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Beyond the Drafts: A Phenomenological Study of Graduate Students' Experiences in Dissertation Writing

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ABSTRACT
This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived academic, psychological, and personal experiences of graduate students engaged in dissertation writing in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in Western Philippines. Using semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling, eight graduate students shared their experiences of navigating the demands of dissertation writing. Interviews were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify patterns and interpretive meanings. Findings revealed five overarching themes: (1) Juggling Life and Deadlines, illustrating the challenge of balancing academic work with personal responsibilities; (2) Emotional Turbulence, encompassing anxiety, self-doubt, and stress; (3) Mentorship and Support, highlighting the role of advisors, peers, and institutional networks; (4) Shaping Scholarly Identity, reflecting the development of academic self-concept and research confidence; and (5) Growth and Meaning, capturing reflective insights, resilience, and professional development. Participants described how structured mentorship, peer support, and self-regulated coping strategies facilitated motivation and perseverance despite academic and emotional pressures. The study emphasizes the importance of enhanced adviser training, targeted writing support, and holistic well-being programs to strengthen graduate student success and scholarly growth.
Keywords: graduate students, lived experiences, dissertation writing, phenomenology

1.INTRODUCTION

The doctoral dissertation represents the culminating scholarly requirement of doctoral education and marks the transition of candidates into independent researchers capable of producing original contributions to knowledge. As a sustained and complex academic endeavor, dissertation writing demands advanced methodological competence, disciplinary writing expertise, self-regulation, and long-term persistence. However, recent research indicates that the doctoral journey, particularly the dissertation phase, is accompanied by substantial intellectual, emotional, and relational challenges that can affect both academic progress and psychological well-being (Mahsood et al., 2025; Tikkanen et al., 2025).

Doctoral candidates commonly experience elevated levels of psychological distress during the dissertation phase, characterized by heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and increased vulnerability. Empirical evidence underscores the demanding nature of this stage, where sustained research engagement, intensive writing requirements, and ambiguity surrounding academic expectations converge to intensify mental strain. A recent scoping review synthesizing studies on the well-being of PhD scholars highlights that prolonged immersion in research activities, persistent performance pressures, and uncertainties regarding supervisory and institutional standards significantly exacerbate anxiety and psychological burden (Casey et al., 2023). These pressures often intensify during critical writing milestones such as drafting results chapters, responding to feedback, and preparing for defense. Empirical research further demonstrates that emerging disengagement during the PhD process may be preceded by persistent doubts and motivational conflict, which can undermine dissertation momentum and persistence (Alisic et al., 2024).

Supervisory relationships also play a decisive role in shaping doctoral dissertation experiences. Recent studies reveal that doctoral candidates' well-being and engagement are closely associated with their perceptions of supervisory quality. Supportive and structured supervision is linked to stronger engagement profiles, whereas misalignment and limited guidance are associated with burnout and distress (Tikkanen et al., 2025). Beyond relational dynamics, the writing process itself presents distinct challenges. Investigation into doctoral students'

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writing of dissertation results sections shows that candidates often struggle with rhetorical expectations, disciplinary conventions, and alignment between supervisors' feedback and students' understanding of scholarly writing standards (Chien & Li, 2024). These findings underscore that dissertation writing is not merely procedural but involves complex negotiation of identity, expertise, and academic voice.

Although existing studies provide valuable insights into doctoral well-being, supervision, and writing challenges, much of the literature relies on large-scale surveys and quantitative profiling. There remains limited in-depth qualitative exploration of how doctoral candidates experience and interpret the dissertation writing process as a lived and meaning-making endeavor. Understanding how doctoral students make sense of stress, supervision, writing demands, and evolving scholarly identity during dissertation work is essential for designing responsive institutional supports.

This study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences of doctoral students engaged in dissertation writing, with particular attention to how they interpret and navigate the intellectual, relational, and psychological dimensions of the process. By foregrounding doctoral candidates' narratives, the study aims to contribute nuanced insights that inform more holistic and context-sensitive approaches to doctoral support.

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of doctoral students during dissertation writing?
2. How do doctoral students make sense of their lived experiences during dissertation writing?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that human motivation and well-being are influenced by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of dissertation writing, doctoral students' experiences of stress, achievement, and engagement can be understood through this lens: the degree to which students feel autonomous in selecting their research focus, competent in executing rigorous academic work, and connected to their supervisors and peers significantly shapes their emotional and cognitive experiences. SDT provides a framework for interpreting both the motivating factors and the challenges that doctoral students encounter as they navigate the demanding process of dissertation completion.

Complementing this perspective, Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) offers insight into how individuals evaluate and respond to stressful situations. Doctoral students face multiple stressors during dissertation writing, including high expectations, time constraints, and uncertainty about outcomes. According to the theory, the way students appraise these stressors as threats, challenges, or opportunities for growth, determines their emotional reactions and coping strategies. Integrating SDT with Cognitive Appraisal Theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of doctoral students' lived experiences, highlighting how personal motivation, perceived competence, and cognitive interpretation of challenges intersect to shape their journey through dissertation writing.

These theories provide a lens for examining the cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions of doctoral students' experiences, offering a framework for understanding how they navigate the pressures, uncertainties, and transformative opportunities inherent in completing a dissertation.

2.METHOD

Research Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research design as well as basis in collecting data that provided specific structure in analyzing them. While IPA is interpretative (recognizing the researcher's role through bracketing), this study also seeks to understand the participant's unique experience in dissertation writing on their own terms. Hence, this qualitative approach is deemed appropriate for the study as it aims to capture the subjective meanings, perceptions, and emotional realities that characterize the dissertation-writing journey beyond its procedural and technical dimensions.

Sample

Purposive sampling was utilized to select eight graduate students who were actively engaged in writing their theses or dissertations across State Universities and Colleges in Panay Island, Western Visayas. The participants, aged 35 to 43, represented diverse doctoral programs, including Educational Management, Social Science, Public Administration, Fisheries Technology, Psychology and Guidance, and Industrial Technology. This diversity allowed for a richer exploration of shared and context-specific experiences. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently enrolled in a graduate program and actively in the dissertation-writing phase, as well as willing to participate in a 60 to 90-minute interview. Students who had completed or discontinued their dissertations were excluded to ensure that accounts reflected immediate and ongoing lived experiences.

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Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	University	Program
Anthony	35	Capiz State University	Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management
Jane	38	West Visayas State University	Doctor of Philosophy in Social Science
Lara	41	Capiz State University	Doctor of Public Administration
Leo	36	University of Antique	Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management
Prince	38	Iloilo State University of Fisheries Science and Technology	Doctor of Fisheries Technology
Ana	40	Aklan State University	Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management
Liza	43	West Visayas State University	Doctor of Philosophy in Education Major in Psychology and Guidance
Mark	39	Iloilo Science and Technology University	Doctor of Industrial Technology

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted via online video conferencing platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth reflections on academic challenges, psychological responses, supervisory relationships, support systems, and coping strategies. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of their narratives.

3.DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts were analyzed following a rigorous phenomenological process consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Transcriptions were examined iteratively to identify significant statements, emergent themes, and patterns of meaning that illuminated the essence of participants' experiences. Through careful reflection and thematic clustering, the analysis sought to articulate the shared structures of meaning underlying the dissertation-writing journey while honoring individual variations.

4.ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical integrity was rigorously upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring that they were fully apprised of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Measures were implemented to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms and the removal of all identifying information. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequences. These safeguards were established to protect the dignity, privacy, and autonomy of all individuals involved.

5.RESULTS

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Themes	Narratives	Interpretive Meaning
Juggling Life and Deadlines	"I have to juggle work, family, and writing, it feels like there's never enough time." "Deadlines push me forward, but sometimes I feel creatively blocked because of time pressure."	Students' experiences of time, role conflict, and context influence both their workflow and their psychological endurance, making temporal challenges a symbolic and lived aspect of their dissertation journey.
Emotional Turbulence	"Some days I feel completely overwhelmed, like I'll never finish." "Writing alone in my room makes me feel isolated, but also strangely in control of my work." "When I finally get a breakthrough, the relief is indescribable."	Emotional experiences are central to students' meaning-making; stress, solitude, and moments of pride frame the dissertation as both a challenge and an opportunity for growth.
Mentorship and Support	"My advisor's feedback sometimes confuses me, but when it clicks, it's invaluable." "Having regular meetings with my committee helps me feel guided and not lost in the process."	Interpersonal relationships with mentors and institutional structures provide both emotional scaffolding and intellectual guidance, shaping how students interpret their agency, confidence, and belonging in the academic environment.
Shaping Scholarly Identity	"I never imagined that writing a dissertation would make me feel like a real researcher for the first time." "Every chapter I finish, I feel like I'm becoming someone more capable than I was when I started."	Dissertation writing is more than an academic task; it functions as a transformative process that reshapes graduate students' self-concept and scholarly identity.
Growth and Meaning	"Even though it's hard, I see myself growing not just academically, but as a professional." "The process forces me to reflect on who I am as a scholar and where I want to go."	Dissertation writing serves as a reflective space where students make sense of their professional identity, values, and future scholarly trajectories. Growth emerges through both struggle and achievement.

6.DISCUSSION

The present study explored the lived experiences of graduate students engaged in dissertation writing through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis generated five superordinate themes: Juggling Life and Deadlines, Emotional Turbulence, Mentorship and Support, Shaping Scholarly Identity, and Growth and Meaning. These themes illuminate the complex psychological, academic, and personal processes that characterize the dissertation journey.

Juggling Life and Deadlines

Participants consistently described the challenge of balancing dissertation responsibilities with professional, familial, and personal obligations. Many were working professionals who navigated demanding schedules while attempting to maintain academic productivity. The pressure of deadlines, coupled with competing life roles, created a persistent sense of time scarcity and cognitive overload.

Dardour (2025) highlights that doctoral students often experience competing academic and personal demands, which may influence productivity and persistence in completing research tasks. Dissertation writing requires sustained cognitive engagement, time management, and institutional support systems to facilitate progress. These pressures can intensify emotional strain but may also foster resilience and adaptive strategies among doctoral students as they navigate complex academic responsibilities.

Emotional Turbulence

The dissertation journey was frequently accompanied by intense emotional experiences. Participants recounted periods of anxiety, frustration, self-doubt, and mental exhaustion, particularly during critical stages such as proposal defense, data analysis, and manuscript revisions. These emotional fluctuations reflect the demanding cognitive and psychological demands associated with doctoral-level research.

Existing literature indicates that doctoral students commonly experience a complex mixture of positive and negative academic emotions throughout their research process. These emotional states often fluctuate depending on academic progress, supervisory feedback, and perceived competence (Casey et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2026).

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Emotional challenges such as anxiety and uncertainty are therefore not unusual but are embedded within the doctoral learning trajectory (Chen, 2023). In the context of IPA, these emotional experiences are interpreted as part of participants' meaning-making processes, where struggles become integral elements of personal and scholarly development.

Mentorship and Support

Mentorship emerged as a crucial factor shaping participants' dissertation experiences. Participants highlighted the importance of constructive feedback, guidance, and encouragement from dissertation advisers and committee members. Positive mentoring relationships were described as sources of intellectual clarity and emotional reassurance, particularly during moments of uncertainty.

Recent research underscores the central role of doctoral supervision in shaping students' research practices and scholarly positioning. Supervisory advice and feedback not only guide the research process but also influence doctoral students' rhetorical agency and disciplinary engagement (Li & Hu, 2026). Institutional and supervisory support have also been identified as key factors influencing the successful completion of dissertations and the development of research competence among doctoral students (Dardour, 2025). These findings reinforce the interpretative insight that mentorship is not merely procedural guidance but a relational process that mediates doctoral students' academic identity formation.

Shaping Scholarly Identity

Participants described dissertation writing as a transformative process that significantly contributed to the formation of their scholarly identity. Beyond fulfilling an academic requirement, the dissertation was experienced as a rite of passage that marked their transition from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. Participants articulated moments of self-realization as they navigated theoretical frameworks, methodological decisions, and the articulation of original contributions to their respective fields. From an IPA perspective, these narratives reveal how individuals interpret their academic development as a deeply personal journey toward becoming independent scholars.

This finding aligns with research emphasizing that doctoral education plays a critical role in shaping professional and scholarly identity through engagement in research practices and disciplinary communities. The process of conducting independent inquiry enables doctoral students to internalize the identity of a researcher and develop confidence in contributing to knowledge production (Naidoo et al., 2023). Similarly, research suggests that doctoral students' research styles and academic engagement significantly influence the development of their professional identity and scholarly self-concept (Larcombe et al., 2022).

Growth and Meaning

Despite the difficulties encountered throughout the dissertation process, participants ultimately described the experience as deeply meaningful and transformative. The completion of the dissertation symbolized not only academic accomplishment but also personal growth, perseverance, and intellectual maturity. Participants reflected on how the journey reshaped their perspectives on research, learning, and professional aspirations.

This transformative dimension of doctoral education has been widely acknowledged in the literature, which suggests that engaging in sustained research contributes to both intellectual development and personal growth among doctoral students (Chen, 2023). The reflective process embedded in doctoral research encourages students to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for learning and self-development. Within the IPA framework, such interpretations represent how participants reconstruct meaning from difficult experiences and integrate them into their evolving scholarly identities.

Taken together, the themes illustrate that dissertation writing is not solely an academic exercise but a multifaceted experiential process involving identity formation, emotional negotiation, relational support, and personal transformation. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach reveals how participants actively interpret their challenges and achievements, constructing meaning from experiences that extend beyond technical research tasks. These findings emphasize the importance of supportive mentoring environments, institutional awareness of doctoral students' lived realities, and recognition of dissertation writing as a transformative scholarly and personal endeavor.

7.CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study revealed that dissertation writing is a transformative and multifaceted experience for graduate students, extending beyond the production of a scholarly manuscript. The findings highlight how the dissertation journey contributes to the shaping of scholarly identity while simultaneously exposing students to psychological and emotional challenges, the critical role of mentorship, the demands of balancing multiple life responsibilities, and the eventual realization of personal and professional growth. These lived experiences emphasize that dissertation writing is both an intellectual and developmental process that requires resilience, meaningful guidance, and supportive academic environments.

Recommendations

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In light of these findings, higher education institutions, particularly those in Western Philippines, may further strengthen graduate education by implementing comprehensive support mechanisms that address both the academic and psychosocial needs of dissertation writers. Universities may consider enhancing mentor development initiatives that cultivate faculty competencies in effective research supervision, constructive feedback, and responsive mentoring practices. In addition, institutions may expand mental health and well-being services specifically tailored to the unique pressures experienced by graduate students during the dissertation process. Providing structured academic support through workshops on research writing, scholarly communication, and time management may likewise assist students in developing the skills necessary for sustained research productivity. Furthermore, establishing peer support structures, such as dissertation writing groups and collaborative learning communities, may foster collegial engagement, reduce feelings of isolation, and encourage accountability among graduate students. Collectively, these institutional initiatives may contribute to the development of a more supportive and responsive graduate research environment that promotes timely dissertation completion and the holistic development of emerging scholars.

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