

Triumphs and Tribulations: A Phenomenological Analysis of Post-Mentorship Entrepreneurial Journeys Among KMME Graduates in Western Visayas

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Abstract

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) anchor local livelihoods in Western Visayas but continue to face persistent constraints in finance, digitalization, and market access. To strengthen MSME capabilities, the Department of Trade and Industry's Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) program provides module-based mentoring and Business Improvement Plan (BIP) coaching. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how KMME mentee graduates made sense of their post-mentorship journeys, their triumphs and tribulations after completing the program. Guided by social constructivism and interpretivism, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven mentee graduates representing diverse sectors (food manufacturing, shell crafts, real estate, events, mushroom farming, bakery/cafe, and integrated farming) across Region VI. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four major themes were developed. Two reflected triumphs: (1) Organizational and Strategic Transformation – movement from improvised to systematic operations, quality assurance, branding, and people-centered leadership; and (2) Success in Entrepreneurial Confidence and Identity Formation – growth in self-efficacy, professional identity, and decision-making. On the other hand, two captured tribulations: (3) Structural and Institutional Barriers to Growth – risk-averse lending, limited capitalization, and uneven post-program support; and (4) Operational, Technological, and Crisis-Driven Challenges – market volatility, multigenerational workforce tensions, uneven digital adoption, and shocks like pandemics and supply disruptions. To synthesize these findings, the study introduces the GRIT model (Growth-Resilience-Innovation-Transformation), which conceptualizes how mentorship fosters entrepreneurial progression despite limitations. It further proposes a Transformative Sustainability Theory (TST), asserting that sustained entrepreneurial growth arises not from linear advancement but from adaptive learning, innovation, and resilience in responses to contextual challenges. Findings suggest that KMME's early impacts can be strengthened through continuous post-mentorship monitoring, accessible financing mechanisms, digital capability development, and stronger ecosystem collaboration among DTI, LGUs, TESDA, DOST, financial institutions, and academic partners.

Keywords: KMME program, MSMEs, qualitative phenomenology, reflexive thematic analysis, Western Visayas, mentorship, sustainability



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INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are the foundation of the Philippine economy, comprising 99.59% of total business establishments and employing over 64% of the country's workforce (Department of Trade and Industry, 2023). In response to the crucial role of MSMEs in national development and job generation, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) launched the Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) Program under its 7Ms Framework

includes Mindset, Mastery, Monitoring, Money, Machine, Market, and Models. This nationwide initiative was designed to build the capabilities of MSME owners through mentorship, coaching, and practical business modules led by successful entrepreneurs and experts. By combining classroom-based sessions and coaching on Business Improvement Plans (BIPs), the Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) program aimed to equip entrepreneurs with the tools to manage and grow their respective enterprises sustainably.

Region VI (Western Visayas), which comprises the provinces of Aklan, Antique, Capiz, Guimaras, Iloilo, Negros Occidental, has been a major implementation site of the KMME program. With a booming MSME sector and a history of strong DTI regional involvement, the region has produced hundreds of KMME mentee graduates over the past years (DTI, 2021). The real-life experiences and success stories shared in the KMME Coffee Table Book (DTI, n.d.) show the program's positive influence on business confidence, mindset change, and operational improvement. Mentees in Region VI (Western Visayas) highlighted how mentorship helped them restructure their business models, improve marketing strategies, and shift to online platforms during the pandemic. These results show that the KMME program has worked to improve business basics and provide entrepreneurs with short-term knowledge enhancement.

However, despite these promising outcomes, a critical gap continues in understanding the long-term impact and lived experiences of mentee graduates after the mentorship ends. Reports from Region VI recommend that MSMEs continue to face enduring constraints such as limited access to follow-up support, weak market linkages, low digital readiness, and inadequate capitalization, particularly in rural and island provinces such as Antique and Guimaras (National Economic and Development Authority Region VI, 2020; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). While existing assessments of the KMME program emphasize output-based indicators (e.g., number of graduates or business plans completed), they fail to capture the deeper, qualitative experiences of mentees, how they internalize mentorship, apply learned strategies, and navigate challenges in the real-world business setting. The Western Visayas Regional Development Plan 2023-2028 noted that MSMEs in the region remain vulnerable to market saturation, technical delay, and inconsistent access to entrepreneurial ecosystems that could support scaling (NEDA Region VI, 2023).

The research gap, which is the lack of detailed, qualitative evidence on how KMME mentees in

Region VI sustain their businesses post-training, needs a phenomenological study that centers on the lived experiences of mentee graduates. Understanding how these entrepreneurs define success, overcome challenges, and integrate mentorship into their business practices is essential to refining the program, informing policy, and developing a more responsive support system for MSMEs in Western Visayas and similar settings. This study aimed to understand the real lives of KMME graduates in Region VI, showing how the program helped them and what challenges they still face.

Thus, this study aimed to explore the triumphs and tribulations among KMME mentee graduates in Western Visayas, capturing how they made sense of their lived experiences after completing the program. It sought to answer two main questions:

1. What meanings did the mentee graduates attribute to their achievements and successes following participation in the KMME program?
2. What challenges did the graduates encounter after completing the program, and how did they interpret these experiences in their entrepreneurial journeys?

The study adopted the social constructivist epistemology, consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018), emphasizes that knowledge is not a fixed reality but is socially constructed through interactions, cultural contexts, and shared experiences. Within the Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) Program, entrepreneurs make sense of their journeys not in isolation but through continuous dialogue with the participants, and in this study, with the researcher. Thus, their understanding of "success", "challenges", and "growth" is socially shaped, co-created, and deeply contextualized.

Aligned with this epistemological stance, the study adopted an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Interpretivism highlights that meaning is subjective and situated within human experiences, with the researcher

playing an active role in interpreting participants' narratives (Schwandt, 1994). Within this framework, mentorship is understood not merely as the transfer of skills but as a relational and meaning-making process through which mentees reinterpret their identities, practices, and visions for their enterprises.

The study is supported by Transformational Leadership Theory, which explains how entrepreneurs evolve into proactive and visionary leaders who embrace change (Bass, 2015). Their enhanced knowledge and confidence reflect Human Capital Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory, which highlight the role of skills and belief in one's ability to perform effectively in driving business outcomes (Becker, 1993; Maddux, 1995). Their adaptive responses to challenges correspond with how entrepreneurs navigate uncertainty through flexibility, experimentation, and persistence (Sarasvathy, 2001; Santoro et al., 2020). In addition, Entrepreneurial Learning Theory emphasizes that entrepreneurs learn through action, reflection, and continuous improvement in a real context (Politis, 2005). Finally, sustainability and responsible operations are shaped by the Resource-Based View and Ethical Entrepreneurship Theory, which underline the strategic use of internal resources and values-driven practices as foundations for long-term competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Tilley, 2000).

To operate this perspective, the study employed a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology seeks to understand the world through the perspectives of human experience, how individuals interpret, make sense of, and assign meaning to what happens to them (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It recognizes that knowledge is subjective and that multiple realities exist, shaped by personal backgrounds and perspectives (Lever, 2013; Leong-on, 2022). Hence, the study analyzed the lived experiences of KMME graduates by adopting this interpretivist and phenomenological approach. The researcher did not remain an outsider observing from a distance, but instead worked collaboratively with participants, listening to

their stories and seeking to understand their experiences from their perspectives. This approach allowed the study to capture how mentees perceived growth, overcame challenges, and discovered purpose in their entrepreneurial lives, stories rich in meaning that could not be reduced to numerical data.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of KMME mentee graduates, particularly how the program influenced their entrepreneurial growth, market responsiveness, and adaptability in facing business challenges. Using an inductive approach, the study aimed to uncover deeper meanings behind their successes and struggles after completing the mentorship program. Now that the study has been completed, the findings not only provide critical insights into the effectiveness of the KMME Program but also offer valuable recommendations for enhancing future mentorship and enterprise development initiatives. Thus, the study contributed to the broader goal of strengthening the resilience and sustainability of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the Philippines.

The study's significance lies in its relevance to both practice and policy. For the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), findings provide insights to refine the KMME curriculum, improve monitoring systems, and strengthen post-program mentoring. For other implementing agencies, such as the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and local government units (LGUs), the results offer guidance for designing programs that address mentees' ongoing needs, ranging from technology adoption to workforce development and localized MSME support.

For mentee graduates, the narratives highlight lessons and reflections that may serve as peer guidance for sustaining business growth. For policymakers and planners, the research provides evidence-based insights for crafting responsive MSME policies and funding mechanisms. Lastly, for the academic

community, the study contributes to the body of qualitative research on entrepreneurship and mentoring, offering contextualized knowledge from a Philippine regional setting.

Throughout the study, the researchers acknowledge that complete neutrality is unattainable. With a professional background in entrepreneurship and management, the researchers recognized how personal beliefs about mentorship and enterprise development could influence interpretation. To address this, reflexivity was practiced in maintaining awareness of biases, using bracketing to set aside assumptions, and engaging in member checking to validate interpretations with participants. Ethical sensitivity was upheld by ensuring confidentiality and informed consent. The measures fostered credibility and fairness, confirming that findings represented participants' authentic voices rather than preconceived notions.

LITERATURES

Mentorship has long been recognized as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial growth and capacity building. In the Philippine setting, the Department of Trade and Industry's Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) program was designed to strengthen micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through enhancing managerial knowledge, self-confidence, and access to business networks (Almaden & Yu, 2022; Gonzales & Nunez, 2024). The program was established in the 7Ms framework, including Mindset, Mastery, Mentoring, Money, Machine, Market, and Models, which aims to guide entrepreneurs through mentorship and peer learning, linking them with industry experts who can help them sustain and expand their businesses (DTI Philippines, 2022a)

Mentorship and Entrepreneurial Transformation. Mentorship provides more than technical instructions; it nurtures self-efficacy, resilience, and identity formation among entrepreneurs. Studies have shown that mentoring relationships empower entrepreneurs to reflect on their challenges, make sound decisions, and develop stronger

leadership capacities (Kunaka & Moos, 2019; Shah et al., n.d.). Yani et al. (2024) underscored that mentorship enhances both personal and professional growth by building confidence and adaptability, such qualities essential in managing micro and small enterprises. Maddux (1995) and Ajzen (1991) emphasize self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control as crucial in shaping entrepreneurial persistence. Yani et al. (2024) explained that mentorship is critical in stimulating the growth and success of entrepreneurial ventures. Likewise, Wei et al. (2024) highlighted that combining mentorship with entrepreneurship competitions enhances participants' entrepreneurial competencies, as mentorship not only provides guidance but also develops an entrepreneurial spirit that strengthens overall competence. Kunaka and Moos (2019) highlight the role of mentorship in fostering identity and legitimacy.

Yendra, Zakaria, and Noy's (2024) findings indicate that digital marketing is vital in improving MSMEs' visibility and customer reach, particularly in fast-changing environments. Additionally, mentorship helps entrepreneurs grow by guiding strategic planning and decision-making. Mentors help entrepreneurs create clear vision and mission statements, link goals with market possibilities, and solve problems proactively (Yani et al., 2024). Zhang et al. found that mentorship in entrepreneurial development programs can help define and implement strategic vision and mission, meeting the needs of more experienced participants. Mentors play a variety of roles, offering insights, experiences, assistance in overcoming challenges, strategic guidance, and network facilitation for young entrepreneurs (Sutrisno, 2023). Entrepreneurial learning is a dynamic, experience-driven process, and sustaining a business through failure is a key indicator of long-term growth and adaptability. Recent studies also show that entrepreneurial success requires emotional resilience and adaptability shaped through mentorship, strengthening coping and performance in uncertainty (Yu et al., 2023). Mentoring often becomes a bridge that connects entrepreneurs with communities of practice. Fauzan et al. (2022) explained that

mentorship encourages collaboration, networking, and knowledge sharing, which help local MSMEs remain competitive.

MSME Challenges and Institutional Support. One of the main challenges was the limited access to finance, where many small businesses find it difficult to secure loans or credit due to perceptions of risk and challenges in meeting financial institutions' requirements (Raquiza, 2022). Furthermore, management inefficiencies posed substantial constraints, as MSMEs often lack access to formal business education and training, resulting in issues related to strategic planning, financial management, and overall organizational effectiveness (Raquiza, 2022). The lack of skilled labor was another pressing concern, with MSMEs struggling to attract and retain qualified employees in the face of competition with larger enterprises (Francisco & Canare, 2019). Weaver (2022) and Sharma and Pandit (2021) highlighted that multigenerational workplaces require adaptive leadership, as younger workers often have different motivations and career expectations. Scholars note that generational diversity in the workplace creates both opportunities and tension, requiring adaptive leadership to bridge varying values, work ethics, and expectations (Sharma & Pandit, 2021; Weaver, 2022).

Leadership capability remains a significant buffer against workforce challenges, particularly in managing multigenerational teams and retaining talent in resource-constrained environments (Nemashakwe & Mpofu, 2024). Gen Z workers tend to prioritize balance, purpose, and digital integration, which may conflict with MSME owners who value persistence, traditional loyalty, and resource maximization (Ng'ora et al., 2023). Infrastructure problems further complicate the challenges, surrounding inadequate transportation, communication, and utility networks that lead to increased operational costs and hinder market reach (Raquiza, 2022). Adaptability and creativity enable microenterprises to survive in changing environments (Sarasvathy, 2001; Nemashakwe & Mpofu, 2024). Eggers (2020), who underscored that crises simultaneously expose

uncertainties and stimulate innovation among SMEs. Updated research emphasizes that MSME resilience improves when businesses strategically adopt technology and receive financial support during crises (Kurniawan & Iskandar, 2023; Lestari et al., 2024).

In the same way, Hwang (2024) and Satpathy et al. (2025) emphasized that entrepreneurial resilience, the capacity to adapt and reconceptualize crises as opportunities, is central to MSME survival. Furthermore, the rise of digital platforms reshapes entrepreneurial challenges, as MSMEs must now build digital competencies to maintain market connectivity and competitiveness (Habaradas et al., 2024; Mia et al., 2024).

Suppico (2021) highlighted that community-based enterprises that restructured operations were able to buffer both their businesses and local livelihoods. MSMEs faced financial scarcity, limited access to advanced technology, difficulties in scaling operations, market competition, and regulatory restrictions, which hinder their long-term growth and sustainability (ASEAN, 2022). Habaradas et al. (2024) revealed that the obstacles, such as cost, inadequate infrastructure, and low digital literacy, limited entrepreneurs' ability to maximize technology. Mia et al. (2024) closely observed that while digitalization during the pandemic improved resilience and market reach, adoption varied widely, often dependent on family support or client-driven promotion. Yendra et al. (2024) found that digital marketing provided opportunities for market expansion, but its success depends on sustained digital competence and investment.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has consistently encouraged MSMEs to adopt digitalization as a marketing tool not only for competition but as a pathway to wider market access (DTI Region V, 2022b; DTI Philippines, 2022a). Rane et al. (2023) found that customer loyalty depends heavily on consistent service quality and marketing, which is often challenging for resource-constrained MSMEs. Furthermore, MSMEs faced challenges such as financial constraints, market instability, and

supply chain disruptions can limit their ability to adapt and grow, despite network engagements, long-term partnerships, and innovation, which requires strategic interventions and government support to ensure resilience (Youssof, Tan, & Yahaya, 2023). Also, World Bank's (2024) observation that MSMEs' limited capacity may hinder their ability to seize sudden demand surges. Ryciuk and Zabrocka (2024) suggested that supply chain disruptions demand cooperation and information-driven responses, often sparking innovations and intuitive decision-making, reflecting the adaptable strategies observed among participants.

Marketing skill deficiencies represented an additional difficulty, as MSMEs may limit knowledge in modern marketing strategies, digital tools, and branding techniques (Raquiza, 2022). Regulatory burdens, including complex and time-consuming bureaucratic procedures for business compliance, registration, and licensing, added to the challenges. Inadequate access to technology and innovation (Diliman, U. I., 2020b), combined with difficulties in navigating global markets due to trade barriers and compliance requirements, further restricts the growth potential of MSMEs (Francisco & Canare, 2019).

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and collaborative methods involving government support, industry initiatives, and strategic interventions in areas such as financial inclusion, skills development, infrastructure enhancement, and regulatory simplification (Francisco & Canare, 2019). Addressing challenges requires joint efforts across government, the private sector, and key areas such as finance, skills, infrastructure, and regulation (Francisco & Canare, 2019). Such measures were vital to fostering an environment conducive to the resilience and growth of MSMEs in the dynamic business landscape of the Philippines. The KMME program improved management skills and entrepreneurial confidence, but the limited post-program support restrained long-term outcomes for many mentee graduates (Gonzales and Nunez, 2024). Almaden and Yu

(2022) reported a similar finding in Region VII, noting that the lack of long-term monitoring limited the continuity of entrepreneurial development.

Mentorship Outcomes: Empowerment and Sustainability. The outcomes of mentorship exceed immediate business performance. Studies such as those of Gunawardana and Bandara (2021) and Fauzan et al. (2022) highlight that training and mentoring enhance long-term entrepreneurial resilience. Additionally, the integration of emotional intelligence and leadership theory has been linked to entrepreneurial success (Alotaibi & Badawi, 2023; Bass, 2015). Emotional resilience, patience, and adaptability are those traits critical in managing uncertainty and sustaining business operations. Hwang (2024) expanded that entrepreneurial resilience, shaped through mentorship and lived experience, allows entrepreneurs to transform crises with creativity and persistence. Mentorship strengthens sustainability when enterprises align innovation with stakeholder engagement and environmental responsibility, enabling long-term resilience (Hazel, 2024). Skill enhancement through support programs such as KMME contributes to growth readiness, improving strategic planning, and business continuity (Flaminiano, 2024; Dana-Gica et al., 2021).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of mentee graduates of the Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) Program in Western Visayas. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals experience and make sense of a phenomenon as it occurs in their lives (Creswell & Poth, 2023). In this research, the phenomenon referred to the post-mentorship journey of KMME graduates, their triumphs and tribulations as they continued to operate and grow their businesses after completing the program. Guided by social constructivism and interpretivism, the study recognized that meaning is not discovered but

co-created through human interaction and reflection (Crotty, 2003; Schwandt, 1994). These philosophical orientations underscore that knowledge is socially constructed and that experiences are interpreted through dialogue, context, and shared understanding. Thus, the researcher sought to capture how mentees made sense of their successes and struggles in their own words, acknowledging that their experiences were shaped by personal, social, and institutional factors.

The study was conducted in Region VI or Western Visayas, composed of the provinces of Aklan, Antique, Capiz, Guimaras, Iloilo, and Negros Occidental. This region was purposively selected because of its active participation in the DTI's KMME Program and its diverse entrepreneurial settings. Western Visayas has a thriving micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) sector, with entrepreneurs engaged in food processing, handicrafts, agribusiness, and services. The region's strong culture of entrepreneurship, with its local economic challenges such as limited financing, technology adaptation, and market instability, provided an ideal context for understanding the KMME graduates' post-mentorship experience.

Participants of the study were composed of seven (7) KMME mentee graduates who were purposively selected based on specific criteria. To be included in the study, participants must have completed the KMME Program under DTI Region VI between 2016 to 2021, maintained business operations for at least two years after graduation, and expressed willingness to participate in a reflective, in-depth interview. These criteria ensured that participants could meaningfully describe their experiences after mentorship.

To ensure regional representation, the seven participants were selected from different provinces across Western Visayas. Specifically, one participant each came from Aklan, Antique, Capiz, and Guimaras, while two participants were from Iloilo and one participant from Negros Occidental. This geographic distribution reflected the diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems within Region VI.

The participants represented various industries, including food manufacturing, shell crafts, real estate, integrated farming, event management, and other service-oriented ventures. To protect their identities, pseudonyms or pen names such as Val, Girlie, Leon, Joebert, Fe, Gwen, and Gigi were used throughout the reporting.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between April 2024 to May 2024. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes and was conducted face-to-face. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share their experiences freely while ensuring that discussions stayed aligned with the research objectives. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to obtain the participants' narratives based on their experiences during the mentorship, their perceived changes in managing their enterprises, and the challenges encountered after completing the program. Probing questions were used to encourage deeper reflection and to capture insights beyond surface descriptions. Likewise, field notes were taken to record nonverbal cues, emotions, and contextual details that enriched the interpretation of the data. Ethical standards were always observed. Before each interview, participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Written consent was obtained, confidentiality was assured, and participants were given the freedom to withdraw at any time without consequence.

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which highlights researchers' reflexivity and deep engagement with data. RTA was deemed appropriate because it aligns with the interpretivist and constructivist orientation of the study, recognizing that meaning is co-created rather than objectively found (Dawadi, 2020). The researchers engaged in multiple phases of analysis, beginning with familiarization with the data by reading and rereading transcripts while noting initial impressions. This was followed by generating

initial codes that captured the important features of the data related to the research questions. The next phase involved organizing these codes into potential themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants' narratives. Through iterative refinement, the researchers reviewed, defined, and named these themes to capture their essence. Finally, a narrative synthesis was produced, integrating participants' voices and the researchers' interpretive insights to present the meanings embedded in their lived experiences. Throughout the process, reflexivity was central, and the researchers maintained a journal documenting thoughts, decisions, and emerging interpretations. This ongoing reflection ensured that the analysis remained transparent and true to the participants' perspectives while acknowledging the researchers' interpretive role.

Ethical integrity guided every aspect of the study. Approval to conduct the research was secured from the appropriate institutional review board and from DTI Region VI. Participants' privacy was protected by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying details from quotations. All audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected digital files, and access was restricted solely to the researchers. Participants were treated with respect and empathy throughout the research process, and the principle of voluntary participation was strictly upheld.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the in-depth interviews with seven mentee graduates of the Kapatid Mentor ME (KMME) program in Region VI. Using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2006; 2021), data were coded, clustered, and interpreted to uncover the lived meanings of their triumphs and tribulations. Themes are organized under major categories reflecting both achievements and challenges.

Profile of Participants. The profile of the participants, as shown in Table 1, represented

diverse industries, ages, and locations, enabling rich insights into entrepreneurial transformations across the Western Visayas region.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Name of the Participant	City/Province	Sex	Age	Nature of the Business	Year Business Started	KMME Year Graduated	Interview Date	Interview Duration
Val	Iloilo City	Male	38	Food Manufacturing	2014	2016	May 4, 2024	51 minutes and 14 seconds
Girle	Capiz	Female	43	Shell Crafts Souvenirs	2013	2017	May 18, 2024	54 minutes and 54 seconds
Leon	Antique	Male	39	Real Estate Brokerage & Development	2016	2018	May 21, 2024	58 minutes and 21 seconds
Joebert	Aklan	Male	48	Fashion Designer and Events Organizer	2014	2019	June 16, 2024	50 minutes and 41 seconds
Fe	Guimaras	Female	50	Agribusiness (Mushroom Farming)	2018	2020	May 12, 2024	46 minutes and 4 seconds
Gwen	Iloilo	Female	59	Bakery, Pastry, and Coffee Shop	2004	2020	May 11, 2024	48 minutes and 25 seconds
Gigi	Negros Occidental	Female	47	Agribusiness (Integrated Farm)	2019	2020	May 23, 2024	50 minutes and 25 seconds

Constructed Meanings of Success and Achievements Among Mentee Graduates.

Mentee graduates balanced success with reaching a point of stability in their enterprises, where operations became systematic, quality was consistently sustained, and customer relationships and networks were strengthened. "My market increased. We had numerous opportunities...My clients come back to me despite going to others." (Joebert), success meant growth, repeat clients, and sustained opportunities. Mentees defined success as their capacity to adapt and remain responsive to changing market demand. "I managed to expand. Some customers have been ordering from me for eight years straight, with repeat orders...." (Girle). Yani et al. (2024) explained that mentorship is critical in stimulating the growth and success of entrepreneurial ventures. For many participants, achievements were not only measured by profit but also by their ability to sustain customer trust, diversify product lines, and embrace digital tools during times of disruption. SMEs' adaptability is critical to survival in volatile contexts, with crises often serving as triggers for innovation (Eggers, 2020; Habaradas et al., 2024). MSMEs that prioritize product consistency and operational efficiency achieve sustained customer retention and resilience against market disruptions (Fadillah et al., 2022; Francisco & Canare, 2019). Fauzan et al. (2022) explained that mentorship encourages collaboration, networking, and knowledge sharing, which help local MSMEs

remain competitive. Also, mentee graduates as associated with moving from informal, improvised practices to more structured, documented, and professionalized systems. "DTI helped me register for the IPO to reserve the logo of the business... Then I focused on menswear. After that, I had more clients." (Joebert). Mentorship helps entrepreneurs grow by guiding strategic planning and decision-making. Mentors help entrepreneurs create clear vision and mission statements, link goals with market possibilities, and solve problems proactively (Yani et al., 2024). Some mentee graduates define success as the ability to empower their workforce through training, delegation, and skills transfer. Mentors play a variety of roles, offering insights, experiences, assistance in overcoming challenges, strategic guidance, and network facilitation for young entrepreneurs (Sutrisno, 2023). Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), emphasizes how training and skills development increase productivity.

Success was not limited to personal achievements but extended to building a capable and responsible team, fostering loyalty, and ensuring that employees contributed actively to business growth. While other mentees define success as the strengthening of their entrepreneurial identity through self-confidence, resilience, persistence, and personal transformation. "It's my self-confidence...you feel a step ahead... You have an edge over others because you know. Before, it was like you were just an ordinary vendor." (Girlie). Mentorship and experience were viewed as agents that helped them transform from being "ordinary vendors" to empowered entrepreneurs, capable of leading, adapting, and sustaining their businesses. Yani et al. (2024) underscored that mentorship enhances both personal and professional growth by building confidence and adaptability, such qualities essential in managing micro and small enterprises. Likewise, Wei et al. (2024) highlighted that combining mentorship with entrepreneurship competitions enhances participants' entrepreneurial competencies, as mentorship not only provides guidance but also develops an entrepreneurial spirit that strengthens overall competence.

Perceived Challenges Encountered by the Mentee Graduates. Mentee graduates who consistently reveal difficulties in accessing finance and capital. "They offered loans, but I didn't want to borrow because I didn't know how to repay without sales..." – Gigi. This challenge is broadly recognized in related literature. Raquiza (2022) observed that many Philippine MSMEs encounter struggles in securing loans because of perceptions of high risk and strict banking requirements. Furthermore, the perceptions align with international findings. Abbas et al. (2019) recognized that financial constraints limit SMEs' ability to develop dynamic capabilities, minimizing competitiveness and resilience.

Other gaps in institutional follow-up and sustained support for mentee graduates after completing the KMME program. "The first challenge is how to continue what we have started learning. We were only trained for a limited time, and you cannot say that you have put it in 100%. There is no follow-up from the DTI, 'What's next?'" – Leon. Habaradas (2017) highlighted that MSME programs in the Philippines often face challenges of sustainability because of short-term implementation and a lack of systematic follow-up. Gonzales and Nunez (2024) also observed that while the KMME program improved management skills and entrepreneurial confidence, the limited post-program support restrained long-term outcomes for many mentee graduates.

Mentees' ongoing struggles in maintaining customer loyalty and sustaining market presence amidst intense competition and structural disadvantages. This shows how microenterprises often adopt survival strategies that compromise sustainability, which condition that aligns with Raquiza's (2022) argument on equal footing. Other participants resonated with these challenges in different forms. This echoes Yendra, Zakaria, and Noy's (2024) findings that digital marketing is vital in improving MSMEs' visibility and customer reach, particularly in fast-changing environments. Likewise, the pressure between demand and supply also emerged as a unique

challenge. This reflects the World Bank's (2024) observation that MSMEs' limited capacity may hinder their ability to seize sudden demand surges.

Some mentees' struggles in handling workforce diversity across generations, particularly the attitudes and expectations of younger employees. Scholars note that generational diversity in the workplace creates both opportunities and tension, requiring adaptive leadership to bridge varying values, work ethics, and expectations (Sharma & Pandit, 2021; Weaver, 2022). Gen Z workers tend to prioritize balance, purpose, and digital integration, which may conflict with MSME owners who value persistence, traditional loyalty, and resource maximization (Ng'ora et al., 2023).

Mentee graduates recognized that digital transformation was a lifeline for survival; it was also one of the most challenging transitions to sustain. "Maybe it's the talk about your products. And online marketing... that is what I focus on now. But I am too lazy with gadgets. Before my child created an account, but he forgot the password, so we did not open it then." – Fe. This pressure reflects what Habaradas et al. (2024) revealed in their study of Philippine MSMEs, noting that the obstacles, such as cost, inadequate infrastructure, and low digital literacy, limited entrepreneurs' ability to maximize technology. Mia et al. (2024) closely observed that while digitalization during the pandemic improved resilience and market reach, adoption varied widely, often dependent on family support or client-driven promotion. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has consistently encouraged MSMEs to adopt digitalization as a marketing tool not only for competition but as a pathway to wider market access (DTI Region V, 2022b; DTI Philippines, 2022a).

Mentees revealed that crises and external shocks deeply shaped their entrepreneurial journeys, testing both resilience and adaptability. The challenges expressed by the participants align with findings that MSMEs are highly vulnerable to environmental shocks like the pandemic, supply chain disruptions, and

natural calamities (Mia et al., 2024; Habaradas et al., 2024). In addition, literature underscores that adaptability and creativity enable microenterprises to survive in changing environments (Sarasvathy, 2001; Nemashakwe & Mpofu, 2024). Supplio (2021) highlighted that community-based enterprises that restructured operations were able to buffer both their businesses and local livelihoods.

Table 2 collectively illustrates the emerging major themes from the subthemes with corresponding descriptions based on the results of the meanings of triumphs and perceived tribulations encountered by mentee graduates.

Table 2
Themes on the Meanings of Success and Challenges Among Mentee Graduates

Subtheme	Description	Theme
1.1. Success in Achieving Business Stability	This is characterized by smooth and systematic operations, commitment to product quality, loyal and repeat customers, increased reseller networks, and expanded market reputation. True stability is not only a mere survival but also about ensuring resilience, continuous opportunities, and competitiveness in a changing market.	1. Organizational and Strategic Transformation
1.2. Success in Adaptation and Market Responsiveness	This reflects the ability to innovate, diversify products, and respond quickly to external challenges such as crises, competition, and sudden customer demand. Slaying competitive in volatile markets, enterprises need responsiveness, continuous promotion, and enduring innovation to generate long-term value.	
1.3. Success in Formalization and Professionalization of Business Practices	This shows the shift from informal and survival-driven operations toward structured systems, proper documentation, branding, and professional management practices.	
1.4. Success in Human Capital and Workforce Empowerment	This highlights growth through effective leadership, staff empowerment, and workforce development, resulting in improved accountability, loyalty, and organizational performance.	2. Personal and Entrepreneurial Identity Transformation
2.1. Success in Entrepreneurial Confidence and Identity Formation	This captures how mentees developed self-confidence, perseverance, and a stronger entrepreneurial identity. They shifted from seeing themselves as ordinary business owners to empowered entrepreneurs capable of leading, innovating, and sustaining growth.	
3.1. Struggles in Access to Finance and Capital	Entrepreneurs often faced persistent financial fragility, shaped by hesitancy to take loans, reliance on family funds, and the difficulty of attracting investors. Fear of debt limited expansion, while high interest rates and capital scarcity restricted growth.	3. Structural and Institutional Barriers to Growth
3.2. Limited Government and Institutional Support	Strict requirements, bureaucratic processes, and the lack of sustained monitoring limited the long-term impact of programs like KMME. Mentorship was often too "bookish," leaving microenterprises without context-sensitive solutions.	
3.3. Challenges in Sustaining Markets and Customer Loyalty	Entrepreneurs found that having good products was not enough; constant visibility, marketing, and supply chain stability were necessary. Sustaining customer loyalty required balancing quality, demand, and limited resources.	4. Operational, Technological, and Crisis-Driven Challenges
3.4. Challenges in Managing Generational Workforce Differences	Workforce tensions emerged between younger and older employees, with Gen-Z prioritizing flexibility while traditional staff relied on older practices. This forced entrepreneurs to adjust leadership and management approaches.	
3.5. Difficulties in Digitalization and Technology Adoption	Digitalization became a double-edged sword. While it was important for resilience and competitiveness, adoption was inconsistent due to high costs, skill gaps, or reliance on clients to promote online.	
3.6. Coping with Crises and External Shocks	Crises such as COVID-19, El Niño, inflation, and supply chain disruptions threatened survival. But these shocks also stimulate creativity, such as facemask production, PPE-making, delivery service, and resilience, framed as true tests of entrepreneurship.	

DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of KMME mentee graduates in Western Visayas revealed that entrepreneurship is not only an economic endeavor but a transformative human journey resulting in growth, resilience, and persistent struggle. Guided by social constructivism and interpretivism, this study uncovered how mentees made sense of their post-mentorship experiences and how they transformed knowledge into practice, challenges into opportunities, and uncertainty into adaptive resilience. Using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2006, 2021), four major themes were generated that show a process of

continuous transformation: (1) Organizational and Strategic Transformation, (2) Success in Entrepreneurial Confidence and Identity Formation, (3) Structural and Institutional Barriers to Growth, and (4) Operational, Technological, and Crisis-Driven Challenges.

Theme 1 – Organizational and Strategic Transformation. Organizational and strategic transformation captures how mentee graduates of the KMME program redefined their business through improved operations, professionalization, responsiveness, and people-centered leadership. This transformation was not confined to financial growth alone but represented a deeper restructuring of how enterprises were managed, sustained, and positioned in dynamic markets. The key point of transformation was the stabilization of business operations through systematic processes, product quality assurance, and strengthened customer loyalty. Related studies noted that MSMEs that prioritize product consistency and operational efficiency achieve sustained customer retention and resilience against market disruptions (Fadillah et al., 2022; Francisco & Canare, 2019). SMEs' adaptability is critical to survival in volatile contexts, with crises often serving as triggers for innovation (Eggers, 2020; Habaradas et al., 2024). Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), emphasizes how training and skills development increase productivity and firm value.

Theme 2 – Success in Entrepreneurial Confidence and Identity Formation. Success in Entrepreneurial Confidence and Identity Formation emerged as an essential transformation among KMME mentees, reflecting how mentorship nurtured not only business skills but also personal growth and self-belief. Further, networking and mentorship enhanced their confidence, providing not only technical skills but also opportunities for social growth, as introverted participants gained self-assurance in engaging with others. Studies support these experiences, with Maddux (1995) and Ajzen (1991) emphasizing self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control as crucial in shaping entrepreneurial persistence, while

Kunaka and Moos (2019) highlight mentorship's role in fostering identity and legitimacy.

Theme 3 – Structural and Institutional Barriers to Growth. A common challenge shared by the mentees was the struggle to access finance and capital. Several entrepreneurs admitted to their hesitancy in applying for or taking out loans and dependence on family funding, and fear of indebtedness, which restricted business growth and innovation. This reflects Raquiza's (2022) analysis that MSMEs in the Philippines remain financially weak due to risk-averse lending practices and high interest rates. Further systematic barrier was the limited government and institutional support. Mentee graduates describe KMME program the sessions as sometimes "too bookish" and disconnected from their unique contexts, coupled with the absence of post-program follow-up, considering it is a foundational mentorship. Almaden and Yu (2022) reported a similar finding in Region VII, noting that the lack of long-term monitoring limited the continuity of entrepreneurial development. Consequently, structural barriers reveal how external support systems remain insufficient to meet the evolving needs of microentrepreneurs. Without accessible financing and sustained mentoring, many remain in survivalist modes, unable to transition toward growth-oriented enterprises. The mentees' experiences emphasize the need for policies that bridge financing gaps, simplify regulatory processes, and ensure mentorship continuity after the program completion.

Theme 4 - Operational, Technological, and Crisis-Driven Challenges. Aside from structural gaps, the mentee also underscored operational struggles, particularly in sustaining markets and customer loyalty. Even with high-quality products, entrepreneurs realized the importance of visibility and consistency of marketing. Rane et al. (2023) found that customer loyalty depends heavily on consistent service quality and marketing, which is often challenging for resource-constrained MSMEs. Furthermore, the persistent issue was managing generational workforce differences. Entrepreneurs reported stress with Gen Z employees, who value flexibility and work-life

balance, versus older conventional employees, due to traditional practices. Weaver (2022) and Sharma and Pandit (2021) highlighted that multigenerational workplaces require adaptive leadership, as younger workers often have different motivations and career expectations. These findings emphasized how leadership in MSMEs is elevated about balancing interpersonal dynamics and fostering inclusive management practices.

Mentees also engage and struggle with digitalization and technology. While some embraced online marketing, others admitted technological hesitancy, lack of skills, or reliance on clients for visibility. Yendra et al. (2024) found that digital marketing provided opportunities for market expansion, but its success depends on sustained digital competence and investment.

Lastly, mentees highlight the challenge of coping with crises and external shocks, such as COVID-19, El Niño, and supply chain disruptions. Many showed creativity by shifting to PPE-making, facemask production, or delivery services during the pandemic. This connects with Eggers (2020), who underscored that crises simultaneously expose uncertainties and stimulate innovation among SMEs. In the same way, Hwang (2024) and Satpathy et al. (2025) emphasized that entrepreneurial resilience, the capacity to adapt and reconceptualize crises as opportunities, is central to MSME survival.

Thematic Integration and Emerging Framework: The GRIT Model. From the integration of these themes emerged a new conceptual framework called GRIT, which stands for Growth, Resilience, Innovation, and Transformation. The acronym defines the importance of how Filipino MSME entrepreneurs evolve through mentorship, grow through empowerment, stay resilient despite challenges, innovate under pressure, and transform continuously toward sustainability. This framework explains that mentorship does not lead to linear success; instead, it's a cyclical process of empowerment and adaptation. Growth begins through knowledge transfer and professionalization, Resilience develops as entrepreneurs face and

overcome obstacles, Innovation is created in response to operational and technological challenges, and Transformation becomes the sustainable results, both personal and organizational.



Figure 1
The GRIT Model

Proposed Theory: The Transformative Sustainability Theory (TST). Synthesizing all the themes, this study proposes that the Transformative Sustainability Theory explains how mentorship-driven empowerment evolves into long-term entrepreneurial sustainability through adaptive transformation. It explains that entrepreneurial sustainability emerges from continuous interaction among empowerment, resilience, innovation, and transformation, that embodied in the GRIT framework. It begins with mentorship as the catalyst, where guidance, shared experiences, and new learning form transformation through giving entrepreneurs the knowledge, skills, and connections they need to improve. This leads to transformation as a process, where growth happens gradually as entrepreneurs apply what they learned, organize their business better, and develop stronger confidence and identity as business owners. However, transformation is not always easy; there are always challenges and obstacles present. Here, resilience acts as a mediator, helping entrepreneurs face the struggles and crises, learn from them, and adapt rather than give up. Through these challenges, innovation becomes the driver, as entrepreneurs develop their creativity and practical ways to adjust and adapt to changes and uncertainty. Lastly, sustainability is the outcome, where long-term success is not easy,

like avoiding risks and problems, but rather about continuously transforming and improving through them. This proposed theory illustrates a true and lasting entrepreneurship is formed through mentorship, growth, resilience, creativity, and the courage to keep moving despite the hindrances and difficulties.

Conclusion. This study revealed that the lived experiences of KMME mentee graduates in Western Visayas reflect a dynamic balance between empowerment and limitation. Mentorship through the KMME program catalyzed transformation in both organizational practices and personal confidence, allowing entrepreneurs to professionalize their operations, strengthen customer relationships, and redefine their entrepreneurial identity. However, challenges persisted, specifically limited access to finance, weak post-program support, market instability, and technological adaptation gaps. The findings underscore that these insights emerged the GRIT Model Growth, Resilience, Innovation, and Transformation) and the Transformative Sustainability Theory, which explain how long-term entrepreneurial sustainability evolves through mentorship, adaptation, and innovation in the face of persistent challenges.

Recommendations. From the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1. **For DTI and Program Implementers.** Establish a structured post-mentorship support system, such as KMME plus, that focuses on follow-up coaching, digital transformation, and finance-readiness assistance.
2. **For Policy and Development Agencies.** Strengthen coordination between DTI, LGUs, TESDA, DOST, and financial institutions to bridge financing gaps, simplify regulatory procedures, and promote local market linkages.
3. **For MSME KMME Graduates.** Apply the GRIT framework by continuously developing business systems (Growth), overcoming

challenges as learning opportunities (Resilience), adopting digital and innovative solutions and concepts (Innovation), and pursuing ongoing self and enterprise development (Transformation).

4. **For Future Researchers.** Extend validation of the Transformative Sustainability Theory across other regions and entrepreneurship programs to improve contextual understanding and policy enhancement. Also, future studies may expand the number of respondents to improve representativeness and may employ other qualitative approaches or mixed-method research designs. Conducting longitudinal studies is also recommended to track the long-term impact of mentorship on MSME sustainability and post-program growth.

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