



Transforming Entrepreneurial Identity through Community-Based Training in Marginalized Settings

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship has been widely recognized as a catalyst for economic development, particularly in underserved and rural communities. Within this field, the personal transformation experienced by individuals participating in community-based entrepreneurship programs remains underexplored. While prior research has primarily focused on measurable outcomes such as business performance, little is known about how participants internalize these experiences and redefine their entrepreneurial identities. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do alumni of community-based entrepreneurship training interpret their post-training experiences in shaping sustainable entrepreneurial identities? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study examines the lived experiences of nine individuals who completed community-based entrepreneurship training within the previous 6 to 12 months in rural Central Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to uncover the essence of their personal and professional transformation. The findings reveal that participants underwent a shift in self-perception marked by economic self-awareness, identity reconstruction, intrinsic motivation, and community-rooted resilience. These themes illustrate how entrepreneurship was not only a means of livelihood but also a process of becoming embedded in cultural and social meaning. This study contributes to a deeper, experience-centered understanding of entrepreneurial development and highlights the limitations of purely outcome-based program evaluations. The findings underscore the value of applying phenomenological inquiry in entrepreneurship research and open pathways for future studies focused on identity, context, and subjective transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a vital driver of economic development, particularly within marginalized and rural communities. Amid ongoing structural inequalities and limited employment opportunities, entrepreneurial initiatives offer a pathway for individuals to assert economic agency and create sustainable livelihoods. Community-based entrepreneurship programs have emerged as a strategic intervention to empower individuals with practical skills, confidence, and social support necessary to initiate and maintain micro or small-scale enterprises. These programs often operate in contexts where formal infrastructure is lacking, aiming to catalyze change through grassroots empowerment and localized knowledge transfer (Ahmed & Salim, 2022).

While quantitative assessments of such programs frequently focus on measurable indicators—such as income generation, employment creation, or business growth (Karlan et al., 2015; Banerjee & Duflo, 2019)—they may not fully capture the nuanced, experiential dimensions of entrepreneurial development. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that quantitative methods offer valuable insights, particularly when evaluating scale, replicability, and policy-level impacts. Rather than suggesting inadequacy, this study seeks to complement those approaches by exploring an underrepresented dimension: the lived, transformative journey of becoming an entrepreneur.

For many individuals, particularly those in underserved regions, entrepreneurship is not merely an economic endeavor, but a process that reshapes self-perception, social roles, and future aspirations. It intersects with identity, cultural norms, and collective meaning-making within the community (Jones et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2017). Understanding these subjective experiences is crucial to obtaining a holistic picture of entrepreneurial impact—one that encompasses both statistical outcomes and personal transformation.

Given the complexity of this phenomenon, there is a growing need to explore how individuals internalize and interpret their entrepreneurial journeys, especially when such experiences emerge from participatory, community-oriented training environments. A phenomenological approach, which seeks to uncover the meaning and essence of lived experience, provides a valuable lens to examine how individuals construct and reconstruct their entrepreneurial identities. This perspective emphasizes the importance of context, perception, and meaning-making—elements often overlooked in conventional research paradigms. In light of this, the present study aims to illuminate the personal narratives and evolving identities of those who have participated in community-based entrepreneurship programs, contributing to a richer, experience-centered understanding of entrepreneurial development.

Within the broader field of entrepreneurship research, scholarly attention has increasingly shifted toward understanding how individuals experience the entrepreneurial process on a personal level. Rather than treating entrepreneurship solely as a set of business activities or measurable outcomes, this subfield emphasizes how individuals come to define themselves as entrepreneurs, particularly in challenging social or economic contexts. Studies on the lived experiences of entrepreneurs reveal that identity construction, psychological adaptation, and contextual interpretation are central to how entrepreneurial behavior emerges and evolves (Mei & Tan, 2020; Rodríguez & Valdez, 2023).

Despite growing recognition of these experiential dimensions, much of the existing literature continues to rely heavily on quantitative methods, such as surveys and econometric modeling. While these approaches offer valuable insights into patterns and correlations, they fall short in capturing the depth and nuance of how individuals make meaning from their entrepreneurial journeys. Quantitative indicators may reveal what has changed—for instance, an increase in business income—but they often fail to uncover how and why such change is experienced by individuals within their social realities (Stevenson et al., 2022).

This methodological limitation presents a significant challenge in fully understanding the transformative potential of community-based entrepreneurship programs. Previous research often overlooks the intricate process through which participants internalize training experiences, reconstruct their self-concept, and navigate new entrepreneurial identities. Moreover, studies tend to generalize findings across diverse contexts, neglecting the cultural and communal dimensions that are central to meaning-making in marginalized or rural settings (Gibb & Ritchie, 2021). As such, there is a pressing need for research approaches that foreground the lived experiences of individuals and explore the essence of entrepreneurial transformation from their own perspectives.

Efforts to support entrepreneurship in marginalized and rural communities have largely relied on standardized, skill-based training programs designed to equip individuals with practical knowledge and business tools. These interventions are typically evaluated through post-training outcomes such as enterprise establishment, income increases, or employment generation. While useful, such metrics offer only a partial understanding of the entrepreneurial transformation process. They overlook the internal, subjective dimensions through which individuals experience and construct their entrepreneurial journeys (Ahmed & Salim, 2022).

The predominant reliance on quantitative and programmatic evaluations limits the capacity of existing research to reveal how entrepreneurship is understood, internalized, and embodied by those who undertake it—particularly in contexts shaped by social vulnerability and communal interdependence. These conventional approaches tend to marginalize the voices and lived realities of participants, resulting in a fragmented and instrumental view of entrepreneurship that fails to account for the complex psychological and social dynamics involved (Gibb & Ritchie, 2021; Stevenson et al., 2022).

This gap underscores the need for an alternative research paradigm that can capture the richness of experience, the evolution of identity, and the meanings attributed to entrepreneurship from the perspective of those living it. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on essence and lived meaning, provides a robust framework for addressing this shortcoming. By focusing on how individuals interpret and give meaning to their entrepreneurial development within their specific socio-cultural environments, phenomenological inquiry allows for a more holistic, authentic, and contextually grounded understanding of the entrepreneurial process. However, such approaches remain underutilized in the study of community-based entrepreneurship, especially in exploring the subjective transformations that participants undergo after training programs.

Prior studies have explored the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education, particularly within marginalized or rural settings. Most of this research emphasizes external outcomes, such as economic performance or business growth. However, some qualitative work has begun to examine how entrepreneurship affects identity and self-perception (Jones et al., 2021; Rodríguez & Valdez, 2023). These studies indicate that personal transformation plays a critical role in sustaining entrepreneurial behavior. Yet, the internal meaning-making process that underlies such transformation remains insufficiently understood.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how alumni of community-based entrepreneurship programs experience the development of their entrepreneurial identities. The phenomenological method was selected for its ability to uncover how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their lived experiences. This approach responds directly to the limitations of previous research, which often fails to account for subjective transformation. By focusing on personal narratives, the study seeks to understand the essence of entrepreneurial change from the participant's perspective. Through this lens, entrepreneurship is not only an activity but a deeply personal journey shaped by context and reflection.

The article is organized as follows. First, the introduction presents the background and rationale for the study. Second, the methods section details the phenomenological framework, participant selection, data collection, and analytical process. Third, the results section provides thematic narratives derived from the data, supported by direct participant quotes. Fourth, the discussion links findings to existing literature and theoretical concepts. Finally, the article concludes with implications for research, practice, and policy in entrepreneurship education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals who had completed community-based entrepreneurship training and subsequently established sustainable businesses. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. The interpretative strand, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was employed to examine not only what participants experienced, but also how they interpreted those experiences within their sociocultural contexts. This approach was deemed suitable for investigating the transformation of entrepreneurial identity and motivation, given its emphasis on subjective meaning and contextual interpretation of lived phenomena.

Participants

Participants in this study were individuals who had completed a community-based entrepreneurship training program within the past 6 to 12 months and had initiated or sustained a business venture since then. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 20 years and above), residing in rural or semi-urban areas, and actively engaged in entrepreneurial activities following the training. Individuals who had received other forms of formal entrepreneurship education outside the community-based context were excluded. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that participants possessed rich, relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under

investigation. A total of nine participants (5 women and 4 men) were included, ranging in age from 23 to 41 years, with varied entrepreneurial sectors such as food processing, agriculture, and handicrafts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person at locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature and pilot-tested for clarity. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. A second round of follow-up interviews was conducted for six participants to deepen understanding and confirm emerging themes. Field notes were also documented during and immediately after each session to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The data collection process was conducted over a period of three months

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to examine the transcribed data. The analysis involved several systematic stages: repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity, identification of meaning units, development of emergent themes, and clustering of related themes to form superordinate categories. Themes were then contextualized based on participants' narratives to capture the essence of their lived experiences. NVivo 14 software was utilized to assist in the organization and coding of data, though interpretative insights were derived through manual engagement with the texts. The analytic process emphasized depth of understanding over breadth, aligning with the phenomenological aim of uncovering essential meanings embedded in the participants' accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after a full explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality assurances. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely with restricted access. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of community-based entrepreneurship training alumni in building sustainable businesses and shaping their entrepreneurial identities. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), several core themes emerged from the in-depth interviews. The findings reflect a deeply personal and transformative journey, grounded in the unique socio-economic contexts of the participants. The narratives reveal not only how participants made sense of their entrepreneurial path but also how they redefined themselves in relation to their communities and aspirations.

Awakening of Economic Self-Awareness

Participants commonly expressed a profound realization of their economic agency, which had previously been dormant due to limited exposure and opportunity. The training served as a turning point that triggered self-reflection and re-evaluation of their economic potential.

"I used to think only people with capital and connections could run a business. After the training, I realized I had something more valuable—an idea, a passion. That was when I saw myself differently." (Participant 3)

This awakening marked the beginning of a shift from dependence to proactive self-reliance. Many described the experience as an "opening of the mind" that enabled them to perceive entrepreneurship not as a privilege, but as a feasible and meaningful path.

“That was the first time I thought, ‘Maybe I can provide for my family, not just survive.’ It was empowering.” (Participant 7)

Reconstructing Entrepreneurial Identity

The participants' post-training experiences revealed a reconstruction of personal identity. Entrepreneurship was no longer a technical skill or profession, but an intrinsic part of who they had become. Their narratives emphasized a change in self-perception, often accompanied by greater confidence and responsibility.

“Before, I was just someone trying to get by. Now, I see myself as an entrepreneur—not in the big city sense, but someone who builds something meaningful in their village.” (Participant 1)

This reconstructed identity was deeply embedded in social roles and local relevance. Participants spoke about a newfound sense of purpose tied to their cultural and community-based responsibilities.

Inner Drive and Meaning-Making

Participants described a deep sense of intrinsic motivation rooted in personal values, family, and communal contribution. For many, financial success was not the sole marker of achievement; instead, the meaning lay in the act of creating and sustaining something of value.

“The business is not just to earn money. It’s to show my children that we can stand on our own feet, even here in this remote place.” (Participant 5)

This inner drive was frequently fueled by adversity. Participants who had faced previous business failures or socio-economic exclusion viewed the training as a catalyst for self-renewal.

“I failed twice before. This time, I built it not just for profit, but to prove that I can rise again with what I learned.” (Participant 9)

Community-Based Resilience and Shared Success

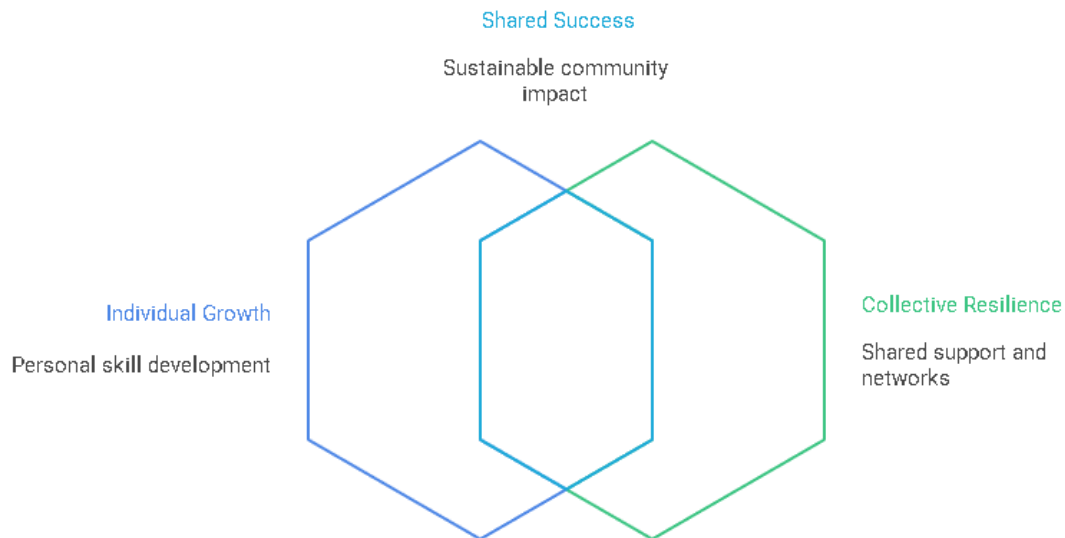
The community-based nature of the training fostered not only individual growth but also collective resilience. Several participants emphasized the importance of peer support, knowledge-sharing, and local networks that evolved after the program ended.

“I didn't just gain skills; I gained a circle of people who understand my journey. We push each other, we remind each other not to give up.” (Participant 2)

Participants often spoke of sustainability in terms of shared success, emphasizing how their ventures contributed to local employment, mentorship, and inspiration for others in the community.

“My small business hired two neighbors. That may not be big, but it means something here. It’s how we grow—together.” (Participant 6)

The Power of Community-Driven Resilience



Essential Summary of Findings

The findings reveal a holistic transformation among alumni of community-based entrepreneurship programs. These transformations spanned economic self-awareness, identity redefinition, value-driven motivation, and the nurturing of communal support systems. Rather than mere acquisition of technical skills, the participants experienced entrepreneurship as a personal and social journey of becoming—one that restructured how they see themselves, their roles, and their futures.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that alumni of community-based entrepreneurship programs undergo a profound transformation marked by increased economic self-awareness, redefinition of entrepreneurial identity, and a deepened sense of intrinsic motivation. These lived experiences illustrate that entrepreneurship, within this context, is not merely a technical or economic undertaking but a deeply personal and social journey of becoming. This interpretation directly responds to the central research question concerning how individuals experience and internalize entrepreneurial identity formation after such training.

The results contribute a nuanced understanding of the entrepreneurial process by highlighting how participants interpret their post-training trajectories in terms of identity, purpose, and resilience. Rather than being passive recipients of vocational knowledge, participants reframe their lived realities through the lens of self-agency and community relevance. This subjective transformation is central to the sustainability of their entrepreneurial activities. The study thus advances the field by offering a voice-centered, meaning-rich account of entrepreneurial development—an area often neglected in program evaluation and policy discourse.

These findings align with and extend prior qualitative studies that emphasize the experiential and identity-related aspects of entrepreneurship (Mei & Tan, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). The concept of “entrepreneurial becoming” as suggested by these authors is affirmed in this study, particularly in the ways participants navigate socioeconomic adversity while constructing new personal narratives. Moreover, the sense of communal empowerment reported by participants reinforces Rodríguez & Valdez’s (2023) assertion that entrepreneurship in marginal contexts is inseparable from social responsibility and relational meaning-making. Unlike mainstream economic theories that focus on individualistic gain, the current findings suggest that entrepreneurship, as lived by these individuals, is embedded in collective values, self-redefinition, and contextually grounded aspirations.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry several important implications for both theory and practice. At a social level, the results emphasize that community-based entrepreneurship is more than an economic strategy—it is a transformative process that reshapes individuals' identities, relationships, and roles within their communities. These insights suggest that policymakers and program designers must go beyond technical skill-building and consider how entrepreneurship training can support personal growth, emotional resilience, and social reintegration. Culturally, the narratives reveal the importance of localized meaning-making in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly in marginalized rural settings where individual agency is tightly interwoven with community dynamics. Professionally, the study offers educators and facilitators new perspectives on how training programs might integrate reflective practices to support participants' identity reconstruction and long-term motivation.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was intentionally small and context-specific, consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth over breadth. However, this limits the ability to generalize findings across different demographic groups or geographic regions. Additionally, all participants had completed their training within the same institutional model, which may influence the uniformity of their experiences. The study also relied exclusively on self-reported data through interviews, which, while rich in insight, may be subject to memory bias or social desirability effects. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather point to the need for complementary research using varied populations and longitudinal approaches.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies may expand on these findings by exploring similar phenomena in diverse cultural and economic settings, allowing for cross-contextual comparison of entrepreneurial identity formation. Longitudinal research could investigate how the transformations identified in this study evolve over time and whether they lead to sustained business practices or further social engagement. Additionally, further phenomenological inquiry could examine the role of peer networks, mentorship, and community perception in shaping the entrepreneur's sense of purpose and belonging. By deepening our understanding of the human experience within entrepreneurship, such research can enrich the theoretical landscape and inform more inclusive and empathetic program designs.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how alumni of community-based entrepreneurship programs experience the development of their entrepreneurial identities and sustain business efforts within marginalized settings. The findings reveal that participants undergo a personal transformation marked by increased economic self-awareness, reconstructed identity, and deeper intrinsic motivation. These experiences highlight entrepreneurship as a socially and emotionally embedded journey, not just a functional activity. The study addresses a critical gap in the literature by offering a rich, experience-based understanding of entrepreneurship, often overlooked in quantitative evaluations. It also contributes to a more holistic view of entrepreneurial development by centering the voices and lived realities of individuals in underserved communities.

To translate these insights into practice, educators and program designers should incorporate reflective components—such as narrative-sharing, mentorship, and identity workshops—into entrepreneurship curricula to support deeper self-understanding and motivation. Policymakers are encouraged to move beyond outcome-based metrics and consider qualitative indicators of entrepreneurial success that include personal growth and community impact. Practitioners can use these findings to design more culturally grounded interventions that recognize entrepreneurship as a developmental journey, not merely a means of economic survival. Future research may build on these insights by applying phenomenological methods in varied cultural contexts or adopting longitudinal approaches to trace identity transformation over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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