

THE PARADOX OF SUSTAINABILITY OF CULINARY MSMES: DECONSTRUCTING ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES IN DEALING WITH CONTEMPORARY MARKET VULNERABILITIES

Muh. Husriadi^{1*}

Halu Oleo University, Kendari, Indonesia
husriadiadi@gmail.com

Usman. M²

Halu Oleo University, Kendari, Indonesia

Nada Kusuma³

Halu Oleo University, Kendari, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The culinary Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) sector plays a strategic role in supporting the resilience of the people's economy, but its actors are constantly faced with accumulative pressures in the form of market uncertainty, intense spatial competition, and the dynamics of changing consumer preferences. This study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of MSMEs in the culinary sector in the early-stage survival phase in formulating adaptive strategies, internalizing operational obstacles, and strengthening the articulation of business sustainability goals. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design, this study examines the in-depth experiences of the owners and managers of Kedai Ross in the MTQ MSME center area, Kadia District, Kendari City. Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and structured field notes. The results reveal that the operational resilience of micro-enterprises in the early stages is highly dependent on the advantages of physical location differentiation and an interpersonal service orientation centered on customer satisfaction. Although access to digital marketing remains very limited due to the technological literacy gap, business sustainability can be maintained through responsive product adaptations tailored to the tastes of the younger generation (Generation Z) and self-efficacy in dealing with visitor fluctuations due to seasonal factors. The theoretical and practical implications of this research point to the importance of reconstructing a digital literacy mentoring model based on local characteristics and local government policy interventions to ensure the resilience of micro-enterprises in public spaces.

Keywords: Culinary MSMEs, Adaptive Strategy, Digital Literacy, Business Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are universally recognized as the backbone of national economic stability, oriented towards providing social safety nets and absorbing labor. (Affandi et al. 2024). The regulatory framework as stipulated in Law Number 20 of 2008 confirms the position of MSMEs as independent and competitive productive economic entities in driving the wheels of the people's economy. (Dharmajaya et al. 2023). In the urban landscape, the micro-scale culinary industry such as food stalls, beverage stalls, and public space-based snack vendors, are the most dynamic segment because they have a high level of access to daily cash flow and are able to become the main livelihood for community groups that are not absorbed in the formal sector. (Paul et al. 2023). Despite having a significant macro contribution, the survival of culinary sector MSMEs in post-pandemic conditions and contemporary economic dynamics is faced with complex vulnerabilities. (Hasmarini et al. 2026). Micro-entrepreneurs are not only required to compete in a fragmented market competition arena, but also have to adapt to changes in people's consumption behavior that are shifting very quickly (Alshebami 2025).

The rapid development of information technology provides exponential opportunities through the digitalization of marketing and the integration of e-commerce; however, this transition creates a new disparity in the form of a digital literacy gap. (Richmond, Rader, and Lanier 2017). Many individual micro-business actors are unable to adopt technological instruments optimally due to age constraints, limited cognitive-technological capacity, and limited operational capital. (Anatan and Nur 2023). As a result, reliance on conventional marketing methods and physical locations risks increasing business vulnerability, especially for new business entities that are in the early-stage survival phase (Fürst et al. 2023). On the one hand, several previous studies support the view that micro-enterprise resilience in the early stages is largely determined by non-digital capabilities, social capital, and product adaptations based on local wisdom. Findings (Dogan 2023) emphasized that for culinary MSMEs in urban public spaces, relational closeness and quality face-to-face service are the main foundations of sustainability that can mitigate limited access to digital technology. The same thing was expressed by (Arifin, Zakaria, and Bustaman 2023) who found that psychological resilience and self-efficacy of business owners are critical determinants in maintaining operational stability when facing fierce competition in busy city centers.

Furthermore, (Wiastuti and Rashid 2024) confirming that the expertise of micro-business owners in redesigning menus that are responsive to Generation Z taste trends can be a major driver of daily cash flow without having to rely entirely on online ordering platforms. On the other hand, a contrasting perspective is voiced by other recent phenomenological studies which place digital literacy as an absolute, non-negotiable prerequisite. (Susanto et al. 2026) concluded in their study that the advantages of physical

location and conventional services are no longer sufficient to sustain urban MSME businesses; failure to integrate digital marketing channels exponentially accelerates business failure rates. This critical view is reinforced by (Pratiwi 2024) which indicates that the perception of young consumers (Generation Z) is currently very accustomed to the efficiency of cashless transactions and social media visibility, so that micro-businesses that only rely on physical interactions and strategic locations are considered obsolete and are experiencing a gradual decline in market share. The fundamental debate in the literature above shows a substantial explanatory gap. Existing literature tends to generalize that digital technology adoption is the only path to MSME survival, or conversely, oversimplifies the role of physical location without deeply examining how the dynamics of micro-entrepreneurs' lived experiences actually evolve when facing dual disruptions, such as digital literacy inequality and spatial environmental uncertainty. This research gap becomes even more apparent when drawn into the socio-economic context of developing regions outside Java (secondary cities).

Most MSME studies focus on metropolitan ecosystems that already have mature digital infrastructure and public literacy. In this context, Kendari City, specifically the MTQ Public Space Area in Kadia District, is a crucial and strategic research location. Kendari City is the epicenter of economic growth and service agglomeration in Southeast Sulawesi, which is undergoing a rapid urbanization transition. The MTQ Kadia area specifically has unique historical, sociological, and economic values, so this area is projected by the local government as an open public space center that brings together mass interaction, regulations on business land provision, and intense competition between stall-based culinary traders or stalls. Examining the dynamics of culinary MSMEs in this region provides a rich empirical description of how the government's public land provision policy interacts with the survival strategies of independent micro-vendors amidst seasonal challenges such as high rainfall and visitor fluctuations. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively outline and describe the lived experiences of novice culinary MSMEs in Kendari City. In-depth analysis of the adaptive strategies formulated by MSMEs in leveraging location advantages and conventional service interactions amidst limited digital literacy is also conducted. It explores the representation of physical and non-physical operational barriers such as spatial competition dynamics and seasonal weather factors, as well as the psychological-operational coping mechanisms applied. It also identifies the articulation of goals, expectations, and direction of long-term business sustainability from the subjective perspective of business actors.

The novelty of this research lies in its explanatory disclosure of the "non-digital" resilience mechanisms implemented by culinary MSMEs in the early stages of the public space of developing cities. This study offers a new framework that challenges technological determinism, by proving that the flexibility of product innovation based on local demographic trends (Generation Z) and the self-efficacy of entrepreneurs can be an effective sustainability buffer. Academically, this research provides theoretical contributions to the qualitative

business management and socioeconomic literature related to micro-enterprise adaptation in urban transition areas. Practically, these findings provide a basis for argumentation for policymakers at the regional level to design MSME mentoring programs oriented to the context of real needs, such as strengthening community-based digital literacy and mitigating business risks based on local spatial dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological method to deeply understand the lived experiences of micro-culinary business owners in the early stages of business establishment, particularly regarding the dynamics of struggle, strategic adjustments, and psychological and operational resilience amidst limited technological literacy. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meaning of informants' subjective experiences in depth without limiting those experiences to certain assumptions or conceptual frameworks. Researchers apply the principle of *epoché* by suspending initial assumptions so that informants' experiences can be understood based on the perspectives and meanings provided by the informants. According to (Öhlén 2023) states that phenomenology is suitable for exploring the deeper meaning of an individual's experience of a phenomenon. Research informants were determined using purposive sampling techniques based on the suitability of their characteristics and the depth of information needed. (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025). The key informant was Mrs. Rosmini, the owner and sole operational manager of Kedai Ross in the MTQ MSME Center area, Kadia District, Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi Province. The informant was selected because she is a culinary MSME actor in the early-stage survival phase with a business age of five months, directly involved in decision-making, financial management, customer service, and production, and experiencing limited digital literacy relevant to the research focus.

The research was conducted at the MTQ MSME Center, Kadia District, Kendari City. The location was chosen purposively because it is a public space that is the center of socioeconomic activities and a location where various culinary businesses develop with a relatively high level of competition. These conditions provide a relevant context for examining the ability of business actors to face competition, changes in the number of consumers, open environmental conditions, and seasonal factors that influence business sustainability. Primary data collection was conducted in October 2026 through in-depth interviews, field observations, and field notes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured guide covering business background, marketing strategy, operational challenges, digital technology utilization, adaptation strategies, and expectations for business sustainability. Observations were made of business premises conditions, customer interactions, service activities, visitor density, and competitors' conditions in the surrounding area. Field notes were used to record environmental context, gestures, emotional expressions, coping

responses, and situations that emerged during the study. The use of these various techniques aimed to increase data credibility through triangulation, as stated (Janis 2022). Data analysis used the Interactive Model (Monaro, Gullick, and West 2022) This phase includes data condensation, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. In the condensation phase, interview and observation data were sorted, focused, and grouped into meaningful units and themes such as location-based strategies, seasonal constraints, technological limitations, marketing strategies, product adaptation, and business resilience. The data were then presented in narrative form and categorized to identify patterns of relationships between constraints and adaptive actions. Conclusions were repeatedly verified through comparisons of interview results, observations, and field notes. Data validity was strengthened through member checking to ensure the researcher's interpretations matched the informants' experiences. With this method, the research is expected to yield a deep and contextual understanding of the experiences, adaptation strategies, and resilience of culinary micro-business owners in the early stages of business establishment amidst limited technological literacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that the sustainability of the Ross Shop micro-business is not solely determined by the amount of financial capital, but rather the result of the interaction between the business owner's ability to identify environmental opportunities, utilize location accessibility, adapt to changes in the business environment, and the capacity to develop products. Ross Shop, which has been operating for approximately five months, exhibits the characteristics of a micro-business that grows gradually through the utilization of available resources in the surrounding environment. In this context, the decision to establish a business is based more on observing local opportunities and direct experience than through systematic formal business planning.

Opportunity Detection and Exploitation Capabilities of Physical Accessibility

Interview results indicate that the emergence of Ross's Shop is closely related to the business owner's ability to recognize opportunities arising from the development of the MTQ area. The provision of public facilities and infrastructure by the local government creates a concentration of community activity, which is then perceived as an economic opportunity by business owners. According to Ms. Rosmini, the presence of the MTQ area was one of the main reasons she was interested in opening a business there. She saw the area as quite busy, especially at night, so she believed there was an opportunity to sell food. She did not conduct a specific market survey before starting the business, but rather observed the surrounding conditions and the number of people visiting the MTQ area. Here is her interview account:

*"I saw it was busy here, especially at night, with lots of people coming.
So, I thought, instead of having such a crowded place, it would be nice*

to open a shop. People will definitely come and want something to eat or drink."

Furthermore, the informant explained that the decision to open a business was based more on observing the surrounding conditions than on formal business planning. He believed that the bustling MTQ area provided an opportunity to introduce his products to visitors without having to spend a lot on promotion.

"I just observe the situation here. If it's crowded, I think there's an opportunity to sell. I don't conduct any specific surveys; I just assess the situation. If a lot of people come, it means there's an opportunity for us to sell."

This statement demonstrates that the informants' ability to identify business opportunities stems from experience and direct observation of their surroundings. In the context of the local community in Kendari City, the decision to start a business tends to be simple and practical: by identifying a busy location, assessing the needs of those who attend, and then attempting to establish a business. Thus, the MTQ area is viewed not only as a gathering place for the community but also as an economic space that provides opportunities for MSMEs to start businesses with relatively limited resources.

Digital Literacy Limitations and Dependence on Physical Markets

Based on the research results, limitations were found in the use of digital technology as a marketing tool. At the time of the study, Kedai Ross did not have an official social media account or online marketing channel specifically used to introduce products, build its brand, or reach consumers outside the MTQ area. This situation is primarily related to the business owner's limited skills and understanding of digital technology. When asked why they had not yet used digital media to support business promotion, the informant stated:

"Lack of understanding of technology and how to promote in the digital world..."

This statement indicates that the digital barriers faced by Kedai Ross are not primarily caused by the lack of technology, but rather by limited human resource capacity to operate it. Therefore, the issue of digitalization at the micro-business level needs to be understood not only as a matter of device ownership or internet access, but also as a matter of digital literacy and the ability to translate technology into productive business activities. These limitations mean that Kedai Ross's marketing activities remain centered on face-to-face interactions. Consumers learn about the shop primarily through its physical presence in the MTQ area, purchasing experiences, personal recommendations, and product appeal. This pattern has the advantage of fostering closer interpersonal relationships between owners and customers, but it also limits market reach. Kedai Ross's brand awareness has the potential to grow only within the geographic radius of the MTQ area, so customer growth is highly dependent on visitor flow. This finding aligns with (Matosas-I 2024) This demonstrates the

importance of digital technology adoption and social media engagement in supporting MSME sales performance. The underdevelopment of digital channels limits businesses' ability to build brand awareness and reach potential customers outside their physical location. Therefore, while a strategic physical location may provide initial market access, it may not necessarily provide a foundation for long-term growth without diversified marketing channels. This finding also supports the findings of (Suyanto et al. 2023) The digital literacy gap is one of the obstacles to the sustainability of micro-enterprises. Dependence on a single market makes businesses vulnerable to changes in visitor numbers. When physical conditions in an area are unfavorable, for example due to bad weather or a decrease in community activity, alternative channels are lacking to maintain customer relationships.

Environmental Barriers, Resilience, and Coping Mechanisms of Business Actors

The research found that Ross's shop faced external challenges. The two most prominent factors were weather conditions and intense competition. Heavy rainfall directly impacted visitor traffic to the MTQ area. Since most customers were locals, the decrease in visitor numbers automatically impacted transaction opportunities. The following is an excerpt from the interview:

"When it rains, it's usually quiet, because fewer people come to the MTQ. We can't control the weather, so we just go with it. The important thing is to stay open."

At the same time, the concentration of MSME vendors in the MTQ area creates a relatively high level of competition. Consumers not only have the option to purchase Kedai Ross products but also a variety of culinary alternatives available within the same location. This competition is not only related to price, but also concerns consumer attention, product appeal, convenience of the venue, service, and each vendor's ability to retain customers. Here's an excerpt from the interview:

"There are also a lot of people selling food here, so there is competition. I'm trying to add new menus that young people will like so that customers will still be interested in coming."

Interestingly, the informants' responses to this uncertainty demonstrated a form of resilience that wasn't always demonstrated through aggressive actions or outright expansion. When faced with uncontrollable conditions, such as rain and fluctuating visitor numbers, the informants displayed a calm demeanor and a tendency to accept the situation. This attitude, at first glance, could be interpreted as resignation. However, when viewed collectively, along with the product development actions undertaken, it is more accurately understood as a mechanism for managing psychological stress. Here's an excerpt from the interview:

"If it rains or there aren't enough people, that's beyond our control. But when it comes to food, service, and the menu, we can still manage that. So, the important thing is to see what we can do."

Thus, two forms of response operate simultaneously. Emotionally, informants use acceptance and composure to deal with external conditions beyond their control. Meanwhile, in action, informants continue to adjust to things they can control, particularly through product innovation. This pattern suggests that micro-entrepreneurs' coping strategies are not always singular. *Emotion-focused coping* is used to maintain psychological stability when facing uncertainty, while *problem-focused coping* is implemented through concrete actions to maintain business attractiveness.

This finding is important because resignation in the context of micro-enterprises cannot automatically be equated with incompetence or despair. At Ross's Shop, acceptance of external conditions actually goes hand in hand with adaptability. Informants have no control over the weather or the number of visitors to the area, but they do have control over the products offered, how they serve customers, and how they develop menu variations.

Product Innovation as an Adaptation Strategy to Changes in Consumer Preferences

One form of adaptation identified was the development of new menu variants. This innovation was implemented in response to changing consumer preferences, particularly those from Generation Z. This action demonstrates that although Kedai Ross has not yet optimally utilized social media as a marketing tool, the business owner still possesses the ability to read changing consumer preferences through direct interaction. This demonstrates a form of informal market sensing. The owner does not obtain market information through digital analytics data or formal consumer surveys, but rather through observation of buyer behavior, conversations with customers, and experience throughout the business. This knowledge is then translated into product adjustments. In the context of micro-enterprises, this mechanism represents a form of experiential market learning. This capability becomes increasingly important in highly competitive situations. When merchants are located in the same area and offer relatively close product categories, menu innovation can be a tool of differentiation. Consumers not only consider the location of the shop but also seek experiences or products that align with their preferences. Therefore, Kedai Ross's ability to adapt its menu demonstrates product adaptability, which serves as a non-financial asset for business sustainability. This finding also highlights an interesting paradox in the digitalization process of MSMEs. On the one hand, Ross's shop hasn't been able to leverage digital technology to identify trends and market its products more widely. On the other hand, the owner is still able to capture changes in consumer preferences through direct observation. This means that digital limitations don't completely eliminate entrepreneurial capacity, but they do limit the scale and speed of exploiting those opportunities.

Growth Orientation and the Regional Crowd Paradox

Despite only being in operation for about five months, Kedai Ross has already demonstrated a growth orientation. The informant expressed a desire to open branches in other locations as a means of expanding the business. This orientation demonstrates that

business success for the owner is not solely understood as the ability to generate income under current conditions, but also as the ability to build a customer base, produce products that are accepted by the market, and create expansion opportunities.

Based on interviews, informants identified at least three indicators used to define business success. First, the formation of repeat customers or loyal customers. Second, the creation of products that consumers like. Third, the possibility of expanding the business by opening branches. These three indicators demonstrate that the owner's perspective on success is multidimensional and not solely based on short-term profit calculations.

However, field observations reveal a paradox between the area's hustle and bustle and the rate of visitor-to-customer conversion. The MTQ area does experience high foot traffic, especially at night, but not all of these visitors end up as customers at Kedai Ross. The flow of visitors is spread across many vendors operating in the same area. Therefore, high foot traffic does not automatically translate into high transaction rates for a single business. This situation demonstrates that location advantage is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for growth. Kedai Ross must be able to translate access to visitor traffic into customer conversions. Quality taste and service are crucial for retaining customers, but in a highly competitive environment, the ability to differentiate and attract consumers is also essential.

These findings are consistent with and differ from research (Zhao and Liu 2023) For ultra-micro businesses, quality taste, warm service, and direct interaction can have a strong influence on customer loyalty and repeat purchases. This is evident in Kedai Ross, which still relies on direct customer experiences as the foundation of its relationships with consumers. Therefore, the absence of social media does not necessarily mean the business is unable to survive. However, on the other hand, the competitive context in the MTQ area shows that product and service excellence is not enough to generate broad market reach. If these advantages are only known to consumers who physically visit the area, the benefits for growth remain limited. This is where the difference between customer retention and market expansion lies. Kedai Ross has the opportunity to retain customers through products and services, but still faces limitations in expanding its customer base through digital channels.

Therefore, overall, Kedai Ross's sustainability is built on three main strengths: location accessibility, owner adaptability, and direct relationships with consumers. The MTQ area provides an initial market, while interaction with consumers helps the owner understand preferences and adapt products. However, the business still faces vulnerabilities such as dependence on the physical conditions of the area, competition between vendors, and limited digital literacy. Reliance on physical visitors becomes increasingly risky when weather or regional conditions reduce the number of customers, while digital limitations prevent the business from having alternative marketing channels. These findings suggest that Kedai Ross's primary problem is not a lack of opportunities, but rather the ability to transform local opportunities into sustainable business advantages. The owner has demonstrated

entrepreneurial alertness and product adaptability, but is not yet fully supported by digital and managerial capacity. Therefore, branch expansion plans need to be accompanied by strengthening organizational capacity, particularly in retaining customers, building brand identity, and utilizing digital media. Thus, Kedai Ross's sustainability is determined not only by location, but also by the ability to adapt, build market reach, and manage resources to cope with changes in the business environment.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the research results, Kedai Ross demonstrates the business model of a fledgling MSME that relies on a strategic location, good service, and the ability to adapt to consumer needs. The main obstacles include a decrease in visitors during the rainy season, competition between vendors, and limited use of technology. Despite this, the owner maintains a business development orientation through menu innovation and plans to open new branches. This demonstrates adaptability and an entrepreneurial orientation, although they still need to be strengthened with digital literacy and better business management. Therefore, Kedai Ross needs to reduce its dependence on crowded locations by utilizing simple digital media, such as WhatsApp Business and social media, to maintain communication with customers and expand market reach. The government and related parties can also support MSMEs through digital literacy and business management training. However, the results of this study are limited because they only involved one informant, making them unable to be generalized. Future research is recommended to involve more MSMEs and use more in-depth interviews to obtain a more comprehensive picture of their experiences and business sustainability strategies.

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