BREAKING THE SILENCE: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE PLIGHT OF FRAUD VICTIMS IN DAVAO REGION, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract :

This case study aimed to understand the plight of fraud victims in Davao Region, highlighting how they fell into the trap of fraud, its impacts, their coping mechanisms, and insights. The study utilized a qualitative research design using multiple case study, with seven individuals who are victims of fraud chosen through purposive sampling, utilizing an interview guide with open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis tool. Across the seven cases, several interrelated themes explain how participants became vulnerable to fraud. Participants 1-6 were primarily deceived by referrals and, more particularly, attractive offers, which underscores the significant influence of trust in social networks and the persuasive appeal of promised high financial returns. Additionally, profound and consistent across all the participants' cases are the psychological, emotional, and behavioural impacts of their victimization. Significant psychological distress, such as disappointment, remorse, and self-blame, which is often accompanied by physical strain, was reported by the participants. The participant's coping strategy varied but converged around seeking solace in social support networks, engaging in constructive daily activities, and pursuing redress through formal reporting, though silence emerged in cases which is influence by personal relationships. More importantly, the participants' reflection on their insights highlights the protective value of vigilance, advocating for practices such as delaying trust, authenticating documents, and resisting emotional attachments to enticing offers and opportunities. It also generated preventive wisdom and commitment to collective advocacy of positioning

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personal narratives as powerful contributions to broader anti-fraud efforts and consumer education.

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1. Introduction

Fraud victimization constitutes a severe and growing socio-economic and public-health concern, as victims not only experience immediate financial loss but also long-lasting psychological distress, including anxiety, shame, and depressive symptoms (DeLiema *et al.*, 2021). When these harms remain unaddressed, victims face an increased likelihood of revictimization, social withdrawal, and diminished trust in digital and financial institutions, particularly among vulnerable groups such as older adults (FBI IC3, 2023). These individual impacts scale into broader systemic consequences: the cumulative health, welfare, and law-enforcement demands associated with fraud escalate public spending and burden agencies already challenged by resource constraints (Button & Cross, 2023). Furthermore, reduced consumer confidence and persistent emotional trauma can contribute to weakened market participation and long-term financial instability if appropriate preventive, financial-remediation, and psychosocial support mechanisms are not implemented (Kassem, 2024).

Stigmatization is one of the significant dimensions of fraud victims' experiences, as individuals who fall prey to scams are often judged or even blamed by those around them, leading to heightened feelings of shame and isolation (Cross, 2023). These profound experiences are frequently overlooked, resulting in victims' perspectives being marginalized within broader discussions of fraud. Amplifying these unheard voices is therefore essential to fully understand the complexity of fraudulent practices. The nuanced tactics of perpetrators are equally crucial to examine, as research shows that fraud schemes strategically exploit human vulnerabilities, cognitive biases, and emotional triggers, which are often revealed through victims' detailed narratives of their encounters (Button & Cross, 2023). Victim insights are of great value for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies, strengthening cybersecurity measures, and designing personalized support services that address the psychological and social impacts of fraud (Kassem, 2024). By foregrounding the lived experiences of those affected, the goal is to reduce stigma, encourage reporting, and contribute to a collective effort to combat fraud, ultimately promoting individual safety and enhancing cybersecurity in an increasingly digital world.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive examination of the experiences of fraud victims, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and promote empathy, awareness, and effective social responses to the diverse and difficult challenges faced by these victims. Recent research shows that fraud victimization triggers complex emotional trajectories, including shame, self-blame, and stress that unfold dynamically across the stages of exploitation, underscoring the importance of capturing victims' own

narratives (Wang, Zhang, & Qian, 2024). Moreover, other studies have found that even after the financial loss is settled, many victims continue to suffer long-term psychological harm such as loneliness and reduced trust in others (Cross *et al.*, 2016). Through the exploration of these lived experiences, this research seeks to shed light on the human dimensions of victimization and ultimately aims to inform policies, interventions, and support systems that can mitigate the negative impacts of fraud on individuals and communities.

Fraudulent practices have continually grown through the advent of technology. Understanding the experiences of fraud victims is of global importance due to the widespread nature of online deception and its far-reaching consequences. Fraudulent acts committed online are not bound by geographical boundaries: perpetrators operate globally and target individuals and organizations across different jurisdictions (INTERPOL, 2024). A comprehensive examination of victims' experiences contributes to a collective understanding that transcends regional differences and provides knowledge applicable to diverse cultural and economic contexts. The economic impact of fraud extends beyond individual victims and substantially affects global systems: persistent online fraud erodes consumer trust, distorts market efficiency, and increases operational costs for businesses (Chy, 2024). As fraudulent practices evolve, their impact spreads across financial systems, which can severely impact businesses and even governments, making this issue not only a personal dilemma but rather a societal concern that must not be overlooked.

While significant strides have been made in understanding this research, a notable research gap persists, particularly in the nuanced exploration of factors influencing victimization of fraud victims. Despite the increasing amount of research on scams and fraud-related crimes, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the stigmatization that victims face. Most studies have concentrated on the mechanics of fraud, the psychology behind scammers, and the financial repercussions for victims. However, there has been relatively little focus on the social and psychological effects that linger after someone has been victimized, particularly regarding the stigma associated with being deceived. While we know that fraud can take a heavy emotional and financial toll, there is limited exploration into how this stigma impacts victims' mental health, self-esteem, and relationships with others.

Much of the existing research comes from Western societies, where victim-blaming is common, leaving a lack of insight into how cultural factors might influence the stigmatization of fraud victims in non-Western contexts. Additionally, the media's role in either perpetuating or alleviating this stigma has not been thoroughly examined. Public narratives often portray victims as gullible or careless, but we still need to understand how these representations shape societal attitudes and affect victims' recovery processes. Clearly, there is a need for more research on how victims cope with stigma and which support systems - both formal and informal - are effective in mitigating its negative effects. Addressing these gaps is essential for creating comprehensive support frameworks that not only help victims recover financially but also address the

social and psychological aspects of their experiences. By expanding research in these areas, scholars can play a vital role in promoting better victim advocacy and efforts to destigmatize those affected by fraud.

The aim of this research is primarily to shed light and amplify the unheard voices of people who fall victim to fraudulent practices. This may contribute to unravelling the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of fraud victimization as well as examining the immediate and long-term consequences that go beyond financial losses. Moreover, this will also demonstrate the importance of examining how victims of fraudulent practices cope with their experience, which is critical to understanding resilience and adaptation in the face of adversity. Gaining insights into the perspectives of fraud victims will also reveal their reflections, their lessons learned and any new insights that arise from their experiences. By obtaining this knowledge, the aim of this research is to provide valuable knowledge that can serve as a basis for prevention measures, support mechanisms and broader social awareness.

Self-Control Theory, as proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), provides a foundational perspective for understanding both the behaviours of fraud perpetrators and the susceptibility of victims, suggesting that individuals with lower levels of self-control are more likely to engage in behaviours that prioritize immediate gratification over long-term consequences. In the context of fraud, perpetrators exploit opportunities for personal gain with little regard for the welfare of their victims, while victims with impulsive tendencies or low self-control may fail to critically evaluate offers or requests, thereby increasing their vulnerability (Holtfreter *et al.*, 2008).

Complementing this framework, Routine Activity Theory emphasizes that victimization is influenced by the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979), suggesting that fraud victims are more likely to be targeted when situational and environmental conditions facilitate exploitation. Additionally, the Theory of Planned Behaviour posits that individuals' attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms shape their decision-making and actions (Ajzen, 1991), which can help explain why some victims engage in risky behaviours, such as sending money or disclosing personal information, despite the potential for harm. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of fraud victimization, integrating personality traits, cognitive processing, situational risk factors, and social influences to elucidate why individuals fall prey to fraudulent schemes.

The aim of this research is primarily to shed light and amplify the unheard voices of people who fall victim to fraudulent practices. Participants of this study were asked a series of questions to comprehensively understand their experience.

1.1 Research Questions

Research Questions include:
1) How did the study participants become fraud victims?;
2) What impacts do fraud experiences have on the victims?:

3) How did study participants cope with the consequences of fraud experience?;
4) What lessons or reflections have participants gained from fraud experience?
5) What similarities and differences can be drawn from the experiences of study participants?

By obtaining this knowledge, the aim of this research is to provide valuable knowledge that can serve as a basis for prevention measures, support mechanisms and broader social awareness.

Despite the comprehensive nature of the study, several limitations and delimitations should be acknowledged. One notable rule lies in the potential bias introduced by the qualitative nature of the research design. The study heavily relies on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional nature poses a limitation in capturing the dynamic and evolving essence of the process of victimization of fraud over time. The delimitation of the study is evident in the constrained number of study participants, a practical consideration influenced by resource limitations. While efforts are made to ensure diversity in the participant pool, the study's generalization may be limited to the sample's specific demographic and contextual characteristics.

Furthermore, the analysis process, while rigorous, is subject to the constraint of available analytical tools and methodologies, potentially restricting the depth of insights that could be extracted from the data. Despite these limitations and delimitations, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the victim's journey, offering a foundation for future research to build upon and address these constraints for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The plight of fraud victims is a significant issue that often gets overlooked in discussions about crime and victimization. This dissertation aims to shed light on how societal perceptions and reactions to these victims affect their psychological well-being, social relationships, and willingness to report such crimes. By exploring the process of their victimization, this study seeks to uncover the barriers that victims face when trying to seek justice and support, which can lead to underreporting and further victimization.

The findings from this research are important for several reasons. First, they can provide valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and organizations that support victims. Understanding the unique challenges faced by fraud victims can help develop more empathetic and effective interventions, ultimately reducing the stigma attached to them and improving their access to both legal and emotional support. Additionally, this study will enrich academic literature on victimology by expanding our understanding of how stigma functions in the context of non-violent crimes like scams and fraud. By addressing the societal factors that contribute to this stigma, the research aims to raise public awareness and encourage a shift in how these victims are perceived and treated. Ultimately, the goal is to advocate for a more inclusive and supportive framework that addresses the needs of fraud victims, fostering their recovery and resilience. This research will also contribute to the realization of Item Number 16 (Peace

Justice, and Strong Institutions) of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, as adapted by the Philippine government.

2. Literature Review

Although many online frauds are tailored to appeal to specifically targeted individuals - a phenomenon known as 'spear phishing' it is possible for anyone to be approached and to become a victim of online fraud. Some researchers have observed that socio-demographic factors are not a reliable predictor of fraud victimization because the perpetrators of fraud target people from any background. Accordingly, demographics alone cannot be used as a reliable predictor of whether or not a person is likely to become a fraud victim (Emami *et al.*, 2019). The rise of digital scams, including investment fraud and phishing schemes, is attributed to the increasing sophistication of organized crime groups that exploit technological advancements to target victims worldwide. In 2023 alone, scammers reportedly stole over $1 trillion from individuals globally, emphasizing the scale of this problem (INTERPOL, 2024). Furthermore, a study on e-commerce fraud trends indicates that losses from online payment fraud are projected to exceed $48 billion in 2023, with North America accounting for over 42% of fraudulent transaction values. This trend underscores the vulnerability of consumers in an increasingly digital marketplace where fraudsters employ advanced techniques to deceive potential victims (Mastercard, 2024).

Research also points to the psychological mechanisms behind fraud victimization. A systematic review identified that individuals often rely on heuristic processing when confronted with potential scams, making them more susceptible to fraud (Chen & Yang, 2023). This aligns with earlier findings that suggest low self-control and impulsivity are significant predictors of fraud victimization (Chen & Yang, 2022).

Recent literature continues to address the significant impact of online fraud on victims, emphasizing not only the financial losses but also the emotional and psychological toll it takes. Each year, millions of individuals fall prey to various forms of online scams, which can lead to long-lasting effects on their mental health and well-being. A study by Buse *et al.* (2023) highlights that victims of online fraud often experience anxiety, depression, and a loss of trust in others, which can hinder their ability to form relationships and engage in everyday activities. This research underscores the necessity for comprehensive victim support services that address both the psychological and financial repercussions of fraud.

Additionally, Holtfreter *et al.* (2021) discuss the evolving nature of online fraud, noting that technological advancements have made it easier for fraudsters to perpetrate scams on a larger scale. They argue that the anonymity provided by the internet complicates law enforcement efforts and highlights the need for better training for police and victim support services to effectively assist those affected. Moreover, McGuire & Dowling (2020), emphasize that while online fraud has historically been deprioritized by law enforcement agencies, recent increases in reported cases necessitate a shift in focus.

Their findings suggest that victims often feel unsupported by existing systems, which are ill-equipped to handle the complexities of cybercrime. Lastly, a report from the Federal Trade Commission indicates that consumer complaints regarding fraud have surged, with many victims reporting feelings of shame and isolation after being scammed. The report calls for enhanced public awareness campaigns and improved resources for victims to navigate the aftermath of fraud effectively (Federal Trade Commission, 2023). Each year, millions of individuals worldwide find themselves victims of online fraud. Whether it is responding to a fraudulent email with bank account details or being defrauded through a false relationship, fraud can have a life-changing impact on an individual victim. For many victims, this goes beyond pure monetary losses and impacts their physical and emotional health and well-being. Historically, fraud has not been the priority of police or government agencies; however, increased developments in technology mean that fraud is affecting a greater number of victims than ever before. The online nature of many fraudulent approaches carries with it a new set of unique challenges associated with the policing and prevention of online fraud, and victim support services are currently not well equipped (if even in existence) to deal with the aftermath of victimization (Cross, 2019).

3. Methods

This section presents the method and procedures employed in this study, including the research participants, materials and instruments, and design and procedures.

3.1 Case Units

The case units in this study, a typical approach for a multi-case analysis, involve an in-depth and contextually rich investigation of multiple instances or cases. The study comprised of (7) seven cases who were all victims of different types of fraud; (1) participant who is a victim of Syndicated Estafa/Swindling, (1) participant who is a victim Government-related Fraud, (1) participant who is a victim of Online Shopping Fraud, (1) participant who is a victim of Phishing/Social Engineering Fraud, (1) participant who is a victim of Pyramiding Scam, (1) participant who is a victim of Loan Scam/Lending Fraud, and (1) participant who is a victim of Estafa-General Fraud. Participants were identified through personal referrals from the researcher's personal acquaintances within the Davao Region. The selection process does not necessarily require any time frame during which the participant experiences fraud. The classification of participants was based on the specific nature of the fraudulent acts committed against them, ensuring a diverse and representative sample across different types of fraud.

In this context, the selection procedure involved considering factors such as the type and nature of fraud committed, their educational background, and the amount involved in their victimization. Justification for using snowball sampling could be grounded in the need to capture the heterogeneity of experiences within the target population by having to contact the study participants through the researcher's and

participants' referrals and phone numbers. The literature on qualitative research methods emphasizes the importance of snowball sampling in ensuring that the selected cases are information-rich and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the research question.

Following the inclusion criteria could involve selecting individuals who have been victimized of fraud once and/or multiple times, ensuring a firsthand understanding of the victimization process. Factors such as educational background and types of offenses were considered to achieve a diverse sample. Exclusion criteria may include excluding participants who are minors, with severe mental health conditions or those who have not been a victim of fraudulent activity. Participants' demographic diversity, such as age, gender, and economic diversity, was not considered, focusing the study on participants actively involved in the victimization process.

In qualitative case study research, the sample size is not predetermined and is typically guided by the depth and richness of the data as opposed to statistical representation. Yin (2018) further underscored that case studies aim to have in-depth contextualized knowledge of a phenomenon, and such is usually based on a few cases to enable extensive probing. Likewise, Creswell and Poth (2018) propose that a qualitative case study can include 1 to 5 cases when implementing a multi-case design, provided each case is well developed and yields meaningful insight into the research questions. Thus, having seven participants, each a unique case of fraud, falls well within the suggested range for a multi-case study, permitting both depth and comparative analysis. A purposive snowball sampling technique was employed to identify and recruit participants, which is particularly suitable for accessing hard-to-reach populations such as fraud victims. Given the sensitive and often stigmatized nature of fraud victimization, potential participants may be reluctant to self-identify or respond to general recruitment methods. Snowball sampling allows initial participants to refer other individuals who have experienced similar fraudulent incidents, thereby facilitating the identification of a sample with relevant lived experiences (Dosek, 2021; Ting, Memon, & Cheah, 2025). This approach not only ensured the inclusion of participants who met the study's criteria but also allowed for the development of trust and rapport, which is essential for eliciting in-depth narratives in qualitative research (Raifman *et al.*, 2022; Boelter *et al.*, 2023). By leveraging social networks and personal referrals, snowball sampling effectively captured a diverse range of victim experiences while maintaining the ethical and practical considerations necessary for researching sensitive topics.

3.2 Profile of Case Units

Table 1 presents this study's seven participants who were victims of fraud. One participant is a victim of Syndicated Estafa/Swindling, one is a victim of Government-related Fraud, another participant is a victim of Online Shopping Fraud, one participant who is a victim of Phishing/Social Engineering Fraud, one participant is a victim of Pyramiding Scam, one participant who is a victim of Loan Scam/Lending Fraud, and another one participant who is a victim of Estafa-General Fraud. Thus, participants of

this study answered the research questions through in-depth interviews to compile a thorough data set for the completion of this study.

Table 1: Profile of the Research Key – Informants

Assumed Names (Pseudonyms)	Age/Gender	Nature of Crime Experienced
Gab	Female/ 33 years old	Investment & Financial Scams *(Syndicated Estafa/Swindling)*
Ray	Male/ 38 years old	Government-related Fraud
April	Female/ 28 years old	Online & Cyber-Enable Fraud *(Online Shopping Fraud-Misrepresentation Counterfeit Product Scam)*
Orm	Female/ 26 years old	Online & Cyber-Enable Fraud *(Phishing/Social Engineering Fraud)*
May	Female/ 41 year old	Investment & Financial Scams *(Pyramiding Scam)*
Cel	Female/ 37 years old	Investment & Financial Scams *(Loan Scam / Lending Fraud)*
Ling	Female/ 31 years old	Investment & Financial Scams *(Estafa-General Fraud)*

3.3 Materials and Instruments

A researcher-made interview guide questionnaire was utilized as an instrument to gather the relevant data needed to understand the complexity of becoming a victim of fraud. The said interview guide questionnaire was validated by five internal and one external validator, who are experts in the field of criminal justice, to ensure accuracy and reliability of the instrument. The study's methodological choices aim to provide a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the factors contributing to collective effort in combatting fraud and positive transformations within the criminal justice system.

Several tools and techniques enhanced the data collection process and facilitated meaningful discussions during the in-depth interview. Firstly, a well-crafted interview guide is crucial, providing a structured framework with open-ended questions to guide the conversation while allowing for participant-driven discussions. Additionally, audio or video recording equipment was utilised to capture nuances, expressions, and interactions, aiding in the later stages of transcription and analysis. Ultimately, the choice of tools aligns with the research objectives, ensuring that they enhance rather than impede the natural flow of the discussions.

3.4 Design and Procedure

This study employs a case study research design, which is ideally suited for exploring in-depth the multifaceted and context-specific experiences of fraud victims. Case study methodology enables researchers to explore "how" and "why" questions in real-life settings (Yin, 2020), allowing for rich, detailed narratives of psychological, emotional, and social impacts. By adopting a multi-case design, the research facilitates cross-case comparison, enabling the identification of both shared themes and unique variations

among the seven fraud victims, thereby enhancing analytical robustness (Viera, 2024). Moreover, case study research inherently supports the integration of multiple sources of data such as interviews, documents, and perhaps artefacts or correspondence, strengthening the credibility and validity of the findings through methodological triangulation (Salmons *et al.*, 2023). This design choice provides both depth and flexibility, making it uniquely capable of capturing the complexity of fraud victimization while generating actionable insights for theory, policy, and practice.

Before initiating the interviews, obtaining ethical approvals and permissions from relevant authorities is crucial. The researcher ensured that the research aligns with ethical guidelines, emphasizing respect for the rights and well-being of the victims and establishing rapport with them to facilitate a smooth and secure process. An in-depth interview was one approach that was undertaken in order to gather all information from the research informants. The in-depth dialogue is designed to obtain a vivid picture of the participant's mindset on the research topic (Mack *et al.*, 2005).

During the interview, maintain a non-judgmental and empathetic demeanour. Pose open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses and explore the nuances of their experiences. Listen actively, ask for clarifications when needed, and be mindful of non-verbal cues. Utilize probing techniques to delve deeper into specific aspects of their journey from victimization to recovery. Qualitative data analysis methods, such as thematic analysis, were used to identify patterns and themes within the collected narratives. Maintain rigor and transparency throughout the analysis process, documenting decisions made during coding and interpretation.

In this study, the data collected from the seven fraud victims were analyzed using thematic analysis in combination with cross-case analysis, providing both in-depth understanding and comparative insight across cases. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to systematically identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning within the qualitative data, highlighting recurring themes in victims' emotional, cognitive, and social experiences of fraud (Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Cross-case analysis was then employed to compare and contrast these themes across the seven cases, identifying both shared experiences, such as trust exploitation and regret, and unique responses, including diverse coping strategies and recovery trajectories (Pedersen & Blok, 2024). This dual approach ensures that the findings are both richly descriptive of individual experiences and analytically robust, revealing patterns that can inform theory, policy, and practice in fraud prevention and victim support. The use of case study design further supports this methodology by situating each participant's narrative within its real-life context, enhancing the depth and relevance of the analysis (Yin, 2020).

Ethical considerations are paramount in this study, with informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. As granted approval by the UM Ethics Review Committee with certification number UMERC-2025-106. Use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants is made, thus avoiding risks such as confidentiality breach or reputational harm. An informed consent form also ensures that the vulnerability of participants as fraud victims is considered in the study.

The research adheres to ethical guidelines concerning treating fraud victims, acknowledging their fear of judgement from becoming a fraud victim. Utilizing interview questionnaire that uses language the participants fully understand and assuring that risk mitigation mechanism such as counseling referrals, are utilized during and after their interview to ensure the participants' emotional and psychological safety. Approval was sought from relevant institutional review boards or ethical committees. The implications and applications of the research findings are significant, providing insights for policymakers in crafting support programs to enhance the healing process of fraud victims. The research outcomes will be disseminated through publications in academic journals, presentations at conferences, and sharing results with stakeholders in the criminal justice system.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 How the Study Participants became Fraud Victims

The participants shared their sentiments regarding the various ways used by their fraudster, which made them vulnerable and eventually led them to fall victim to the trap of fraud victimization. Across the cases, the victimization of six of them was tied to referrals and attractive offers. However, one case deviated, and cited emotional attachment as the reason for his/her victimization. These insights revealed that fraud victims are not simply naive, but rather driven by motivations which pushed them to the pits of victimization. Their experiences shed light on the fact that fraud victimization arises not only from ignorance, but it is a complex interplay between various factors, such as the manipulation of both rational and emotional aspects of human behavior. These are just some of the nuances of victims' vulnerabilities that fraudulent criminals capitalize in committing fraud or scams.

Table 2: Themes and Core Ideas on How the Study Participants became Fraud Victims

Emerging Themes	Core Ideas
Deceived by referrals and attractive offers	• Informants reported feeling reassured when a product or service was recommended by someone they knew (IDI_1). • Attractive sales and promotional offers influences informant's purchasing decision despite potential risk (IDI_3). • Trusted referrals from friends and family, which led them to become fraud victims (IDI_5). • The desire to take advantage of deals made participants vulnerable to misrepresentation and scams (IDI_4).
Limited awareness and misplaced confidence	• Participants acknowledged being influenced by persuasive sales tactics or promotional offers (IDI_4). • Relied on one's judgement without verifying the legitimacy of the offer (IDI_1). • Expressed regret for not conducting proper research beforehand (IDI_5). • Previous positive experience increased their confidence in similar transactions (IDI_6).

Being overly trusting and emotional attachment	• Trusted the fraudster and ignored warning signs due to emotional attachment (IDI_7). • Felt reassured by the fraudster's persuasion scheme (IDI_1). • Acted impulsively to please or satisfy one's desire to own the item posted in social media (IDI_3). • Relied on their affection as a reason to continue transactions despite doubts (IDI_4).
Misled by convenience, investment goals, and blind affection	• Pursued the transaction because it seemed convenient and easy (IDI_1). • Attracted by promises of high returns or profitable investments (IDI_5). • Both emotional and financial motivations made them vulnerable to deception (IDI_6). • Feeling pressured to act quickly because of the fraudster's persuasion (IDI_4).

Table 2 presents the consolidated themes regarding the participants' way of falling into the trap of fraud victimization. During the data analysis, four principal themes emerged, capturing the overarching patterns that reflect the mechanisms by which they were misled and exploited.

4.1.1 Deceived by Referrals and Attractive Offers

The first theme that arose in the description of the participants with regard to how they became victims of fraud is being "Deceived by Referrals and Attractive Offers". It is revealed that most of the participants were swayed by their acquaintances' referrals, who had first experienced those offers, which gives seemingly good benefits from the offers of the fraudster. The involvement of trust minimized the participants' scepticism regarding the offer and eventually contributed to their fast decision-making, which resulted in their vulnerability to becoming a fraud victim.

Some of the participants mentioned that they were introduced to those offers by their friends, colleagues, and even family members whom they trust, and since someone they knew had already benefited from that attractive offer, their initial hesitation was eliminated. This reflects the psychological principle of social proof, where individuals look to trusted peers or their social circle for cues on how to behave - especially in uncertain or high-risk situations (Lin, Ng, Sun, & Wang, 2025; Voigt, Schlögl, & Groth, 2021). Recent studies show that social proof via peer recommendations, likes, and positive comments significantly increases consumers' impulsive buying on social-commerce platforms (Lin *et al.*, 2025).

Moreover, the desire to take advantage of attractive offers and deals, particularly those promoted as "limited time only", also influences participants' buying decisions despite potential risks. Time-limited promotions, discounts, and urgency cues have been shown to trigger immediate, less-deliberative decision making, increasing impulse purchases and susceptibility to fraudulent or low-quality offerings (Lyu, Gao, & Zhang, 2025; Online promotion effects under time limitation, 2023). By combining social proof with urgency and scarcity cues, fraudsters can more effectively "nudge" potential victims

into impulsive decisions; the presence of trusted referrals reduces scepticism, while time pressure diminishes critical evaluation. This dual influence helps explain why some victims proceed with fraudulent purchases even when warning signs are present (Voigt *et al.*, 2021; Lyu *et al.*, 2025).

4.1.2 Limited Awareness and Misplaced Confidence

The second theme that emerged from the description of the participants regarding how they became victims of fraud is having "Limited Awareness and Misplaced Confidence". A shared pattern of being easily persuaded by persuasive sales tactics, a lack of scrutiny towards offers and relying on previous experiences contributed to the victimization of most of the participants. Their narrative reveals how certain factors, such as opportunity, trust and emotional and psychological vulnerabilities, play a vital role in creating a conducive environment for fraud schemes.

Ignorance is often associated with susceptibility to becoming a victim. Consumers are often victimized by fraudsters who exploit this psychological vulnerability. As recounted by one of the participants, the fraudster mimicked an authority which promotes offers that would expire for a short period of time, which compelled them to make an on-the-spot decision, which takes away their chance to verify the legitimacy of the offer. This psychological and emotional manipulation, particularly framed within financial insecurity and aspirational goals, can cloud one's judgment and increase susceptibility to deceit (Langenderfer & Shimp, 2001). Additionally, research by Cross and Smith (2017) on people who are repeatedly victimized by fraud reveals that their prior experiences, which resulted in a positive outcome, decreased their vigilance, especially when fraudsters wait for a certain period of time to establish rapport and trust towards their victim before consummating the final fraudulent act. This "trust investment" becomes a psychological barrier to skepticism and a powerful tool of manipulation.

4.1.3 Being Overly Trusting and Emotional Attachment

The third theme that emerged from the participants' narrative on how they became victims of fraud is "Being "Overly Trusting and Emotional Attachment". Most of the time, a fraud victim's decision is shaped by the interplay of emotional factors such as their bonds with the persons close to them and their impulsive desires, which is highlighted in this theme. The participant's narrative illustrates that their rational judgement and capacity to recognize warning signs are often clouded by emotional attachment, which eventually resulted in their victimization.

Some of the participants admitted that the trust they had developed with their fraudster through their repeated interactions is the reason why certain warning signs or red flags were overlooked by them. As stated by Whitty and Butchanan (2020), fraudulent criminals deliberately exploit emotional vulnerability and emotional trust to create compliance and reduce skepticism. This was supported by Cross, *et al.* (2016), stating that

fraudsters are often perceived by their victims as part of their social or emotional circle, leading them to reinterpret red flags as misunderstanding rather than deliberate deceit.

Acting on their impulses when buying things online has also been admitted by the participants, especially whenever they see "on sale" promos, which are most of the time available for a limited time only. This creates a sense of excitement towards the participants with their desire to acquire such items, which in effect blocks their ability to discern in their purchasing decisions. As Darmawan & Gatheru (2021) point out, people frequently shop not out of necessity but for the joy of acquiring something new or interesting. This tendency becomes even stronger when promotions and visually appealing advertisements are pushed on social media platforms. In such cases, decisions are less about rational planning and more about being carried away by emotion and instant gratification. Social media adds another layer to this behaviour, since users often share opinions or experiences about their purchases, which in turn shapes how others choose to buy (Jabeen *et al.*, 2024).

In some of the participants, the excitement of acquiring their desires online through promos is not the factor in their victimization but is rather influenced by their affection with the person who defrauded them. Despite the initial doubts, these emotional ties caused them to have difficulty in walking away. This shows how strong personal bonds can blur the line between simple mistakes and deliberate deceit, leaving individuals unsure whether they are being misled (Munton & McLeod, 2023). Fraudsters often take advantage of this by building emotional closeness, knowing it can keep their targets compliant. For many victims, this reliance on emotion rather than logic made it harder to break free, showing that vulnerability to fraud does not come only from poor judgment but also from the power of human relationships and trust.

4.1.4 Misled by Convenience, Investment Goals, and Blind Affection

The final theme that emerged from the participant's description on how they became victims of fraud is being "Mislead by Convenience, Investment Goals, and Blind Affection". This theme is a reflection of humans' hedonistic characteristic of seeking pleasure by choosing convenience in something that we desire. Coupled with our goals and emotional impulses, this underscores the complexity of a person's motivation in making impulsive decisions, which can ultimately result in victimisation.

Participants admitted that they were easily persuaded by transactions that promised ease and convenience, though this often discouraged them from exercising due diligence. Convenience was commonly equated with credibility in online settings, as smooth processes created an illusion of trustworthiness (Cross *et al.*, 2016; Buil-Gil *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, many were lured by offers of high returns and quick profits, overlooking risks in favor of potential gains, an opportunity bias frequently exploited in investment fraud (Button *et al.*, 2017). The rise of social media further amplified this vulnerability through fabricated success stories (Whitty, 2019), while financial hardships made individuals more receptive to quick-profit promises as a means of relief (Reurink, 2018).

4.2 Impacts of Fraud Experience on the Victims

The participants' narratives revealed the drastic and lasting impacts of victimization on their lives. Consistent across all cases is the psychological, emotional and behavioral impacts of their victimization. All of them shared that their ability to trust other people has been significantly affected. Additionally, all of them shared that their fraud victimization have also been a factor in their heightened prudence and critical thinking on their future decisions.

Table 3: Themes and Core Ideas on the Impacts of Fraud Experience on the Victims

Emerging/Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Developed trust issues and heightened vigilance	• More prudent and/or cautious in dealing with strangers or online offers (IDI_3) • The tendency to become skeptical of referrals and recommendations from acquaintances (IDI_1). • Carefully verify the legitimacy of information before making transactions (IDI_2). • Experience of fraud permanently changed their approach to trust and decision-making (IDI_4).
Induced psychological distress, disappointment, and physical strain	• Experience anxiety that affected daily routines and decisions (IDI_1). • Disappointment in themselves for trusting the wrong person (IDI_7). • Being scammed had lasting effects on both mental and physical well-being (IDI_4). • Felt betrayed by people or systems and lead to sadness and a sense of personal failure (IDI_2).
Strengthened prudence and critical judgement	• To be extra careful before trusting people or offers (IDI_3). • Verifying information thoroughly before making decision and avoid being impulsive in buying items posted in social media (IDI_4). • Evaluate the credibility of referrals more carefully to guide future actions (IDI_1). • Past experience have made them more alert and vigilant in daily life (IDI_7).
Experienced regret and self-reproach	• Feeling guilty for trusting the wrong person (IDI_7). • Regret over decisions that led to financial loss (IDI_2). • Blamed themselves for being careless or naïve (IDI_3). • Internal frustration and sorrow for not verifying information and not being more cautions wishing to have acted differently (IDI_5).

Table 3 presents the impacts experienced by the participants after falling into the trap of fraud. Based on the participants' accounts, their lives have been drastically changed after the victimization. This reflection is evident in the four emerging themes identified during the data analysis.

4.2.1 Developed Trust Issues and Heightened Vigilance

One of the significant themes that emerged from the narratives of the victims of fraud regarding the impact of fraud on their lives is that they "Developed Trust Issues and Heightened Vigilance". The participants admitted that their experience of fraud drastically changed their perception and interaction with other people, especially towards strangers. Additionally, their personal and financial decision-making capabilities were one of the aspects in their life that were evidently reshaped as part of their adjustments after their victimization.

Several participants expressed that after experiencing fraud, they became more cautious and prudent in their dealings, particularly with strangers online. Fraud victimization often fosters skepticism toward digital platforms and heightens perceptions of risk in online transactions, leaving long-term psychological effects that shape how individuals approach unfamiliar offers (Button & Cross, 2017; Shao *et al.*, 2019). Many described becoming stricter in evaluating opportunities before engaging, reflecting a protective adaptation rooted in their experience. This skepticism extended beyond digital interactions, as participants also reported growing distrust toward referrals and recommendations, even from acquaintances. Such experiences eroded interpersonal trust and reduced reliance on informal social networks for decision-making, as noted by Cross *et al.* (2018) and Ganzini *et al.* (2021). Ultimately, adopting suspicion even toward once-trusted sources, emerged as a common strategy victims used to guard themselves against further exploitation.

Moreover, participants emphasized that one of the key changes after their victimization was the practice of carefully verifying the legitimacy of information before engaging in any transaction. They described adopting more thorough strategies such as cross-checking sources, reviewing online feedback, and consulting formal institutions as part of their validation process. This shift reflects findings that fraud victims often develop cognitive vigilance strategies to mitigate future risks (Whitty, 2020; Shao & Lee, 2020). For many, such vigilance extended beyond financial decisions to everyday life, becoming an ingrained part of their routines. Moreover, participants noted that fraud victimization fundamentally altered their approach to trust and decision-making, treating the experience as a turning point rather than an isolated event. This perspective resonates with evidence that fraud can deeply affect victims' sense of identity, emotional security, and ability to rebuild trust (Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020; Button *et al.*, 2022). Ultimately, their heightened caution and reflective stance illustrate how lessons from victimization are internalized as part of a "new normal."

4.2.2 Induced Psychological Distress, Disappointment, and Physical Strain

Another major theme which emerged from the narratives of the participants on how fraud victimization has impacted them is being "Induced with Psychological Distress, Disappointment, and Physical Strain". More than the financial losses that they had incurred from the victimization, their responses revealed a deep emotional disruption as well as enduring health consequences. These impacts highlight that aside from the

disruption of the victim's material and financial security, their psychological stability and physical well-being were also disrupted after the fraud victimization.

Participants described experiencing intense anxiety following their victimization, which disrupted their concentration, sleep, and even ordinary decision-making. Many recounted nightly disturbances and a lingering sense of apprehension, reflecting stress-related symptoms akin to post-traumatic responses that are frequently observed among fraud victims (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016; Cross, 2019). Alongside these emotional struggles, participants expressed deep disappointment in themselves for having trusted the wrong person, often internalizing blame for what they perceived as poor judgment. This self-blame eroded their confidence and self-esteem, reinforcing the belief that their victimization reflected personal weakness (DeLiema, 2018; Ganzini *et al.*, 2021). Together, these experiences highlight how fraud not only imposes psychological distress but also reshapes how victims see themselves, compounding their emotional pain with a diminished sense of self-worth.

Additionally, participants' accounts underscored that the impact of fraud extended beyond emotional suffering, leaving enduring effects on both mental and physical health. Many described stress-related ailments such as headaches and fatigue, which they linked to constant anxiety over financial losses and the fear of social stigma. These psychosomatic symptoms illustrate how psychological trauma translates into tangible health problems, a connection supported by existing research that identifies fraud-induced stress as a significant contributor to reduced quality of life (Button *et al.*, 2022; Shao *et al.*, 2019). Beyond the physical toll, participants also conveyed a profound sense of betrayal, not only by the perpetrators but by institutions they had once relied on for protection, including banks, law enforcement, and even trusted acquaintances. This erosion of trust reflects broader patterns observed in prior studies, where fraud victims experience humiliation, loss of social confidence, and diminished capacity to trust others (Cross *et al.*, 2018; Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020). For many, the combined weight of physical strain, emotional distress, and institutional disappointment deepened their feelings of inadequacy, making recovery from fraud a complex process that entailed grappling not only with financial harm but with fractured trust and identity.

4.2.3 Strengthened Prudence and Critical Judgement

Another theme that surfaced from the participants' accounts was how fraud experiences strengthened their prudence and sharpened their judgment in dealing with people and situations. Although the incident left them with pain and loss, many explained that it also reshaped how they approached everyday decisions, making them more deliberate and cautious. Instead of viewing themselves solely as victims, they described adopting new habits of critical evaluation, which now guide how they interact with others and manage their resources.

A common theme in participants' accounts was their renewed commitment to exercising greater caution before placing trust in people or offers, particularly in online spaces. Whereas they once admitted to being more open and easily persuaded, their

experience of fraud prompted the development of a habit to pause, question, and reflect before making commitments, illustrating how victimization often fosters protective adaptations that use caution as a form of self-preservation (Button & Cross, 2017; Shao & Lee, 2020). Rather than succumbing to paralyzing distrust, they redirected this vigilance into deliberate and thoughtful decision-making. Many also described adopting new practices of verification, such as reading reviews, assessing seller credibility, and consulting official sources, particularly to avoid impulsive purchases from social media promotions. These behavioral shifts align with evidence that fraud survivors tend to build digital literacy and fact-checking routines as safeguards against future risks (Whitty, 2020; Shao *et al.*, 2019). For most, these adjustments evolved into personal rules, reinforcing the belief that slowing down and carefully verifying information is essential for avoiding further harm.

Participants also described how they became more critical in evaluating referrals and recommendations, even those coming from friends or acquaintances. Whereas they once assumed such advice was inherently trustworthy, their experiences of fraud taught them that misplaced trust could result in harm, reflecting how victimization weakens reliance on informal trust networks and replaces blind acceptance with cautious appraisal (Cross *et al.*, 2018; Ganzini *et al.*, 2021). Alongside this shift, many recounted developing a heightened sense of vigilance in their daily lives, extending beyond financial matters to relationships, opportunities, and everyday routines. This "watchful eye" illustrates how fraud can permanently reshape one's worldview, embedding caution into ordinary decision-making (Button *et al.*, 2022; Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020). Although this alertness was borne from painful experiences, participants also interpreted it as a form of hard-earned wisdom that enabled them to move forward with greater discernment.

4.2.4 Experienced Regret and Self-Reproach

Another theme that emerged from the participants' narratives regarding the impact of fraud victimization on them was "Experiencing Regret and Self-Reproach". Beyond the financial losses, many described being weighed down by guilt and frustration, reflecting on how their own actions or choices contributed to their victimization. Their stories revealed how fraud not only strips away financial resources but also leaves lasting emotional scars tied to feelings of personal failure.

Several participants expressed feeling guilty for having trusted the wrong person, describing how the betrayal was intensified by the belief that they "should have known better," which made the pain deeply personal. This response reflects how victims often internalize responsibility, interpreting their experiences as failures of judgment rather than solely the result of manipulation (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016; DeLiema, 2018). The weight of misplaced trust became a significant source of emotional suffering, with many replaying the moment of deception in their minds. In addition, participants voiced regret over decisions that directly led to financial losses, recalling instances where a moment of hesitation might have changed the outcome but instead chose to proceed, choices that

continue to haunt them. Such rumination, marked by cycles of "what ifs" and self-blame, is a common response to fraud victimization (Cross, 2019; Ganzini *et al.*, 2021). For many, the regret extended beyond the monetary loss itself to the symbolic weight of what that money represented; security, opportunity, and stability that could no longer be recovered.

Also, participants frequently blamed themselves for being careless or naive, acknowledging that their trusting nature or lack of attention made them easy targets for deception. This self-reproach reflects how fraud victimization often damages self-concept, leaving individuals to view themselves as more vulnerable and less competent than before (Button *et al.*, 2022; Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020). Many also described intense frustration and sorrow over not verifying information or exercising greater caution, with hindsight regrets such as "if only I had double-checked" weighing heavily on them. Such counterfactual thinking, where victims imagine alternative actions and outcomes, often intensifies feelings of loss and shame and prolongs recovery (Whitty, 2020; Shao & Lee, 2020). Collectively, these experiences reveal that fraud reshapes not only financial circumstances but also victims' sense of self and worldview. While participants carried the enduring weight of regret, guilt, and sadness, they also emphasized how betrayal instilled new habits of caution, vigilance, and deliberate decision-making. In this way, fraud emerged not as a fleeting setback but as a turning point that left lasting marks of anxiety and self-doubt, while simultaneously cultivating hard-earned wisdom and protective strategies for navigating daily life.

4.3 Coping Mechanisms of Fraud Victims

The participants' narratives shared by the revealed various coping mechanisms after their victimization, However, despite the differences in their coping mechanisms, it is shown across all the cases that the emotional impact of their victimization were addressed mostly through seeking solace in social support, diversion through activities, and pursuing justice through reporting. Despite the uncertainty of the outcome, these coping mechanisms helped them feel a sense of control over the situation that they were in because of their victimization.

Table 4: Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanisms shared
by the Fraud Victims from the Consequences of Fraud Experience

Emerging Themes	Core Ideas
Seeking emotional support	• Turning to an intimate partner, friends, or family when feeling distress (IDI_1). • Confided and seeking advice from trusted individuals to make decisions (IDI_2). • Emotional support helped regain confidence (IDI_4). • Receiving comfort from loved ones reduces feelings of isolation (IDI_7).
Expressing despair and accepting reality	• Sharing feelings of sadness alleviates the pain of being scammed (IDI_1). • Acceptance gives a sense of peace despite the untoward event that happened (IDI_3). • Talking about struggles with the scam helped process emotions (IDI_6).

	• There is a need to embrace reality to stop dwelling on what cannot be changed (IDI_7).
Staying occupied to overcome emotional pain	• Relief from emotional distress by immersing in work and personal activities to divert attention (IDI_1). • Interacting with friends and family provided victims with activity and relief from dwelling on the scam (IDI_2). • Victims keep themselves busy to cope and heal with emotional pain (IDI_5). • Engaging in activities gradually helps move on from the scam experience (IDI_3).
Reporting to authorities to rectify fraudulent acts	• Reporting the fraud helped feel a sense of control over the situation (IDI_2). • Expressed relief after reporting to the legal authorities (IDI_3). • Official intervention regains confidence in their decision-making rather than dwelling on the loss (IDI_6) • Formal action made by the victims of a scam empowered them to move forward (IDI_7).
Coping with scams through policies	• Victims managed emotional stress through hope in government action (IDI_5). • Reassuring oneself that existing anti-fraud policies would help victims of scams (IDI_6). • Trusting authorities to act helps victims reduce anger and feelings of distress (IDI_2). • Prevention and accountability through policy gave the victims emotional strength to move on (IDI_3).

Table 4 presents the coping mechanisms utilized by the participants after falling into the trap of fraud. During their most vulnerable moment, emotional connection with significant individuals was one of the highlighted avenues through which their resilience grew. The data analysis revealed five emerging themes which reflects the their efforts in overcomming the aftermath of their victimization.

4.3.1 Seeking Emotional Support

The first theme that emerged from the participants' narratives on their coping mechanisms that helped them in overcoming the aftermath of their fraud victimization was "Seeking Emotional Support". Instead of facing the problem alone, most of the participants turned to their closest social circle, such as their partners, family, and friends, whenever the weight of guilt, regret, and anxiety felt overwhelming. Their narratives reflect the deep human need for connection, especially during vulnerable moments and highlighted how trusted relationships became a crucial part of their healing process.

One important way participants coped with the heavy emotional toll of fraud was by turning to partners, family members, or trusted friends for support. Confiding in others eased the burden of distress and restored a sense of safety that had been undermined by their experience, highlighting how close social ties can buffer psychological harm by providing reassurance and validation in moments of crisis (Lau *et al.*, 2017; Park & Lee, 2021). Beyond comfort, participants also stressed the importance of receiving advice and guidance from those they trusted when making decisions after fraud. Seeking counsel helped them slow down, consider alternatives, and regain

confidence in their ability to act. Such advice-seeking behaviors are known to reduce uncertainty while fostering a renewed sense of agency in those recovering from financial exploitation (Hafiz *et al.*, 2020). For many, the act of being heard and guided reinforced the belief that, despite deception, they were not powerless and could move forward with greater assurance.

Additionally, participants emphasized that emotional support from loved ones played a crucial role in helping them rebuild confidence after fraud. Words of encouragement functioned as emotional scaffolding, restoring a sense of self-worth that had been shaken by deception and counteracting the weight of self-blame, thereby fostering resilience and a more positive self-concept (Xiao *et al.*, 2020; Zhai *et al.*, 2023). They also described how comfort from trusted individuals alleviated feelings of isolation, which many identified as one of the most painful aspects of their experience. While fraud often left them feeling embarrassed and alone, sharing their story allowed them to reconnect and regain a sense of belonging. This aligns with research showing that social connectedness helps protect against the psychological harms of victimization, including shame and loneliness (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Through these supportive relationships, participants found relief from the isolating silence that fraud so often imposes, reminding them that they were not alone in their journey toward healing.

4.3.2 Expressing Despair and Accepting Reality

One of the most striking themes that emerged from the responses of the participants on how they cope with the impact of their fraud victimization is "Expressing Despair and Accepting Reality". By sharing their sadness with their partners, family, friends, the participants felt relieved from the emotional burden they carried after their victimization. Participants explained that expressing their emotions helped transform inner turmoil from a private and isolating struggle into a shared experience that others could acknowledge and understand. This reflects the emotional-approach coping framework, which emphasizes that expressing rather than avoiding emotions fosters healthier recovery by allowing individuals to process trauma more effectively and achieve better psychological adjustment (Stanton *et al.*, 2000; Austenfield & Stanton, 2004). Alongside expression, many participants described how acceptance of their situation brought a sense of peace despite the pain of their experience. By acknowledging that the past could not be changed and instead reframing it as a lesson for the future, they found a calmer way forward. Research shows that such acceptance not only validates feelings of sadness and betrayal but also enhances resilience and emotional regulation, enabling victims to reconcile with their circumstances and regain inner balance (Verywell Mind, 2008). For these participants, acceptance functioned as a turning point, allowing them to lay down the weight of constant struggle and move toward healing with greater clarity.

Moreover, participants shared that openly talking about their struggles helped them process difficult emotions, such as betrayal, shame, and confusion. By verbalizing their experiences, they were able to transform overwhelming feelings into clearer, more manageable narratives, fostering both clarity and self-compassion. This aligns with

evidence that labeling emotions can reduce their intensity and engage cognitive mechanisms that support regulation (Burklund *et al.*, 2014; Stanton *et al.*, 2000). In addition, participants emphasized the importance of accepting reality as a way to avoid being consumed by "what ifs" and "if onlys," which only deepened their pain. Instead, embracing their circumstances allowed them to shift focus from despair toward rebuilding their lives. As Folkman and Lazarus (1988) argue, when stressors are beyond one's control, emotion-focused strategies such as acceptance serve as adaptive tools that enable gradual healing and the restoration of stability.

4.3.3 Staying Occupied to Overcome Emotional Pain

Another striking theme that emerged from the participants' responses on how they cope with their fraud victimization is "Staying Occupied to Overcome Emotional Pain". The participants often find relief from their emotional distress by immersing themselves in work and other personal activities, which serves as a way to divert their attention from the pain of their fraud victimization.

Participants described coping through attention deployment, a form of emotional regulation that involves redirecting focus to alternative tasks to lessen the intensity of negative emotions. By engaging in purposeful daily activities, they were able to distract themselves from distress, temporarily restoring a sense of stability amidst the emotional toll of fraud. This strategy aligns with findings that distraction through meaningful activity can reduce stress and promote overall well-being (Sheppes *et al.*, 2017). Equally central to their recovery was the role of social interaction, particularly time spent with loved ones. Participants explained that companionship not only offered emotional validation but also kept them from dwelling excessively on their victimization. Social support is consistently recognized as one of the strongest protective factors against psychological distress, fostering resilience during crises (Taylor, 2020). Evidence from broader contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further shows that supportive networks buffer against helplessness and isolation (Saltzman *et al.*, 2020). For these participants, meaningful social connections served as both a healthy distraction and a space for emotional healing.

Furthermore, participants shared that beyond financial distractions, they deliberately kept themselves busy with structured tasks as a way to recover from the trauma of fraud. By maintaining routines and taking on new roles, they found a sense of purpose that eased self-blame and helped restore emotional balance. This form of positive distraction illustrates how purposeful activity not only offers temporary relief but also contributes to long-term psychological well-being (Leslie-Miller *et al.*, 2023). In this way, staying occupied became more than a short-term coping tool; it emerged as a vital step toward regaining stability after victimization. Over time, engagement in meaningful activities supported participants in moving forward, shifting from immediate comfort to deeper emotional restoration. Such activities allowed them to rebuild confidence, rediscover meaning, and reduce the enduring weight of trauma, reflecting evidence that adaptive strategies foster better outcomes than maladaptive

responses such as aggression (Chaaya *et al.*, 2025). Through purposeful engagement, participants demonstrated resilience, showing how staying occupied can play a transformative role in the healing process.

4.3.4 Reporting to Authorities to Rectify Fraudulent Acts

Another striking theme that emerged from the participants' responses on how they cope with the aftermath of fraud victimization is "Reporting to Authorities to Rectify Fraudulent Acts". The participants shared that reporting their cases to authorities gave them a sense of control over the situation.

Participants described how formally reporting their experience allowed them to shift from being passive sufferers to active agents in their pursuit of justice. This act of acknowledgment helped them regain a sense of agency, which is vital for psychological recovery, as perceived control can reduce helplessness and foster adaptive coping (Frazier *et al.*, 2017). In this way, reporting functioned not only as a legal step but also as a restorative process that empowered them to reclaim control over their misfortune. Many also expressed relief after contacting legal authorities, noting that the official recognition of their case validated their emotions and eased the internalized stigma often tied to fraud victimization (Button *et al.*, 2022). Entrusting their cases to legitimate institutions alleviated some of their emotional burden, as it reassured them that they were not alone in seeking accountability. For several participants, this validation marked the beginning of healing, helping shift self-blame toward a clearer recognition that responsibility lay with the perpetrator, not themselves.

Moreover, participants emphasized that official intervention played a crucial role in helping them regain confidence in their judgment and decision-making. Fraud had deeply shaken their self-trust, leaving many doubtful of their ability to make sound choices; however, legal and regulatory responses reassured them that mistakes could be corrected and that protective systems existed. Such interventions not only strengthened their trust in formal institutions but also restored a personal sense of efficacy, which is vital for resilience (Cross *et al.*, 2018). For many, this reinforcement interrupted cycles of self-doubt and rumination, restoring dignity and self-assurance. Equally, participants described how taking formal action through reporting empowered them to move forward after victimization. Rather than remaining immobilized by grief and regret, the act of pursuing justice shifted their focus from loss to recovery. Research suggests that such empowerment through action can transform trauma into opportunities for growth, contributing to post-traumatic development (Lloyd, 2021). Thus, for participants, reporting was not only about restitution but also about reclaiming resilience, confidence, and readiness to re-engage with life.

4.3.5 Coping with Scams Through Policies

Another theme which emerged from the narratives of the participants regarding their coping mechanisms on the consequences of their fraud experience is "Coping with Scams through Policies". The participants shared that their ability to handle the emotional stress

of their victimization was connected to having high hopes in government action and legal protections.

Participants found comfort in believing that their suffering would not go unacknowledged, drawing reassurance from the sense that authorities were actively working to address fraudulent activities. This perception of institutional support provided psychological safety by reinforcing the idea that justice mechanisms exist to protect victims, which is crucial since trust in institutions strongly shapes emotional recovery by fostering perceptions of fairness and social order (Murphy & McCarthy, 2018). For many, this belief transformed feelings of despair into a source of hope, laying a foundation for resilience. In addition, participants described coping by reassuring themselves that existing anti-fraud policies could offer protection and redress. Because fraud undermines both financial stability and personal trust, it often leaves victims vulnerable to lingering anxiety; however, knowing that consumer protection laws and cybercrime policies were in place reassured them that remedies were available. Confidence in such regulatory systems reduces uncertainty, validates grievances, and strengthens victims' ability to manage distress (Button *et al.*, 2022). This cognitive reassurance helped participants move beyond helplessness, fostering acceptance and renewed confidence in formal structures.

Additionally, participants described finding relief from overwhelming emotions by placing their trust in authorities to act on their behalf. When law enforcement or government agencies were perceived as responsive, victims were less likely to internalize guilt or self-blame, as institutional intervention helped restore confidence in themselves and in wider social systems (Cross *et al.*, 2018). By transferring responsibility to legitimate authorities, participants experienced reduced stress and regained emotional balance, which in turn strengthened their belief in their own capacity to recover. Many also highlighted how prevention and accountability through policy offered them the emotional strength to move forward. Anti-fraud measures were seen not only as deterrents but also as symbols of collective protection and social justice, reinforcing a sense of security. Research suggests that systematic accountability both prevents recurrence and supports post-traumatic growth in victims of financial crime (Lloyd, 2020). For participants, such policies acted as psychological anchors that reframed their experiences, shifting the focus from loss to resilience. In this way, government initiatives and legal frameworks served as more than practical safeguards; they became essential emotional resources that empowered victims to reclaim their lives.

4.4 Lessons and Reflections of the Fraud Victims

The participants' responses revealed the lessons and reflections they gained from their fraud victimization which highlighted the importance of being vigilant in their dealings and decision-making. Additionally, their victimization reflected suffering, yet it also revealed their resiliency and preventive wisdom, advocating for broader efforts to further strengthen anti-fraud policies.

Table 5: Themes and Core Ideas on the Lessons and Reflections Gained from Fraud Experience

Emerging Themes	Core Ideas
Practice discernment in making decisions	• Think twice and assess choices; if mistakes happen, accept them, learn from the experience, and be more prudent next time (IDI_1). • Practice self-control on social media, especially when sales or offers seem too good to be true (IDI_3). • Never trust someone right away. Always verify their identity and ensure they are legitimate before engaging further (IDI_4). • Don't let emotions completely take over (IDI_7).
Trust cautiously and verify legitimacy	• Never give complete trust and verify the legitimacy of transactions, more importantly, if the transaction is done via phone call (IDI_4). • Practice caution, and it is important to check the veracity of the transaction before giving full trust (IDI_1). • Trust wisely and verify every transaction or dealings (IDI_3). • Be skeptical or unexpected calls, text messages, or phone calls requesting personal or financial information (IDI_6).
Protect privacy and trust instincts	• Never be complacent and verify transactions carefully, even when the information seems convincing (IDI_2). • Always stay cautious and think before you click (IDI_3). • Protect personal information, verify whom you're dealing with, use strong passwords, and seek help if something seems off (IDI_5). • Avoid trusting someone immediately, especially if you've just met, as they might have hidden motives (IDI_7).
Avoid being too attached to investment opportunities	• Stay cautious of investment opportunities with unrealistic high returns, like way back then (IDI_1). • Double-check everything and check proper documentation to hold accountability (IDI_2). • Maintain caution and don't become attached to investments (IDI_4). • Keep a clear head and be extra careful and cautious when considering future investment (IDI_5).
Review and validate all transactions thoroughly	• There is a need to conduct a thorough background check on how stable the business of the person you are dealing with (IDI_1). • Double-check documents and verify the legitimacy of government representation (IDI_2). • Stay alert and never share personal information (IDI_5). • Never give your trust right away (IDI_7).
Provide cautionary advice to prevent future scams	• Better to strengthen information dissemination of fraud-related issues (IDI_1) • Proper information dissemination to promote awareness of fraud cases involving the government (IDI_2). • Awareness campaign must be given a premium, like the conduct of a seminar on fraud activities (IDI_4). • Educating the people about scam activities and how to avoid fraud tactics (IDI_6).
Availability of accessible hotlines for fraud-related concerns	• There should be a hotline that can be called immediately for suspected scam transactions (IDI_4). • It is important to regulate online scams (IDI_3). • It is important to have a dedicated contact hotline where victims of scams can easily communicate (IDI_5).

	• Quick access to hotlines for cyber scams and other fraud-related cases (IDI_2).

Table 5 presents the lessons and reflections gained by the participants from their fraud experience.

4.4.1 Practice Discernment in Making Decisions

The first theme that emerged from the participants' gained lessons and reflections from their fraud victimization is "Practicing Discernment in Making Decisions". The experience of fraud taught them the importance of thinking carefully and assessing decisions before acting.

Most participants acknowledged that their own impulsive choices had made them vulnerable to fraud, but recognizing this mistake also became an opportunity for growth. They emphasized the importance of prudence and discernment, framing these as both preventive measures and coping strategies. Reflective decision-making following negative experiences has been shown to foster resilience and reduce the likelihood of repeating risky behaviors (Park & Folkman, 2017), and for these participants, discernment evolved into a cautious practice shaped by painful yet instructive lessons. In addition, many described learning to exercise self-control on social media, particularly when confronted with enticing offers or seemingly unrealistic sales. As they noted, the digital environment is a prominent breeding ground for fraud, often preying on impulsiveness and greed. By learning to pause, question, and verify information online, participants developed strategies to resist manipulation and avoid repeating past mistakes. This aligns with research linking digital literacy and self-regulation to reduced susceptibility to online fraud (Kircaburun *et al.*, 2019). For the participants, cultivating digital self-control became an essential skill for navigating the risks of contemporary online life.

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of practicing verification and maintaining skepticism before extending trust to others. Many acknowledged that their vulnerability stemmed from placing too much confidence in strangers without confirming legitimacy, which left them open to manipulation. This reflection fostered a new awareness that due diligence is essential, with fraud prevention strengthened by adopting a "trust but verify" mindset that prioritizes evidence over appearances and reduces reliance on assumptions or emotional persuasion (Button *et al.*, 2022). Equally, participants recognized the necessity of managing emotions in decision-making, noting how unchecked feelings of urgency, fear, or excitement had clouded their judgment in the past. Since fraud often exploits emotional vulnerability, participants committed to tempering their emotions with rational thought, transforming painful lessons into a renewed discipline of reflective judgment. Research supports that controlling emotional impulses improves decision quality and lowers susceptibility to deception (Shao *et al.*, 2019). In this way, participants reframed their victimization not simply as loss, but as a catalyst for cultivating wiser, more grounded approaches to life's decisions.

4.4.2 Trust Cautiously and Verify Legitimacy

Another theme that emerged regarding the participants' insights is to "Trust Cautiously and Verify Legitimacy". Most of them reflected that learning to withhold full trust and carefully verifying the legitimacy of transactions, especially in online or phone calls, was one of the most important lessons that they learned from their unfortunate experience.

Participants recognized that blind trust had left them vulnerable to manipulation, as fraudsters often exploit urgency or false authority to pressure individuals into compliance. Fraud schemes frequently succeed by leveraging trust cues in remote communication, where opportunities for physical verification are absent (Modic & Anderson, 2018). With hindsight, participants reframed their understanding of trust as conditional rather than automatic, emphasizing verification as a crucial safeguard against exploitation. They further reflected on the importance of practicing caution by confirming the legitimacy of transactions before extending trust. Simple measures such as double-checking contact details, cross-referencing company credentials, or researching background information were identified as strategies that could help prevent misjudgment. Research similarly highlights that fraud susceptibility decreases when individuals adopt deliberate, critical approaches to decision-making before committing to transactions (Shao *et al.*, 2019). By integrating verification into their daily routines, participants transformed their painful experiences into a foundation for cultivating prudence and mindfulness in future interactions.

Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of trusting wisely and verifying every transaction, no matter how routine or harmless it may appear. They reflected that their fraud experience taught them that legitimacy should never be assumed, even in familiar contexts. Scammers often exploit ordinary interactions such as text messages, phone calls, and emails by embedding deception within familiar patterns of communication (Button *et al.*, 2022). As a result, discernment and consistent verification emerged not only as protective behaviors but also as transformative practices that reshaped how participants approached both financial and personal dealings. In addition, many shared that they had learned to be especially skeptical of unexpected requests for personal or financial information, particularly through unsolicited messages or calls. Recognizing that emotional triggers such as urgency, fear, or temptation are common manipulation tactics, participants resolved to respond with caution rather than compliance. This mirrors broader public safety advice that skepticism toward unverified digital communications significantly reduces risks of victimization (Lloyd, 2021). By adopting a stance of cautious trust, participants reframed their loss into an enduring lesson in vigilance, demonstrating that empowerment comes not from rejecting trust altogether but from balancing it with verification and healthy skepticism.

4.4.3 Protect Privacy and Trust Instincts

Another striking theme that emerged from the participants' insights is the need to "Protect Privacy and Trust Instincts". Most of the participants emphasized the

importance of never becoming complacent and verifying transactions carefully, even when they appear convincing.

Many participants admitted that their confidence in seemingly authentic communications, such as emails, offers, calls, or messages, led them to overlook subtle inconsistencies in detail or legitimacy. Fraudsters often design messages to exploit peripheral processing, bypassing deeper evaluation and encouraging quick compliance (Norris *et al.*, 2019). In hindsight, participants reframed these experiences into a lasting reminder that apparent credibility can be deceptive and that verification must always remain a personal responsibility. Another key insight they internalized was the necessity of exercising caution and resisting the impulse to click links or respond hastily. Several acknowledged regretting moments when excitement or uncertainty led them to act first and think later. Research highlights that raising awareness of these risks encourages protective behaviors, such as pausing and questioning before engaging with potentially harmful content (Bhagavatula *et al.*, 2020). Participants' reflections illustrate that thoughtful hesitation, rather than reflexive action, can serve as one of the most effective defenses against fraud.

Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of actively protecting their personal information through practices such as verification, strong passwords, and seeking help when something felt suspicious. They explained that safeguarding digital identity requires consistent routines like validating contacts, creating complex and unique passwords, and consulting trusted sources for reassurance. Practical cybersecurity guidance, such as that issued by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, reinforces these habits by advising individuals to guard personal data, verify unexpected requests, and adopt robust authentication processes (FDIC, 2024). For participants, these measures evolved from abstract recommendations into essential, life-preserving routines. They also reflected on the value of withholding immediate trust, particularly with new acquaintances, as many fraud incidents began with seemingly harmless contact that later turned manipulative. Fraudsters often employ social engineering tactics that exploit natural human tendencies toward initial trust as a way to bypass defenses (European Central Bank, 2024). These lessons emphasized that adopting cautious trust serves as a critical safeguard, preserving personal well-being and reducing vulnerability to deception in both digital and everyday interactions.

4.4.4 Avoid Being Too Attached to Investment Opportunities

Another theme which emerged from the narratives of the participants regarding their insights from their fraud victimization is "Avoiding Being Too Attached to Investment Opportunities". Most of the participants shared that they experience post-event shift from being optimistic to skepticism especially toward "can't lose" opportunities and unusually high or steady returns.

Participants noted that modern investment scams often create a false sense of credibility through fabricated platforms, staged profits, and social proof, tactics that drive quick commitment and escalating stakes. In hindsight, they recognized these as red flags,

echoing research that highlights how trust-building, pressure, and re-engagement are used to manipulate victims (Oak & Shafiq, 2025; Nataraj-Hansen, 2024). Such schemes rely on extraordinary return promises and social consensus cues, reinforcing victims' later advice to scrutinize "too good to be true" offers and independently verify claims (DeLiema *et al.*, 2023).

A key lesson participants stressed was avoiding emotional attachment to investments, as overconfidence often increases risk-taking and reduces information-seeking, leaving individuals more vulnerable (Karki, 2024). Broader studies show that personal traits like trust or need for certainty interact with situational pressures to lower resistance (Williams *et al.*, 2017). Reflections on "keeping a clear head" align with expert guidance to break emotional, commitment-driven cycles that fraudsters exploit, emphasizing the need to remain cautious and emotionally distant in financial decisions (Nataraj-Hansen, 2024; DeLiema *et al.*, 2023).

Most of them emphasized the importance of "double-checking everything" and demanding proper documentation as a safeguard against fraud. They acknowledged that failing to spot common red flags increases vulnerability (Kieffer & Mottola, 2016), while taking time to verify details and request evidence offers stronger protection across scam types (DeLiema *et al.*, 2023). This meant asking for verifiable documents, confirming legitimacy, and cross-checking disclosures with independent sources to ensure accountability. They also highlighted the value of maintaining a preventive stance like resisting urgency, questioning return promises, and delaying decisions until verification is complete. Research shows that scam education and awareness of persuasive tactics reduce engagement and lower victimization risk (DeLiema *et al.*, 2023), while regulatory guidance identifies warning signs like guaranteed returns and pressure to act immediately (FINRA, 2025). Studies further emphasize that scams succeed by exploiting emotions, making it vital to base decisions on verified evidence rather than persuasive narratives (Oak & Shafiq, 2025). For participants, cultivating emotional distance, tempering overconfidence, and embedding due diligence into everyday practice became essential strategies to prevent repeat victimization (Karki, 2024).

4.4.5 Review and Validate All Transactions Thoroughly

Another striking theme that emerged from the insights of the participants is "Reviewing and Validating all Transactions Thoroughly". Participants reflected that conducting thorough background checks on counterparties could have prevented their financial losses, particularly in cases where business stability or identity was misrepresented. Fraud often thrives when investors fail to validate the operational or financial standing of those they engage with (Button & Cross, 2017). Verifying business history, corporate legitimacy, and financial resilience helps narrow opportunities for deception, reducing exposure to fraudulent practices (Modic & Lea, 2019). These insights reinforced participants' belief that investigating ownership structures, reputational cues, and financial track records is a vital safeguard (Prentice, 2021), making systematic background checks a central lesson from their experiences. Equally, participants stressed

the importance of verifying documents and remaining alert to government impersonation, which is a common tactic used to create a false sense of legitimacy. Scams often rely on fabricated paperwork or fake regulatory approvals, succeeding when individuals accept these symbols of authority without verification (Reurink, 2018; Cross *et al.*, 2016). Participants emphasized the need to double-check documents and confirm official backing, echoing research that shows skepticism toward paperwork significantly reduces scam compliance (Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the participants highlighted the serious risk of sharing personal information too soon, noting that even small details, such as part of an ID number, can turn a potential scam into an actual financial loss (Jansen & Leukfeldt, 2016; Whitty, 2019). They recalled how fraudsters often used pressure tactics such as urgency, familiarity, or fear to trick individuals into handing over sensitive data (Cross *et al.*, 2018). From these experiences, participants stressed the importance of staying vigilant and withholding personal details until claims are independently verified. They also underscored the danger of giving trust too quickly. Fraudsters frequently rely on emotional manipulation or social engineering to accelerate trust, leaving individuals less likely to think critically and more prone to deception (Anderson *et al.*, 2024). Research confirms that delaying trust and verifying claims can significantly reduce scam compliance (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016), while placing confidence prematurely creates openings for exploitation (Modic & Lea, 2019). For participants, cautious trust-building emerged as one of the most effective strategies for safeguarding themselves against fraud.

4.4.6 Provide Cautionary Advice to Prevent Future Scams

Another theme that emerged from the participants' narratives of their lessons and insights from their fraud victimization is "Providing Cautionary Advice to Prevent Future Scams". Most of them reflect that their unfortunate experience could have been prevented if reliable information on fraud risks had been more accessible.

Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening information dissemination as a key safeguard against fraud. They reflected that proactive education and timely warnings equip individuals to recognize common scam tactics, thereby reducing susceptibility (Modic & Lea, 2019). Targeted efforts such as online alerts, newsletters, and community outreach were seen as effective in raising risk perception and lowering compliance with fraudulent requests (Pratt *et al.*, 2020). For participants, broad and continuous access to accurate fraud-related information was considered an essential deterrent against future scams. They also stressed the need for greater awareness of scams involving government impersonation, noting that these are among the fastest-growing fraud types. Victims often assume authenticity because of the perceived legitimacy of state symbols and official rhetoric (Reurink, 2018), and individuals are less likely to question such correspondence unless they have been pre-exposed to fraud awareness messages (Cross *et al.*, 2018). Participants' call for transparent communication and public reporting of government-linked scams reflects evidence that

raising awareness of impersonation typologies significantly reduces victimization risk (Button & Cross, 2017).

Participants recommended that awareness campaigns be prioritized and delivered through seminars or training activities, noting their effectiveness in strengthening resistance to fraudulent persuasion. Community-based educational programs, such as workshops and seminars, help individuals recognize red flags while building resilience against scams (Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020). Interactive formats were seen as particularly valuable, as they allow participants to practice evaluating suspicious claims and rehearse protective responses (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016). This aligns with evidence that participatory training yields longer-lasting protective effects than passive warnings, supporting participants' view that seminars should be prioritized to address evolving fraud tactics (Prentice, 2021). They also emphasized that fraud education more broadly, covering scam typologies, persuasion strategies, and protective behaviors offers the most comprehensive defense against future victimization. Such knowledge not only reduces compliance with scams but also encourages peer-to-peer sharing of protective advice (DeLiema *et al.*, 2023). Research consistently shows that education is central to resilience-building, equipping individuals to resist fraudulent narratives even under emotional pressure (Whitty, 2018). For participants, structured, consistent, and evidence-based education emerged as indispensable for sustainable fraud prevention.

4.4.7 Availability of Accessible Hotlines for Fraud-Related Concerns

The last theme that emerged from the narratives of the participants on their lessons and insights from their fraud victimization is "Availability of Accessible Hotlines for Fraud-Related Concerns". Most of the participants reflected that immediate reporting channels, such as hotlines could have interrupted scams in progress and limited their financial damage.

Rapid access to trusted reporting outlets increases the likelihood of early intervention, which reduces both the frequency and severity of losses (Button & Cross, 2017). Many victims delay reporting because they are uncertain where to go or fear embarrassment, conditions that a clear hotline system can overcome (Cross, *et al.*, 2016). This aligns with the participants' lesson that a hotline available at the moment of their suspicion represents a critical safeguard against escalation.

Additionally, the participants stressed that hotline accessibility must be accompanied by regulation of online scams. Studies on cybercrime governance highlight that hotline systems are only effective when supported by regulatory frameworks that empower agencies to act on reports (Reurink, 2019). Without coordinated regulation, hotlines risk becoming symbolic rather than practical responses. Effective regulatory enforcement, such as the capacity to freeze transactions or issue takedowns, can strengthen public trust towards reporting systems (Prentice, 2021). The participants' emphasis on stronger regulation mirrors hotline efficacy in the existence of well-resourced and responsive authorities.

Participants stressed the importance of having dedicated contact points for fraud-related issues rather than relying on generic consumer hotlines. They reflected that specialized fraud response units not only provide technical guidance but also offer emotional reassurance, which encourages victims to share details and cooperate more fully with investigations (Cross *et al.*, 2018). Research also shows that victims are more likely to seek help when they believe the responding agency has specific expertise in fraud rather than general consumer matters (DeLiema *et al.*, 2023). This validates participants' view that hotlines must be tailored to fraud cases to ensure trust and effectiveness. They further emphasized the need for quick and easy access to such services, particularly for reporting cyber scams and time-sensitive online crimes. Streamlined and widely publicized hotlines have been shown to significantly increase reporting rates (Pratt *et al.*, 2020), while also serving as deterrents by signaling institutional readiness and raising offenders' perception of detection risk (Holtfreter *et al.*, 2020). For participants, hotlines that are simple, continuously available, and responsive were seen as essential tools for both mitigating victimization and preventing repeat offenses.

4.5 Cross-Case Analysis

The data on specific similarities and differences on how the participants become fraud victims, as well as the impacts of their fraud experience, their coping mechanisms and the insights they gained from their fraud victimization are summarized in Table 6 below.

The various cases showed that the victims of fraud have a unique journey shaped by their personal circumstances, emotional well-being, and financial situations. Across the seven cases, several interrelated themes explain how participants became vulnerable to fraud. Participants 1-6 were primarily deceived by referrals and, more particularly, attractive offers, which underscores the significant influence of trust in social networks and the persuasive appeal of promised high financial returns. The participant's reliance on family, friends, and acquaintances is often what fraudsters capitalize, leveraging referrals and promotions to create credibility and urgency. However, participant 7's experience deviated from the rest; personal affection and emotional attachment to the perpetrator became the reason instead of external referrals, unlike the others. This divergence reflects how fraud can exploit both instrumental trust in external networks and affective trust in personal relationships. Furthermore, the participants revealed a pattern of limited awareness, misplaced confidence, and overreliance on perceived legitimacy, factors that compounded their susceptibility. Collectively, these accounts highlight that victimization stemmed not from singular deficits but from the convergence of social trust, cognitive blind spots, and emotional vulnerabilities.

Additionally, profound and consistent across all the participants' cases are the psychological, emotional, and behavioral impacts of their victimization. Significant psychological distress, such as disappointment, remorse, and self-blame, which is often accompanied by physical strain, was reported by the participants. These experiences eroded baseline trust in others and cultivated heightened skepticism. Yet, these hardships

also prompted a recalibration of judgment, fostering their prudence and critical reflection in their future financial and interpersonal decisions. The participant's coping strategy varied but converged around seeking solace in social support networks, engaging in constructive daily activities, and pursuing redress through formal reporting, though silence emerged in cases which is influence by personal relationships. These responses not only alleviated distress but also restored a sense of agency, even when outcomes were uncertain.

More importantly, the participants' reflection on their insights highlights the protective value of vigilance, advocating for practices such as delaying trust, authenticating documents, and resisting emotional attachments to enticing offers and opportunities. Their responses reflect a dual reality that while fraud inflicted acute suffering, it also generated preventive wisdom and commitment to collective advocacy of positioning personal narratives as powerful contributions to broader anti-fraud efforts and consumer education. By foregrounding the participants' voices, this study contributes nuanced insights into how fraud undermines, reshapes, and ultimately reconstitutes trust and decision-making in financial and relational contexts.

Table 6: Cross-case Analysis based on Similarities,
and Differences Identified across Case Units

Emerging Themes	Case Units (Victims)		Remarks
	Similar	Different	
Becoming Fraud Victims			
Deceived by referrals and attractive offers	V1-6 (01-06)	-	Cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 shared the same sentiments of being misled due to their trust in referrals and the appeal of attractive offers. Fraudsters exploited participant's reliance on recommendations from friends, family, and/or acquaintances, while enticing promotions and deals further convinced them to engage, ultimately leading to deception and financial loss.
	-	(07)	Case 7 revealed a different perspective, as the victim's experience was influenced by personal affection for the fraudster rather than trust in referrals. Unlike other cases, emotional attachment and feelings of care and love played a significant role in the victim's vulnerability, highlighting how personal relationships can also be exploited in fraudulent schemes.
Limited awareness and misplaced confidence	V1-6 (01-06)	-	Cases 1 through 6 shared similar sentiments, as the victims' experiences were largely shaped by limited awareness and misplaced confidence. Their lack of knowledge and overreliance on trust made them particularly vulnerable to deception.
	-	(07)	Case 7 (victim 7), however, was more aware of the scam as the victim personally knew the perpetrator. Despite this awareness, the victim's blind affection for the

			individual made the victim vulnerable, ultimately leading to being scammed.
Being overly trusting and emotional attachment	-	V1-6 (01-06)	Being overly trusting and emotional attachment was not a factor in cases 1 through 6, as these victims were primarily deceived through other circumstances such as referrals, online sales posts, promises of investment returns, and similar tactics. Their victimization stemmed from external influences rather than personal emotional involvement.
	(07)	-	Only case 7 was vulnerable due to trust and emotional attachment, while the other cases were deceived differently though external factors such as referrals or online offers.
Misled by convenience, investment goals, and blind affection	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Across all cases (victims 1 – 7), victims were misled by a combination of factors, including the lure of convenience, promises of investment returns, and, in specific instances, blind affection. These elements collectively increased their vulnerability, highlighting how practical incentives and emotional factors can be exploited by fraudsters to deceive individuals.
Impacts of Fraud Experience			
Developed trust issues and heightened vigilance	V1-7 (01-07)	-	All cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 shared the same impacts out from fraud experience. Here, victims across all cases became more cautious and skeptical showing increased vigilance following their experience.
Induced psychological distress, disappointment, and physical strain	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Most of the cases experienced significant impacts from their fraud experiences, including psychological distress, disappointment, and physical strain, highlighting the emotional and bodily toll of being victimized.
Strengthened prudence and critical judgement	V1-7 (01-07)	-	All cases (1 – 7) shared similar impacts. Experiencing fraud made the victims more causations, prompting them to carefully evaluate offers and decisions to avoid being deceived again.
Experienced regret and self-reproach	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Victims across all cases (1-7) felt remorse and blamed themselves for falling victim to fraud.
Coping Mechanisms			
Seeking emotional support	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Across all cases, victims coped with the aftermath of being scammed by seeking emotional support from family, friends, and loved ones. Turning to trusted individuals allowed them to share their feelings, process their experiences, and alleviate emotional distress, helping them regain a sense of comfort and resilience.
Expressing despair and accepting reality	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Cases 1 through 6 coped with their scam experiences by expressing their despair and accepting the reality of the situation. Sharing their feelings helps them process emotional pain, while acceptance allows them to move forward and focus on recovery.

Staying occupied to overcome emotional pain	V1-7 (01-07)	-	All cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 purported that to cope with the emotional pain of being scammed, they engaged themselves in hobbies, or daily activities. Keeping themselves busy helped divert attention from negative emotions and provided a constructive way to manage stress and recover from their experience.
Reporting to authorities to rectify fraudulent acts	V1-6 (01-06)	-	Most of the cases used official turning to authorities, allowing themselves to take constructive action and cope with the impact of the scam and to address the wrongdoing and restore a sense of empowerment.
-		(07)	Case 7 had a different experience, as the victim personally knew the perpetrator. She chose to keep the experience to herself, reflecting on her mistakes and resolving not to let blind affection compromise her judgment in future relationships.
Coping with scams through policies	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Across all cases, victims expressed hope that the government would establish robust anti-fraud policies, ensure perpetrators were held responsible, and provide a broad public awareness campaign about scam schemes and comprehensive public education on fraudulent practices.
Lessons or Reflections Gained			
Practice discernment in making decisions	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 shared the same lessons gained from fraud experience, emphasizing the importance of being discerning in transactions, especially with people they have just met, to protect themselves from being scammed. They highlighted that caution, verification, and careful evaluation of offers are essential to avoid falling victim to fraudulent schemes.
Trust cautiously and verify legitimacy	V1-7 (01-07)	-	All of the cases highlight that one of the lessons learned from fraud experience is the importance of being careful with transactions, especially with unfamiliar individuals. Hence, verifying offers and credentials, such as government documentation and proper representations must also be verified to prevent being deceived.
Protect privacy, and trust instincts	V1-7 (01-07)	-	For all cases 1 to 7, informants emphasized that safeguarding personal information and being cautious about what they share are essential lessons they have learned to avoid being exploited.
Avoid being too attached to investment opportunities	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Most of the cases reflect a shared lesson that becoming emotionally invested in an opportunity, especially one that promises usually high returns, can cloud judgment and increase vulnerability to scams.
Review and validate all transactions thoroughly	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Cases 1 to 7 underscore the importance of carefully checking every detail before proceeding with any financial activity. Participants shared that thorough verification helps prevent mistakes and protects them from falling victim to scams.

Provide cautionary advice to prevent future scams	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Across all cases, informants shared the importance of sharing their stories and significant insights learned from fraud experience to warn others, helping them stay vigilant and be critical in dealing with unknown individuals or unfamiliar transactions.
Availability of accessible hotlines for fraud-related concerns	V1-7 (01-07)	-	Cases 1, 2, 3, 4,5, 6, and 7 highlight the shared reflection and longing that quick and easy access to dedicated support can help victims report scams and seek guidance. Informants shared that having reliable hotlines would provide immediate assistance, improve trust, and help prevent further losses from fraudulent activities.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Implication for Practice

Fraud prevention strategies can be effective through tailoring them to the social and emotional dynamics of vulnerability that shape victimization. Awareness campaigns should move beyond generic warnings and rather address how referrals, personal trust, and emotional manipulation create vulnerability. Through educating consumers on both social and affective triggers, criminal justice practitioners can better equip individuals on how to recognize and resist fraudulent attempts.

Institutionalizing due diligence is an equally important aspect in preventing fraud victimization. The participants' emphasis on document and credential checking underscores the need for accessible authentication tools embedded within financial and digital systems. Automated license validation, regulatory cross-referencing, and user-friendly verification technologies could make protective behaviors as part of routine transactions. Through this, institutions could not only reduce opportunities for deception but also shift the burden of vigilance from individuals to systematic safeguards.

Furthermore, psychosocial care should also be taken into consideration. Fraud victimization leaves a lasting emotional and relational scar alongside its financial impact. Mental health professionals, victim advocates, and social service providers should design interventions that acknowledge fraud as both financial and emotional trauma. Counseling services, peer support groups, and trauma-informed care models can help victims rebuild trust, restore stability, and feel empowered again. Coordinated response from financial, regulatory and psychosocial institutions is what is needed to establish a holistic practice framework against fraud victimization.

5.2 Implication for Future Research

In my capacity as a researcher, I hope that the findings of this study will inspire other researchers to carry out similar research and develop a program that will help mitigate society's vulnerability towards fraud victimization. Thus, exploring the divergence between deception through referrals and by personal affection underscores the need to conceptualize fraud as both a social and emotional process. Researchers could also dig

deeper into victim's post fraud trajectories. While the study found evidence of greater prudence and skepticism among the participants, it remains unclear whether these protective behaviors endure or diminish over time. Long-term studies can illuminate how resilience, coping strategies, and trust recalibration evolve across different stages of recovery.

In essence, future research could assess the effectiveness of systematic interventions such as verification technologies, education campaigns, and reporting hotlines. Experimental and evaluative designs are needed to determine which models meaningfully reduce victimization risk. In parallel, psychological research could explore how specific coping strategies influence recovery, providing a stronger evidence base for designing holistic prevention and support programs.

6. Conclusion

Fraud victimization emerges as a deeply human experience shaped by the fragile interplay of trust, emotion, and cognition. The participants' stories revealed that while their entry points into fraudulent encounters differed, the aftermath converged in high psychological, financial, and relational costs. However, within these hardships lay a remarkable capacity for resilience, through coping, reflection, and adaptation, the participants not only navigated their losses but also transformed them into lessons of vigilance and self-protection.

Clearly, fraud is not merely a result of personal missteps but a systematic challenge that exploits social bonds, emotional vulnerabilities, and institutional blind spots. Any effective response must therefore be layered into raising awareness of manipulation tactics, embedding stronger verification processes into financial practices, and ensuring accessible psychosocial support for those who suffer the harm of fraud. Furthermore, research must continue to explore fraud as a phenomenon, refining theoretical insights while testing practical interventions that promote prevention and recovery.

The voices of the victims remind us that their experiences hold essential knowledge. Their narratives not only reveal the complexity of fraud but also shed light on pathways toward resilience, caution, and accountability. Through the integration of their insights into preventive frameworks and future research, a truly holistic response can be achieved, one that attends to the emotional, social, and financial dimensions of fraud while equipping both the individual and the institutions to resist exploitation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work. The research and writing were conducted independently, and no financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the findings or conclusions presented in this publication. The author(s) have no competing interests that could be perceived to affect the integrity of the research in the field of criminal justice.

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