updates on social media and their website, keeping stakeholders informed about the situation, damage assessment, and remedial actions. This openness fostered accountability and reassured customers of their sincerity. Empathy also played a critical role, with personalized messages from management expressing condolences and apologies, showcasing compassion for those affected. To rebuild confidence, the restaurant reinforced safety protocols by conducting fire drills, displaying safety certifications, and addressing concerns through strategic engagement on social media. Compensatory measures, such as offering discounts or complimentary meals, further alleviated grievances while renovation efforts signaled a commitment to enhancing customer experience. By promoting these changes through before-and-after images and engaging in dialogue with patrons, Khacchi Bhai effectively controlled the narrative surrounding the incident, reinforcing its dedication to service excellence [2].

The fire's devastating impact resulted in 46 fatalities and 75 injuries, with many victims succumbing to burns, suffocation, or evacuation attempts. In response, government authorities launched an investigation, suspecting a gas cylinder explosion as the likely cause [10]. The presence of gas cylinders on every floor, including staircases, compounded the disaster, while the absence of designated fire exits hindered evacuation efforts (Fisher, 1984). Despite ongoing inquiries, systemic failures in safety compliance were evident, highlighting the need for stricter enforcement of building codes and fire safety regulations. Khacchi Bhai faced scrutiny but leveraged this tragedy to emphasize accountability, community engagement, and improved safety standards. Through these initiatives, the restaurant not only sought to restore its image but also aimed to contribute to broader systemic reforms, ensuring such tragedies are prevented in the future.

CONCLUSION

The Bailey Road fire tragedy underscored critical gaps in safety compliance and crisis management, claiming 46 lives and injuring 75. Khacchi Bhai Restaurant faced reputational challenges but responded with transparency, empathy, and proactive safety measures to rebuild trust. By leveraging theories like SCCT, IRT, and Narrative Theory, the restaurant crafted a comprehensive crisis communication strategy, emphasizing accountability, community support, and resilience [6]. Despite systemic failures highlighted by investigations, the incident prompted calls for stricter regulations and improved disaster preparedness. Ultimately, Khacchi Bhai's commitment to rectifying shortcomings and prioritizing customer safety demonstrated their dedication to regaining public confidence and fostering long-term resilience.

Author Biography

Mamunor Rashid is a graduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. E-mail: maunor.rashid@usm.edu

Rubaiya Zannat is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: rubaiya.zannat@usm.edu

Hasan Mahmud Faisal is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: hasanmahmud.faisal@usm.edu

Mohammad ASaduzzaman, a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: mohammad.asaduzzaman@usm.edu

Sherin Farhana Moni is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. E-mail: sherinfarhana.moni@usm.edu

Salauddin Ahmed is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: salauddin.ahmed@usm.edu

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