
Original Research Article

Board Examination Experiences and Coping Strategies Among Review Center Examinees

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Abstract: Board examinations represent a critical milestone for aspiring professionals, often requiring extensive preparation and significant personal sacrifices. This study explored the preparation experiences and coping strategies of review center examinees preparing for professional licensure examinations in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. Specifically, it sought to examine the challenges and opportunities encountered during board examination preparation and identify the coping mechanisms utilized by examinees in managing the pressures associated with the review process. The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design involving twenty-three (23) review center examinees selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that examinees experienced cognitive fatigue and academic overwhelm, emotional volatility and isolation, sacrifices to personal well-being, peer collaboration and competition, logistical challenges within review centers, adaptation of study strategies, conceptual clarity through expert mentorship, and the development of strategic test-taking competence. To cope with these challenges, participants engaged in active cognitive restructuring, strategic pacing, digital detoxification, physical self-regulation, peer-supported learning, reward-based motivation, and spiritual anchoring. These coping strategies enabled examinees to maintain resilience, emotional stability, and motivation throughout the review period. The study concluded that board examination preparation is a multidimensional experience shaped by academic, psychological, social, and personal factors. Understanding these experiences may help review centers, educators, and support institutions develop more holistic interventions that promote both examination readiness and examinee well-being.

Keywords: Board Examination Preparation, Coping Strategies, Review Center Examinees, Licensure Examination, Review Center Culture

Introduction

Professional licensure examinations have long been regarded as critical gateways toward professional legitimacy, career advancement, and socioeconomic mobility across various countries. Because of the high expectations associated with board examinations, many examinees experience immense psychological, emotional, and academic pressure during the preparation process. Studies have shown that board examination preparation is often characterized by anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and uncertainty as examinees attempt to meet both personal and societal expectations (Pantaleo, 2025; Păduraru, 2019). In many professional programs, review centers have become increasingly institutionalized as supplementary learning environments that aim to enhance examinees' readiness through structured lectures, mock examinations, coaching sessions, and test-taking strategies. Consequently, review center culture has become deeply embedded in the preparation experiences of many aspiring professionals worldwide.

International literature consistently emphasizes that examination preparation extends beyond academic readiness and involves significant emotional and psychological demands. Among medical students, examination periods were found to generate heightened levels of stress, fatigue, emotional instability, and academic burnout (Ijah et al., 2023; Arsalan et al., 2022). Similarly, Waterhouse et al. (2024) explained that students preparing for high-stakes examinations commonly experience emotional exhaustion due to academic workload, performance pressure, and fear of failure. Lahme et al. (2024) further noted that stress levels intensify as examination dates approach, particularly among students who struggle with balancing study schedules and personal responsibilities. In phenomenological investigations involving university students, Majumdar and Ray revealed that academic pressure often contributes to emotional distress, reduced motivation, and psychological vulnerability during preparation periods. These findings suggest that board examination preparation is not merely an intellectual undertaking but also an emotionally demanding process that requires strong coping capacities.

Previous studies also highlighted the various coping mechanisms utilized by examinees to manage examination-related stress and pressure. Coping strategies such as prayer, positive self-talk, emotional regulation, peer support, social interaction, and time management were found to help students endure stressful review periods (Ijah et al., 2023; Paul & Majumder, 2023). According to Păduraru (2019), adaptive coping strategies significantly influence students' ability to maintain emotional stability and psychological resilience during examinations. Lai et al. (2021) similarly found that students who practiced emotional regulation and maintained strong interpersonal support systems demonstrated better psychological adjustment during stressful academic situations. In another study, Arsalan et al. (2022) emphasized that unmanaged stress may negatively affect both cognitive functioning and emotional well-being, reinforcing the importance of coping mechanisms among examinees facing high-pressure academic environments.

Within the Philippine context, several studies have explored the realities experienced by examinees preparing for professional licensure examinations. Molina, Olegario, and Baluyos (2024) found that graduate students preparing for the Licensure Examination for Teachers encountered financial difficulties, emotional exhaustion, time-management struggles, and academic pressure throughout their review journey. Similarly, Binayao and Dales (2020) revealed that both passers and non-passers of the Licensure Examination for Teachers experienced anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional strain during preparation periods. Olvina et al. (2024) further identified themes of unpreparedness, pressure from expectations, and emotional distress among examinees who previously failed board examinations. In another phenomenological study, Paler and Muegna (2024) found that retakers of licensure examinations endured frustration, discouragement, and fear of repeated failure while simultaneously developing resilience and adaptive coping strategies.

Existing literature also indicates that support systems play a crucial role in helping examinees navigate board examination preparation. Emotional encouragement from family members, peers, mentors, and review instructors was found to contribute significantly to examinees' motivation and perseverance (Ilano, 2025; Molina et al., 2024). Moreover, review centers were frequently perceived as important support environments that provide not only academic reinforcement but also emotional reassurance and confidence-building opportunities. Ampuan (2025) reported that review center examinees often relied on structured review schedules, mock board examinations, and collaborative learning sessions to cope with the demands of examination preparation. Likewise, studies involving medical and university students revealed that social support and collaborative learning environments positively influenced students' emotional endurance and academic persistence during stressful review periods (Waterhouse et al., 2024; Majumdar & Ray).

Although numerous studies have already examined examination stress, academic preparation, and coping strategies, existing literature remains largely focused on academic performance predictors, stress levels, and institutional outcomes rather than the lived experiences of review center examinees themselves. Many studies also center primarily on successful passers, failed examinees, or specific professional programs such as teaching and medicine (Binayao & Dales, 2020; Paler & Muegna, 2024). Furthermore, while previous research acknowledged the role of review centers in examination preparation, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how examinees personally experience the emotional, psychological, and social realities within review center settings. The nuanced coping experiences of examinees undergoing intensive preparation remain underexplored, particularly within localized contexts where review center culture is highly prevalent.

Given these circumstances, there was a need to further investigate how review center examinees experienced board examination preparation and how they coped with the various pressures and challenges encountered throughout the review process. Understanding these experiences was essential because board examinations significantly influenced examinees' professional aspirations, emotional well-being, and future career

opportunities. Exploring the lived realities of review center examinees provided valuable insights for educators, review institutions, mental health advocates, and future board takers in developing more responsive academic and psychological support systems. Moreover, this study contributed to the growing body of literature concerning examination preparation, stress management, and coping mechanisms among aspiring professionals. Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Explore the experiences of review center examinees in preparing for board examinations; and
2. Identify the coping mechanisms utilized by review center examinees during board examination preparation.

This study is anchored on the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the Self-Efficacy Theory of Bandura (1977), and the Social Support Theory advanced by Cobb (1976). The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping explains how individuals cognitively appraise stressful situations and subsequently employ coping strategies to manage perceived demands that exceed their available resources. This theory is highly relevant because board examination preparation often exposes review center examinees to academic pressure, anxiety, uncertainty, and emotional strain, requiring them to utilize both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms. Meanwhile, Self-Efficacy Theory posits that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to successfully perform specific tasks influence their motivation, persistence, resilience, and performance. In the context of this study, examinees with higher self-efficacy are more likely to sustain review efforts, manage examination-related stress, and remain confident despite challenges encountered during preparation. Lastly, Social Support Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional, informational, and instrumental support received from family members, peers, mentors, and review instructors in promoting psychological well-being and effective adaptation to stressful circumstances. Since previous studies have identified social support as a significant factor in examination preparation, this theory helps explain how interpersonal relationships contribute to examinees' coping experiences and persistence throughout the review process. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how review center examinees experience board examination preparation, perceive challenges, mobilize coping strategies, maintain confidence, and utilize support systems while preparing for licensure examinations.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and describe the board examination preparation and coping experiences of review center examinees. Descriptive qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to obtain a rich and straightforward account of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon. This design enabled the researchers to capture the realities, challenges, and coping mechanisms of examinees as they prepared for licensure examinations without imposing predetermined theoretical interpretations. Through

participants' narratives, the study generated in-depth descriptions of their preparation experiences and coping strategies within review center settings (Sandelowski, 2000; Doyle et al., 2020).

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines, a region located in the western part of Mindanao composed of the provinces of Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay, including the highly urbanized city of Zamboanga. The region hosts several higher education institutions and review centers that cater to graduates preparing for various professional licensure examinations. The locale was deemed appropriate for the study because it provided access to board examination examinees enrolled in different review centers and offered a relevant context for understanding their preparation and coping experiences.

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of twenty-three (23) board examination examinees enrolled in various review centers across the Zamboanga Peninsula. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly utilized in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess firsthand experience and relevant knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation. This sampling method allowed the researchers to recruit participants who were actively engaged in board examination preparation and were capable of providing rich and meaningful descriptions of their experiences and coping mechanisms (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, participants were required to meet specific inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were individuals who were (1) currently enrolled in a review center within the Zamboanga Peninsula and were actively preparing for a professional licensure or board examination at the time of the study. (2) They must have attended review sessions for a sufficient period to meaningfully describe their preparation experiences and coping mechanisms. Additionally, (3) participants were required to be at least 18 years old, willing to voluntarily participate in the study, and (4) able to communicate their experiences effectively during the interview process. The use of inclusion criteria helped ensure that all participants possessed firsthand and relevant experiences concerning the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study and relevant literature on board examination preparation and coping experiences. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to freely describe their preparation routines, challenges encountered, emotional experiences, support systems, and coping strategies. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility during the interview process, enabling the researchers to ask probing questions and gather deeper insights while

maintaining consistency across participants. Table 1 presents the semi-structured interview of the study.

Table 1: Instrumentation

Objectives of the Study	Interview Questions
To explore the experiences of review center examinees in preparing for board examinations.	<p>Major Question: What challenges or opportunities of preparations did you encounter during your preparation?</p> <p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did attending a review center influence your preparation process? 2. What emotions or difficulties or ease did you commonly experience throughout your review period?
To identify the coping strategies utilized by review center examinees during board examination preparation.	<p>Major Question: How did you cope with the pressures and challenges you experienced while preparing for the board examination?</p> <p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What specific strategies or practices helped you manage stress and anxiety during the review period? 2. Who or what sources of support helped you throughout your preparation?

To establish the validity of the interview guide, the instrument was subjected to expert validation by professionals with experience in qualitative research and educational studies. Their comments and recommendations were incorporated to improve the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the interview questions in relation to the study objectives. Although reliability in qualitative research is not measured through statistical procedures, the researchers enhanced the trustworthiness and consistency of the instrument through careful development of interview questions, the use of probing techniques, and adherence to a standardized interview protocol. These measures helped ensure that the instrument effectively elicited comprehensive and meaningful responses from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers secured the necessary permissions and informed consent from all participants. Individual interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through appropriate online platforms, depending on participants’ availability and preference. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to openly share their experiences regarding board examination preparation and coping practices. With participants’ consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the collected data. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim and organized for analysis. Throughout the process, the researchers maintained confidentiality and ensured that participation remained voluntary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative data analysis method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within textual data. Following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for recurring themes, reviewed and refined themes, and developed thematic descriptions that represented participants' experiences. This method enabled the researchers to systematically examine the narratives of review center examinees and identify common experiences and coping mechanisms associated with board examination preparation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports, and data were handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Furthermore, the study observed the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report, particularly respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that participants were treated with dignity and that no harm resulted from their involvement in the research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; Republic Act No. 10173, 2012).

RESULTS

Research Objective 1. *To explore the experiences of review center examinees in preparing for board examinations.*

Question: *What challenges or opportunities of preparations did you encounter during your preparation?*

Theme 1: Cognitive Fatigue and Academic Overwhelm

A prevalent experience among the participants was cognitive fatigue and academic overwhelm, with 18 out of 23 examinees describing feelings of mental exhaustion during their board examination preparation. Participants shared that the overwhelming amount of information, numerous review materials, and continuous study schedules often exceeded their cognitive capacity, making it difficult to retain and process lessons effectively. Many reported experiencing mental blocks, decreased concentration, and feelings of burnout as the examination date approached.

“There were days when my brain just shut down. The review center gives you hundreds of pages of handouts every single week. I remember crying at my desk because I was staring at a page for an hour and absolutely nothing was sinking in anymore.”

This finding suggests that the intensive demands of board examination preparation may lead to significant mental strain, highlighting the need for balanced study practices and adequate psychological support among review center examinees.

Theme 2: Emotional Volatility and Isolation

Another prominent experience shared by the participants was emotional volatility and isolation, with 16 out of 23 examinees recounting periods of intense anxiety, fear, self-doubt, and loneliness throughout the review process. In their effort to maximize study time and maintain focus, many deliberately withdrew from social activities, limited interactions with family and friends, and reduced their online presence. While these sacrifices were viewed as necessary, they often resulted in feelings of emotional disconnection and vulnerability.

“I felt like a ghost for six months. I missed family dinners, deactivated my social media, and lived in constant fear of failing and disappointing everyone. Even when I took a 30-minute break to watch a show, the guilt would just eat me alive.”

Such experiences illustrate how board examination preparation extends beyond academic demands, often affecting examinees’ emotional well-being and social relationships as they navigate the pressure of meeting personal and external expectations.

Theme 3: Time Management and the Sacrifice of Basic Well-being

The challenge of managing time while preserving personal well-being emerged as a recurring concern among the participants, with 15 out of 23 examinees admitting that they often neglected their physical health to keep up with the demands of board examination preparation. Many described maintaining highly structured study schedules that extended into late hours, leaving little time for adequate sleep, nutritious meals, physical activity, or rest. For several participants, the pursuit of academic readiness came at the expense of their overall well-being.

“There simply weren't enough hours in a day. I survived on instant noodles, fast food, and three cups of coffee daily just to stay awake for night reviews. I lost weight, my immune system crashed, and I realized I was destroying my body just to pass a test.”

This account underscores the extent to which examinees may prioritize academic preparation over their physical health, revealing the difficult trade-offs many are willing to make in pursuit of success in the licensure examination.

Theme 4: Peer Synergy versus Toxic Academic Competition

The review center environment was described by 14 out of 23 examinees as a space characterized by both collaboration and competition. Participants shared that their peers often served as valuable sources of encouragement, motivation, and academic assistance throughout the review period. Study groups provided opportunities for sharing resources, clarifying difficult concepts, and offering emotional support during stressful moments. At

the same time, some participants observed a competitive atmosphere that occasionally fostered secrecy, comparison, and interpersonal tension among examinees.

“It was a weird environment. On one hand, my study buddies and I cried together and shared notes, which kept me sane. On the other hand, you could feel the tension in the room. Some people wouldn't tell you what materials they were using because everyone was secretly competing for a slot in the top ten.”

This narrative reflects the dual nature of review center interactions, where camaraderie and mutual support coexist with the pressures of academic competition, shaping how examinees experience and navigate the review process.

Theme 5: Mismanagement and Logistical Inefficiencies of Review Hubs

Beyond academic and emotional concerns, 11 out of 23 examinees reported encountering operational and logistical issues that complicated their preparation process. Participants described experiences involving overcrowded lecture rooms, inadequate facilities, technical problems during lectures, schedule inconsistencies, and delays in the distribution of review materials. While these concerns may appear minor compared to the demands of board examination preparation, participants emphasized that such disruptions affected their concentration, study planning, and overall review experience.

“We paid a premium fee, but the lecture room was so packed that some of us had to sit on plastic chairs at the very back. The audio system was constantly buzzing, and it was hard to hear the lecturer. When they delayed releasing the crucial final coaching modules, it completely threw off my study timeline.”

This narrative suggests that the quality of the review environment can influence examinees' preparation experiences, as logistical inefficiencies may create additional stress during an already demanding period of academic preparation.

Theme 6: Adaptation and Realignment of Study Strategies

The process of adapting and restructuring study habits emerged as a significant experience among 16 out of 23 examinees. Participants disclosed that many of the study techniques they had relied upon during their undergraduate years were no longer sufficient for the demands of board examination preparation. As a result, they were compelled to modify their learning approaches, adopt more effective review strategies, and develop disciplined study routines that aligned with the fast-paced nature of review center programs. For many, this transition involved a period of adjustment marked by frustration, experimentation, and gradual improvement.

“In college, I used to just highlight books and reread them. The review center coaches explicitly told us that passive reading would make us fail. I had to completely change my habits in the first month—switching to

flashcards and doing 100 practice questions a day. It was a painful adjustment.”

This experience demonstrates how board examination preparation often requires examinees to reassess their learning practices and embrace new strategies that better support retention, recall, and examination performance.

Theme 7: Concept Illumination through Expert Mentorship

A positive aspect of the review center experience highlighted by 15 out of 23 examinees was the guidance provided by experienced lecturers and subject matter experts. Participants expressed appreciation for instructors who were able to simplify difficult concepts, provide practical examination insights, and present lessons in ways that were easier to understand and remember. For many examinees, these instructional approaches transformed previously confusing topics into manageable and comprehensible content, increasing both confidence and academic preparedness.

“There was a major subject in college that I never truly understood, no matter how much I read the textbook. But during the review center lecture, the speaker used a single diagram and a clever mnemonic that made it click in 10 minutes. It felt like a massive weight was lifted off my shoulders.”

This experience illustrates the valuable role of expert mentorship in facilitating understanding, enhancing learning efficiency, and helping examinees navigate challenging subject areas during board examination preparation.

Theme 8: Development of Strategic Test-Taking Competence

An empowering aspect of the review center experience identified by 14 out of 23 examinees was the development of strategic test-taking skills. Participants explained that review sessions extended beyond content mastery and introduced them to practical examination techniques such as identifying distractor choices, applying the process of elimination, managing time effectively, and analyzing questions critically. These strategies enabled examinees to approach examinations with greater confidence and a more systematic mindset, transforming the way they responded to board examination questions.

“The center didn’t just teach us facts; they taught us how to dissect a question. They showed us how to eliminate two options immediately based on keywords alone. Learning those exam-taking hacks gave me a massive confidence boost during the practice drills.”

This account demonstrates how review centers contributed not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the development of analytical and strategic competencies essential for success in high-stakes examinations.

Research Objective 2. *To identify the coping strategies utilized by review center examinees during board examination preparation.*

Question: *How did you cope with the pressures and challenges you experienced while preparing for the board examination?*

Theme 1: Active Cognitive Restructuring and Mindset Shifting

One of the most frequently employed coping strategies among the participants was active cognitive restructuring and mindset shifting, with 18 out of 23 examinees reporting that they consciously managed their thoughts and emotions during periods of stress. Rather than allowing fear, self-doubt, and anxiety to dominate their preparation journey, participants intentionally reframed negative experiences into opportunities for growth and learning. By focusing on progress rather than perfection, they were able to maintain motivation and reduce the emotional burden associated with board examination preparation.

“Whenever I started panicking about failing, I had to stop and tell myself, ‘You are scoring low on mock exams now so you can learn, not because you are stupid.’ Reframing my mistakes as lessons was the only way to keep my anxiety in check.”

This coping strategy highlights the importance of maintaining a positive and adaptive mindset, enabling examinees to navigate challenges with greater resilience and emotional stability.

Theme 2: Temporal Compartmentalization and Strategic Pacing

Another coping strategy adopted by 17 out of 23 examinees was temporal compartmentalization and strategic pacing. Participants shared that they deliberately divided their study responsibilities into smaller, manageable segments to prevent feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion. Rather than focusing on the entirety of the board examination coverage, they concentrated on immediate tasks, established realistic daily goals, and incorporated scheduled breaks into their routines. This approach allowed them to maintain consistency in their preparation while minimizing stress and reducing the risk of burnout.

“I stopped looking at the entire board exam syllabus because it gave me panic attacks. I forced myself to focus only on the next 2 hours. I studied for 50 minutes, took a 10-minute break, and strictly shut my books by 9:00 PM no matter what. I realized that pacing myself was better than trying to finish everything at once because it helped me stay productive without completely draining myself.”

This experience demonstrates how strategic pacing enabled examinees to manage their workload more effectively, sustain their energy, and maintain a healthier balance throughout the review process.

Theme 3: Digital Detoxification and Selective Isolation

A significant coping mechanism practiced by 15 out of 23 examinees was digital detoxification and selective isolation. Participants explained that they intentionally distanced themselves from social media platforms, unnecessary online interactions, and individuals who contributed to feelings of pressure, comparison, or distraction. By limiting their exposure to external influences, they were able to focus more effectively on their

review goals and protect themselves from the emotional strain often associated with observing the achievements, routines, or expectations of others.

“I deactivated my Facebook and Instagram the moment review started. Seeing my batchmates posting about studying 14 hours a day or seeing friends traveling was messing with my head. Guarding my peace meant choosing a quiet, isolated bubble.”

This account illustrates how creating personal boundaries and reducing exposure to potentially stressful environments served as a protective strategy that helped examinees preserve their concentration, emotional well-being, and sense of control during board examination preparation.

Theme 4: Kinetic and Physiological Regulation

Physical activity and bodily self-care emerged as important coping strategies among 12 out of 23 examinees. Participants reported engaging in activities such as jogging, walking, stretching, breathing exercises, and short naps to manage stress and restore their mental focus. Rather than continuously studying when fatigue set in, they recognized the value of temporarily stepping away from their review materials to regulate both their physical and emotional states. These activities helped reduce tension, improve concentration, and provide a sense of relief from the demands of examination preparation.

“When my brain felt like mush, sitting longer didn't help. I started going for a 20-minute jog every afternoon or just doing quick breathing exercises at my desk. Sweating it out physically released all the tension I was carrying in my shoulders.”

This experience suggests that physical and physiological regulation served as a practical coping mechanism that enabled examinees to recharge, manage stress more effectively, and sustain their productivity throughout the review period.

Theme 5: Peer-to-Peer Collaborative Co-regulation

Another commonly reported coping strategy was peer-to-peer collaborative co-regulation, with 16 out of 23 examinees emphasizing the importance of supportive relationships with fellow reviewees. Participants shared that studying alongside peers who were experiencing similar challenges provided both academic and emotional benefits. Through group discussions, shared resources, encouragement, and mutual accountability, they found reassurance that they were not facing the pressures of board examination preparation alone. These peer connections often served as safe spaces where participants could openly express frustrations, fears, and moments of self-doubt.

“My review group saved my sanity. We didn't just study together; we checked in on each other. If one of us was crying or failing a mock test, we would pause, grab coffee, and remind each other that we're in this together.”

This narrative highlights how collaborative peer relationships functioned not only as learning partnerships but also as emotional support systems that fostered resilience, motivation, and a sense of belonging throughout the review journey.

Theme 6: Tactical Escapism and Reward-Based Incentives

To maintain motivation throughout the demanding review period, 14 out of 23 examinees adopted tactical escapism and reward-based incentives as coping strategies. Participants explained that they intentionally incorporated small rewards and brief recreational activities into their routines to prevent exhaustion and sustain their enthusiasm for studying. These moments of enjoyment, whether through food, entertainment, music, or leisure activities, served as personal incentives that made the review process more manageable and less emotionally draining.

“I used iced coffee as my ultimate bribe. If I finished answering 100 practice questions, I allowed myself to walk to the café and get a treat. Those tiny, daily rewards gave me something positive to look forward to every single day.”

This account illustrates how small but meaningful rewards helped examinees maintain motivation, celebrate incremental progress, and create positive experiences amidst the challenges of board examination preparation.

Theme 7: Spiritual and Existential Anchoring

For many participants, faith and personal beliefs became important sources of strength throughout the review period, with 13 out of 23 examinees describing their reliance on spiritual practices and deeper reflections during moments of uncertainty and discouragement. When academic preparation became emotionally overwhelming, participants sought comfort through prayer, religious activities, meditation, and reminders of their personal purpose for pursuing the profession. These practices provided reassurance, hope, and a sense of stability amid the pressures of board examination preparation.

“When my mock exam scores dropped, I couldn't rely on my brain anymore. I started visiting the church every Wednesday after our review lectures just to pray for peace of mind. For many of us, when our mock ratings failed us, our faith was the only thing holding us together.”

This account highlights how spirituality served as an anchor during difficult periods, enabling examinees to sustain their motivation and persevere despite academic setbacks and emotional challenges.

DISCUSSION

The experiences of review center examinees reveal that board examination preparation is a multidimensional process characterized by academic, emotional, social, and environmental challenges. The themes of Cognitive Fatigue and Academic Overwhelm, Emotional Volatility and Isolation, and Time Management and the Sacrifice of Basic Well-being demonstrate that examinees frequently encounter mental exhaustion, anxiety,

self-doubt, and physical strain as they attempt to cope with the extensive demands of licensure preparation. These experiences support the observations of Molina et al. (2024), Ampuan (2025), and Ijah et al. (2023), who reported that examination preparation often results in stress, emotional burden, fatigue, and difficulties in maintaining personal well-being. Similarly, Waterhouse et al. (2024) and Lahme et al. (2024) emphasized that prolonged exposure to academic pressure may contribute to burnout and psychological distress among students preparing for high-stakes examinations. These findings are further supported by the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which explains that individuals continuously appraise stressful situations and attempt to manage demands that exceed their available resources. In the context of this study, the overwhelming volume of review materials, fear of failure, and disruption of healthy routines served as significant stressors that shaped the participants' preparation experiences.

Conversely, the themes of Peer Synergy versus Toxic Academic Competition, Adaptation and Realignment of Study Strategies, Concept Illumination through Expert Mentorship, and Development of Strategic Test-Taking Competence highlight the opportunities embedded within the review center experience. While participants encountered competition and interpersonal pressures, they also benefited from collaborative learning, expert guidance, improved study habits, and the acquisition of strategic examination skills. These experiences align with the findings of Binayao and Dales (2020), Ilano (2025), and Paler and Muegna (2024), who emphasized the importance of social support, adaptive learning strategies, and resilience during licensure examination preparation. The positive influence of mentors and peer networks also supports Social Support Theory (Cobb, 1976), which posits that emotional, informational, and interpersonal support enhances individuals' capacity to manage stressful situations. Furthermore, the increased confidence gained through improved study strategies and test-taking techniques reflects the principles of Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), wherein individuals develop stronger beliefs in their capabilities through mastery experiences and guided learning. These results imply that although board examination preparation is often accompanied by significant challenges, review centers can serve as valuable environments that foster academic growth, confidence, and resilience when supportive learning structures and healthy review practices are effectively maintained.

The coping strategies employed by review center examinees demonstrate that managing board examination pressures extends beyond academic preparation and involves deliberate cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social adjustments. The themes of Active Cognitive Restructuring and Mindset Shifting, Temporal Compartmentalization and Strategic Pacing, Digital Detoxification and Selective Isolation, and Kinetic and Physiological Regulation indicate that participants actively regulated their thoughts, behaviors, and environments to maintain psychological well-being during the review period. These coping practices are consistent with the findings of Păduraru (2019), Ijah et al. (2023), and Paul and Majumder (2023), who reported that effective stress management often involves positive cognitive reframing, structured time management, emotional

regulation, and the establishment of personal boundaries. Likewise, Waterhouse et al. (2024) emphasized that students who engage in adaptive coping behaviors are better able to manage academic stress and prevent emotional exhaustion. These experiences strongly support the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which posits that individuals continuously evaluate stressful situations and employ coping responses to mitigate their impact. The participants' intentional efforts to reframe failures as learning opportunities, pace their study schedules, disengage from stress-inducing environments, and regulate physical well-being illustrate how adaptive coping strategies can lessen the psychological burden associated with high-stakes examinations.

Equally significant were the relational, motivational, and spiritual coping mechanisms reflected in the themes of Peer-to-Peer Collaborative Co-regulation, Tactical Escapism and Reward-Based Incentives, and Spiritual and Existential Anchoring. Participants relied on supportive peer networks, personal reward systems, and faith-based practices to sustain motivation, manage emotional distress, and maintain hope throughout the review process. These results resonate with the works of Ilano (2025), Paler and Muegna (2024), and Binayao and Dales (2020), who identified social support, resilience-building activities, and spirituality as important resources among examinees preparing for licensure examinations. The findings also align with Social Support Theory (Cobb, 1976), which emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in buffering stress and promoting psychological well-being. Furthermore, the confidence and persistence cultivated through successful coping experiences reflect the principles of Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), suggesting that examinees who perceive themselves as capable of managing challenges are more likely to remain motivated and resilient. These results imply that effective board examination preparation should not focus solely on academic content mastery but should also incorporate psychological support, peer engagement, wellness practices, and opportunities for personal meaning-making to promote holistic examinee development and success.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the experience of preparing for a board examination extends far beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge. For review center examinees, the preparation process was characterized by a complex interplay of cognitive demands, emotional struggles, physical sacrifices, interpersonal dynamics, and personal growth. While participants encountered challenges such as mental exhaustion, anxiety, isolation, unhealthy study routines, competitive environments, and logistical difficulties, they also discovered opportunities for learning, adaptation, mentorship, and skill development. The findings demonstrate that board examination preparation is not merely an academic undertaking but a transformative experience that tests an individual's resilience, discipline, self-belief, and capacity to navigate adversity.

Equally important, the study revealed that examinees were not passive recipients of stress but active agents in managing the pressures associated with licensure preparation. Through cognitive reframing, strategic pacing, digital boundary-setting, physical

self-regulation, peer support, reward systems, and spiritual anchoring, participants developed diverse coping mechanisms that enabled them to endure the demands of the review process. These coping strategies highlight the multidimensional nature of resilience and illustrate how examinees continuously negotiate challenges while striving toward their professional goals. The findings suggest that successful board examination preparation depends not only on intellectual readiness but also on psychological, social, and emotional resources that sustain individuals throughout prolonged periods of uncertainty and pressure.

On a broader level, this study contributes to the understanding of board examination preparation by illuminating the lived experiences of review center examinees, a population that has received limited scholarly attention despite the widespread reliance on review centers in licensure preparation. Whereas previous studies largely focused on examination performance, predictors of success, or the experiences of passers and non-passers, this research provided a deeper exploration of how examinees experience and cope with the realities of review center culture. In doing so, the study addressed an important gap in the literature and underscored the need to view board examination preparation as a holistic human experience rather than a purely academic endeavor. The insights generated may inform the development of more responsive review programs, wellness initiatives, and support mechanisms that promote not only examination success but also the overall well-being and resilience of future examinees.

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