

Original Research Article

Academic Setbacks and Psychological Consequences Among College Entrance Test Non-Passers

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Abstract: Failing college entrance examinations may significantly affect students' academic direction, emotional well-being, and perceptions regarding their future. Despite the growing literature on academic stress and examination anxiety, limited studies have specifically explored the academic setbacks and psychological struggles experienced by college entrance test non-passers. Hence, this study aimed to identify the academic setbacks experienced by college entrance test non-passers and examine the psychological struggles encountered following examination failure. The study utilized a qualitative research design employing thematic analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Thirty (30) college entrance test non-passers from selected universities in Zamboanga City were selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and analyzed following the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke. Findings revealed that participants experienced several academic setbacks, including disrupted educational plans, financial and institutional limitations, declining academic confidence, pressure from family and social comparison, and forced course redirection. In terms of psychological struggles, participants experienced anxiety, overthinking, shame, emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and fear regarding their future. However, some participants eventually developed acceptance, resilience, and renewed motivation after the experience. The findings suggested that college entrance examination failure extends beyond academic rejection and may significantly influence students' emotional well-being, educational decisions, and self-perceptions. The study highlighted the importance of strengthening academic counseling, mental health support, and resilience-building interventions among students experiencing academic setbacks and educational uncertainty.

Keywords: Academic Setbacks; College Entrance Examinations; Psychological Struggles; Non-Passers

Introduction

The transition from secondary to tertiary education is often accompanied by intense academic competition, particularly through college entrance examinations that determine students' access to higher education institutions. These examinations are commonly viewed as critical gateways toward educational advancement and future career opportunities. As a result, students frequently experience immense pressure to perform well, leading to emotional strain, fear of failure, and uncertainty regarding their academic future. University entrance examinations generate substantial psychological stress among students due to academic expectations, social competition, and concerns about future educational opportunities (Pienyu et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Similarly, Terada (2022) emphasized that high-stakes testing environments often contribute to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and declining mental well-being among examinees.

Recent international literature demonstrated that entrance examinations are strongly associated with various psychological difficulties among students. Rabby et al. (2023) found that students preparing for undergraduate entrance examinations exhibited elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms due to the highly competitive nature of admission systems. Likewise, Yarkin et al. (2023) revealed that test anxiety negatively affected students' emotional resilience and mental well-being, particularly during periods of educational uncertainty. In addition, Fathima et al. (2025) noted that examination-related stress commonly resulted in sleep disturbances, emotional fatigue, and reduced psychological functioning among university students. Yazdanpanah and Marashian (2023) additionally demonstrated that stress management interventions improved students' emotional stability and reduced psychological distress among university entrance examination applicants. These findings collectively suggested that academic pressure and examination performance significantly influence students' psychological experiences and emotional stability. Naylor et al. (2022) further explained that uncertainty regarding academic achievement and performance expectations significantly contributed to psychological distress among university students.

Beyond examination stress itself, studies further highlighted the psychological impact of academic setbacks and failure experiences. Mamun et al. (2021) discovered that students who failed university entrance examinations were more likely to experience burnout, emotional exhaustion, and heightened stress levels. Similarly, Villanueva et al. (2025) explained that negative academic self-perception following poor academic outcomes contributed to emotional distress and weakened psychological adjustment among students. Additional studies observed that failure in college entrance examinations often diminished students' motivation and self-confidence, although some individuals eventually developed resilience and determination after the experience (Cai & Meng, 2025; Nair & Sutar, 2023).

These studies indicated that academic setbacks may extend beyond temporary disappointment and potentially influence students' self-worth, future aspirations, and coping behaviors.

Within the Philippine context, entrance examinations remain highly significant because admission to reputable colleges and universities is often associated with academic prestige, socioeconomic mobility, and long-term career success. Consequently, students who fail college entrance tests may experience considerable emotional and psychological pressure. Benedicto et al. (2023) found that academic challenges among Filipino college students significantly contributed to stress and emotional struggles, particularly when combined with high personal and family expectations. Furthermore, local studies revealed that entrance examinations frequently provoke fear of failure, anxiety, and psychological distress among Filipino students due to intense academic competition and societal pressure. Romero (2020) further reported that many Filipino students expressed anxiety and concern regarding university admission systems due to the uncertainty associated with entrance examinations and academic acceptance.

Several Philippine studies also emphasized the broader educational and emotional implications of examination failure. In a phenomenological study, Binayao and Dales (2021) explored the experiences of licensure examination non-passers and found that failure often resulted in emotional distress, self-doubt, social pressure, and motivational struggles. Similarly, Ramirez Yee (2024) highlighted the importance of entrance examinations within the Philippine educational system and noted that poor examination outcomes may create barriers to educational access, particularly among students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Pastor and Lumabao (2024) also highlighted the educational significance of entrance examination performance by demonstrating its relationship with subsequent academic achievement among Filipino students. These findings demonstrated that academic setbacks within the Philippine context are closely tied to emotional well-being, educational opportunities, and social expectations.

Despite the growing body of literature regarding examination stress and academic pressure, existing studies have largely focused on students preparing for entrance examinations, academic performance predictors, or psychological distress among general student populations. Although some research explored failure experiences in licensure examinations and placement tests, limited studies specifically examined the academic setbacks and psychological struggles experienced by college entrance test non-passers. Furthermore, previous studies primarily concentrated on anxiety, stress, and performance outcomes, while the lived psychological implications and educational disruptions associated with non-passing experiences remained underexplored. These gaps suggested the need for a more focused investigation into how entrance test failure shapes students' academic experiences, emotional responses, and coping processes.

Given these identified gaps, the present study sought to explore the academic setbacks and psychological struggles experienced by college entrance test non-passers. Specifically, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how non-passing

experiences affect students' academic perspectives, emotional well-being, self-perception, and future aspirations. Specifically, this study aimed to: (1) identify the academic setbacks experienced by college entrance test non-passers; and (2) examine the psychological struggles encountered by college entrance test non-passers following examination failure.

The present study was anchored on three theoretical lenses that explained how students experience and respond to academic setbacks following college entrance examination failure. First, Richard Lazarus Stress and Coping Theory explained that individuals experience psychological stress when they perceive situations as threatening or beyond their coping capacities, making it relevant in understanding the emotional struggles, anxiety, and coping mechanisms of college entrance test non-passers (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Second, Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory emphasized that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities significantly influence motivation, emotional responses, and resilience after failure; thus, students who fail entrance examinations may experience reduced academic confidence and self-worth, affecting their future aspirations and persistence (Bandura, 1997). Lastly, Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion, explained that late adolescents and emerging adults often struggle with identity formation and self-definition, making academic rejection a potentially significant source of uncertainty, self-doubt, and emotional conflict during this developmental period (Erikson, 1968). Collectively, these theories provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how academic setbacks influence the psychological experiences, emotional adjustment, and coping processes of college entrance test non-passers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing thematic analysis to explore the academic setbacks and psychological struggles experienced by college entrance test non-passers. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms following entrance examination failure. Specifically, thematic analysis enabled the researchers to identify, analyze, and interpret recurring patterns and themes emerging from the participants' narratives. Through this approach, the study provided an in-depth understanding of how academic rejection influenced students' educational perspectives, psychological well-being, and future aspirations within their sociocultural context.

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of thirty (30) college entrance test non-passers from selected universities in Zamboanga City. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure that participants possessed direct experiences relevant to the phenomenon being investigated. To qualify for inclusion, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) must have taken at least one college entrance examination within the past two academic years; (2) must have experienced non-passing results in one or more

college entrance tests; (3) must be at least 18 years old; and (4) must be willing to voluntarily participate and share their experiences during the data gathering process. Participants who were unwilling to provide informed consent or unable to articulate their experiences were excluded from the study. The selected participants were considered appropriate sources of information because they directly experienced the academic setbacks and psychological struggles central to the study. The study was conducted in selected universities within Zamboanga City. The locale was chosen because Zamboanga City serves as one of the major educational centers in Western Mindanao, accommodating students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds who actively participate in college entrance examinations for university admission.

Research Instrument

The researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data-gathering instrument. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses regarding participants' experiences before, during, and after receiving non-passing entrance examination results. The questions focused on academic setbacks, emotional reactions, psychological struggles, coping mechanisms, and realizations following the experience. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility during interviews, enabling participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while ensuring that the objectives of the study were adequately addressed. To establish clarity and relevance, the interview guide underwent validation by research experts and qualitative research advisers prior to data collection.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers secured permission from appropriate university authorities and identified qualified participants based on the established inclusion criteria. After obtaining approval, the researchers approached potential participants and explained the purpose, nature, and significance of the study. Informed consent was then secured before the conduct of the interviews. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted at mutually convenient schedules and locations to ensure participants' comfort and privacy. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to openly share their experiences, emotional struggles, and coping mechanisms related to failing college entrance examinations. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection and transcription. The researchers also took field notes to capture significant observations and nonverbal responses during the interview process. After data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed, organized, and prepared for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several phases, including familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of recurring themes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretation of findings. Interview transcripts were

carefully examined to identify meaningful statements and recurring patterns related to academic setbacks and psychological struggles among college entrance test non-passers. Through thematic analysis, the researchers systematically organized participants' narratives into coherent themes that reflected the essence of their lived experiences and emotional responses.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers strictly observed ethical principles throughout the conduct of the study to protect the rights, welfare, and confidentiality of the participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms and coded identifiers were used in place of participants' real names in all transcripts and reports. Additionally, the researchers exercised sensitivity during interviews because discussions regarding academic failure and psychological struggles could potentially evoke emotional discomfort. All gathered information was treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic and research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: *Identify the academic setbacks experienced by college entrance test non-passers*

Research Question 1: *What academic setbacks were experienced by college entrance test non-passers?*

Theme 1: Disrupted Educational Plans and Delayed Academic Goals

(24 out of 30)

The majority of the participants described how failing college entrance examinations disrupted the academic plans they had carefully prepared for during senior high school. Many participants shared that they already envisioned themselves studying in specific universities and pursuing preferred degree programs, making the non-passing results emotionally and academically difficult to accept. As a result, several participants experienced delays in enrollment, changes in career direction, uncertainty regarding educational pathways, and loss of motivation. Others explained that they were forced to settle for schools or programs they initially did not consider due to financial limitations, time constraints, or fear of disappointing their families. The participants commonly associated the experience with feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and being left behind by peers who successfully entered their desired universities.

“When the results came out, it felt like I lost direction. All my plans were centered around that school because it had been my dream school since Grade 10. It was difficult to accept because while my friends were posting that they were already enrolled, I was still looking for where I could apply.”

— Student 08

“My plans really changed. I was supposed to take nursing, but because I failed, I just enrolled in another course so I would not be delayed.” — Student 17

The findings supported the study of Cai and Meng (2025), which revealed that entrance examination failure often affects students' educational decisions, motivation, and academic direction. Similarly, Mamun et al. (2021) found that examination failure contributed to uncertainty and emotional exhaustion among students experiencing academic setbacks. The theme was further explained by Albert Bandura Self-Efficacy Theory, which emphasized that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities influence their motivation, persistence, and future goal-setting behaviors (Bandura, 1997). In the present study, participants' non-passing experiences weakened their confidence in their academic abilities, causing them to reconsider their educational aspirations and future plans. The findings implied that educational institutions and guidance offices should strengthen transition support and academic counseling programs for students experiencing entrance examination failure to help them rebuild confidence, adjust academic plans, and prevent prolonged educational disengagement.

Theme 2: Financial and Institutional Limitations

(19 out of 30)

Another significant academic setback experienced by the participants involved financial difficulties and limited educational opportunities after failing college entrance examinations. Several participants explained that they initially depended on passing state university entrance tests because their families could not afford tuition fees in private institutions. However, after receiving non-passing results, many were forced to enroll in schools with fewer resources, choose courses based on affordability rather than interest, or temporarily stop schooling due to financial constraints. Others also expressed frustration regarding limited admission slots, expensive application processes, and the pressure to immediately find alternative schools before enrollment deadlines closed. For many participants, the experience intensified feelings of pressure and disappointment because educational opportunities became more restricted after the examination results.

“It was really heavy because we could not afford private school. That is why I put so much effort into the entrance exam because it felt like it was my only chance to go to college without it being too expensive. When I failed, it immediately became a financial problem for us regarding where I could enroll.”— Student 03

“I felt pressured because slots in other schools were already running out. I felt like I had to choose a course I did not even like just to get admitted immediately.”— Student 21

The findings aligned with Ramirez Yee (2024), who emphasized that entrance examinations significantly affect access to higher education, particularly among students

from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The theme was further explained through Richard Lazarus Stress and Coping Theory, which posited that individuals experience psychological stress when situations are perceived as overwhelming and beyond available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the context of the present study, participants experienced heightened stress because entrance examination failure not only disrupted their academic goals but also intensified financial and institutional barriers to pursuing higher education. The findings implied that universities and educational policymakers should strengthen inclusive admission opportunities, scholarship accessibility, and student assistance programs to support financially vulnerable students who experience academic rejection and educational uncertainty.

Theme 3: Declining Academic Confidence and Loss of Motivation

(22 out of 30)

Many participants revealed that failing college entrance examinations negatively affected their academic confidence and motivation to continue pursuing their educational goals. Several participants described questioning their intelligence, capabilities, and overall worth as students after receiving non-passing results. Others shared that they began comparing themselves to classmates who successfully entered prestigious universities, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Some participants admitted losing motivation to study, feeling emotionally exhausted, or becoming less confident in applying for other universities because they feared experiencing rejection again. For many of them, the entrance examination failure became more than an academic setback, as it gradually influenced how they perceived themselves and their future potential.

“...that was the first time I thought that maybe I was not intelligent enough for the college I wanted. Even if my family told me it was okay, it still felt different knowing that I failed.”— Student 12

“...after that, I really lost the motivation to review again. ...I felt that no matter how much effort I put in, I might still fail again. It was mentally draining.”— Student 27

The findings supported the studies of Villanueva et al. (2025) and Cai and Meng (2025), which revealed that negative academic experiences and entrance examination failure often reduce students' self-confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being. Similarly, Pascoe et al. (2020) explained that academic stress and educational pressure contribute to emotional exhaustion and weakened psychological functioning among students. The theme was further explained through Albert Bandura Self-Efficacy Theory, which emphasized that individuals' beliefs in their abilities influence motivation, persistence, and emotional responses after failure (Bandura, 1997). In the present study, participants who experienced entrance examination failure developed doubts regarding their academic competence, which affected their willingness to pursue future educational opportunities. The findings implied that schools and guidance counselors should implement programs focused on academic resilience, confidence rebuilding, and emotional support to

help students recover from academic rejection and maintain positive educational aspirations despite setbacks.

Theme 4: Pressure From Family and Social Comparison

(20 out of 30)

Another recurring academic setback experienced by the participants was the pressure they received from family expectations and constant comparison with peers who successfully passed college entrance examinations. Many participants shared that they felt guilty, ashamed, or disappointed in themselves because their families had high hopes regarding their admission to prestigious universities. Others explained that seeing classmates celebrate acceptance results on social media intensified their feelings of failure and insecurity. Some participants avoided interacting with friends or relatives after the results because they feared being questioned about their examination performance. For several participants, the emotional burden became heavier because the experience was not only personal but also socially visible within their families, peer groups, and communities.

“My parents were not directly pressuring me, but I could really feel their disappointment. Especially because I was an achiever during senior high school, it seemed expected that I would pass.”— Student 06

“What hurt more was seeing on social media that almost all my classmates passed while I did not. I avoided going online for several days because I honestly felt jealous and embarrassed.”— Student 14

The findings aligned with the studies of Benedicto et al. (2023) and Romero (2020), which emphasized that academic expectations, social pressure, and educational competition significantly contribute to students' emotional struggles and psychological distress. Likewise, Lee et al. (2023) explained that highly competitive educational systems intensify students' psychological burden due to societal expectations surrounding academic success. The theme was further supported by Erik Erikson Psychosocial Development Theory, particularly the stage of identity versus role confusion, which suggested that adolescents and emerging adults are highly sensitive to social validation, self-identity, and perceptions of success during this developmental period (Erikson, 1968). In the context of the present study, participants' non-passing experiences affected not only their academic confidence but also their sense of identity and social belonging. The findings implied that families, schools, and communities should cultivate more supportive and less judgmental environments to reduce the emotional pressure associated with academic failure and promote healthier coping among students experiencing educational setbacks.

Theme 5: Forced Course Redirection and Compromised Career Aspirations

(18 out of 30)

Several participants revealed that failing college entrance examinations forced them to abandon or change the courses and career paths they originally wanted to pursue. Many shared that they had specific dreams such as becoming nurses, engineers, psychologists, or

educators, but non-passing results limited their available options due to admission requirements, financial constraints, or lack of available slots in other institutions. As a result, some participants enrolled in courses they were not passionate about simply to continue studying and avoid being delayed. Others expressed uncertainty regarding whether they would eventually shift back to their desired programs in the future. For many participants, the experience created frustration and emotional conflict because they felt disconnected from the academic and professional goals they had envisioned for themselves.

“It was painful to accept because ever since I was young, nursing had always been my dream. When I failed the entrance exam, I felt forced to take another course because I also did not want to stop studying.”— Student 09

“I honestly do not like my current course, but it was the only available option within our budget. I just keep telling myself that maybe there is a reason why this happened.”—Student 25

The findings supported the study of Cai and Meng (2025), which revealed that examination failure often affects students' educational decisions, course preferences, and future aspirations. Similarly, Martin and Marsh (2022) emphasized that academic setbacks may negatively influence students' emotional adjustment and perceptions regarding their future success. The theme was further explained through Albert Bandura Self-Efficacy Theory, which posited that individuals' confidence in their abilities influences their willingness to pursue challenging goals and persist despite setbacks (Bandura, 1997). In the present study, participants who experienced entrance examination failure became uncertain about their capacity to pursue their desired professions, leading some to compromise their career aspirations. The findings implied that educational institutions should strengthen career guidance and transition counseling programs to help students make informed academic decisions and maintain long-term career motivation despite experiencing educational setbacks.

Objective 2: *Examine the psychological struggles encountered by college entrance test non-passers following examination failure.*

Research Question 2: *What psychological struggles were encountered by college entrance test non-passers following examination failure?*

Theme 1: Feelings of Anxiety, Overthinking, and Fear About the Future

(26 out of 30)

One of the most common psychological struggles experienced by the participants was intense anxiety and overthinking regarding their future after failing college entrance examinations. Many participants shared that the non-passing results caused them to constantly worry about their educational direction, career opportunities, and ability to meet personal and family expectations. Several participants described having difficulty sleeping, repeatedly thinking about their examination performance, and becoming fearful that they might not achieve success in the future. Others expressed feeling pressured by the uncertainty of whether they would still be able to pursue higher education or fulfill the

goals they had set for themselves. For many participants, the experience created emotional instability and persistent fears regarding their future identity and life trajectory.

“After finding out that I failed, I spent nights overthinking. I kept asking myself if I still had a future... if I could still become successful someday.”— Student 02

“I could not move on immediately because I felt left behind. ...even my sleep was affected because I kept thinking about where I fell short.”— Student 18

The findings aligned with the studies of Rabby et al. (2023) and Yatkin et al. (2023), which found that entrance examination pressure and academic uncertainty commonly contribute to anxiety, stress, and emotional instability among students. Similarly, Fathima et al., (2025) emphasized that examination-related stress may lead to sleep disturbances, emotional exhaustion, and declining psychological well-being. The theme was further explained through Richard Lazarus Stress and Coping Theory, which posited that individuals experience psychological stress when they perceive situations as threatening and beyond their coping abilities (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the present study, participants perceived entrance examination failure as a threat to their future aspirations and personal goals, resulting in anxiety and excessive worry about their educational and life outcomes. The findings implied that schools and mental health support services should strengthen emotional counseling and stress management programs to assist students in coping with academic rejection and future-related anxieties.

Theme 2: Feelings of Shame, Embarrassment, and Social Withdrawal

(21 out of 30)

Many participants described experiencing shame and embarrassment after failing college entrance examinations, particularly when interacting with family members, relatives, classmates, and friends who successfully passed their examinations. Several participants admitted avoiding social gatherings, limiting social media use, or distancing themselves from peers because they feared judgment, pity, or uncomfortable questions regarding their examination results. Others explained that they felt humiliated because people around them expected them to pass due to their previous academic performance during senior high school. For many participants, the emotional burden became more difficult because the failure felt publicly visible, making them feel isolated and socially withdrawn during the period following the release of examination results.

“I was really embarrassed to go outside because our neighbors knew that I took the exam for that university. Whenever someone asked if I passed, I did not know how to answer.”— Student 10

“I temporarily deactivated my social media accounts because every time I saw others posting that they passed... I became even sadder and more embarrassed about myself.”— Student 23

The findings supported the studies of Benedicto et al. (2023) and Romero (2020), which emphasized that academic pressure and educational competition often intensify emotional struggles and social anxiety among students. Likewise, Thomas et al. (2021) explained that fear of academic failure may contribute to low self-esteem, anxiety, and avoidance behaviors among students facing high expectations. The theme was further explained through Erik Erikson Psychosocial Development Theory, which suggested that adolescents and emerging adults are highly influenced by social validation and identity formation during this stage of development (Erikson, 1968). In the context of the study, participants' non-passing experiences affected not only their academic confidence but also their social interactions and sense of belonging. The findings implied that schools and families should foster emotionally supportive environments that normalize setbacks and reduce the stigma associated with academic failure to prevent social isolation and emotional withdrawal among students.

Theme 3: Self-Doubt and Questioning of Personal Worth

(23 out of 30)

Another major psychological struggle experienced by the participants was the development of self-doubt and negative perceptions regarding their personal worth after failing college entrance examinations. Many participants shared that the experience made them question their intelligence, abilities, and value as students. Some admitted that they began comparing themselves to peers who passed prestigious universities, causing them to feel inferior and academically inadequate. Others explained that despite receiving reassurance from family and friends, they still internalized the failure and blamed themselves for not meeting expectations. For several participants, the entrance examination result became deeply connected to how they viewed themselves, leading to feelings of insecurity and diminished self-confidence.

"I used to feel confident academically, but after failing, I felt that maybe I was not as capable as I thought I was." — Student 05

"I could not stop comparing myself to my classmates who passed. Sometimes I wondered if I was lacking or simply not good enough."— Student 16

The findings aligned with the studies of Villanueva et al. (2025) and Usher and Pajares (2021), which revealed that academic failure and negative academic self-perception often reduce students' self-efficacy, confidence, and emotional well-being. Similarly, Martin and Marsh (2022) explained that academic setbacks may negatively influence students' emotional adjustment and perceptions of competence. The theme was further explained through Albert Bandura Self-Efficacy Theory, which emphasized that individuals' beliefs regarding their abilities strongly influence emotional responses, motivation, and resilience following failure (Bandura, 1997). In the present study, participants interpreted entrance examination failure as a reflection of their personal and academic inadequacies, resulting in weakened confidence and self-worth. The findings

implied that educational institutions should implement interventions that promote self-esteem, resilience, and healthy academic self-perception among students experiencing educational rejection and academic setbacks.

Theme 4: Emotional Exhaustion and Loss of Motivation

(20 out of 30)

Several participants expressed experiencing emotional exhaustion and a significant loss of motivation after failing college entrance examinations. Many shared that they became mentally drained from reviewing, preparing requirements, and carrying the pressure of expectations before eventually receiving disappointing results. After the failure, some participants admitted losing interest in studying, becoming emotionally detached from academic activities, or feeling too discouraged to apply to other universities. Others explained that they no longer felt excited about their educational future because the experience made them feel emotionally defeated. For many participants, the combination of pressure, disappointment, and uncertainty gradually reduced their drive to continue pursuing academic goals immediately after the examination results.

“I became emotionally exhausted after that. It felt like all my effort and sleepless nights were wasted, so I really lost the motivation to study again.”— Student 07

“There was really a time when I did not even want to open anything school-related because whenever I thought about the exam, the disappointment returned.”— Student 29

The findings supported the studies of Fathima et al. (2025) and Mamun et al. (2021), which revealed that examination-related stress and academic failure commonly contribute to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced psychological functioning among students. Similarly, Pascoe et al. (2020) emphasized that prolonged academic pressure may negatively affect students' mental well-being and academic motivation. The theme was further explained through Richard Lazarus Stress and Coping Theory, which posited that persistent stressors perceived as overwhelming may result in emotional fatigue and reduced coping capacity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the present study, participants experienced entrance examination failure as an emotionally overwhelming event that depleted their motivation and psychological energy. The findings implied that educational institutions should provide accessible mental health support, stress management programs, and recovery interventions to help students regain motivation and emotional stability following academic setbacks.

Theme 5: Acceptance, Resilience, and Motivation to Continue

(17 out of 30)

Despite the psychological struggles brought by entrance examination failure, several participants eventually described developing acceptance, resilience, and renewed motivation to continue pursuing their educational goals. Many participants shared that

although the experience initially caused emotional pain and self-doubt, they gradually learned to accept the setback and view it as part of their personal growth. Others explained that support from family, friends, and personal reflection helped them regain confidence and continue striving for success through alternative educational pathways. Some participants also expressed that the experience motivated them to work harder, become more emotionally mature, and prove to themselves that failure would not permanently define their future. For these participants, the setback eventually became a source of learning and perseverance rather than permanent defeat.

“It was not easy to accept, but as time passed, I realized that maybe it simply was not meant for me yet. Now I am more motivated to prove that I can still become successful even if I failed before.”— Student 13

“Before, I was really down, but my friends and family helped me recover. Little by little, I realized that an entrance exam does not solely determine my future.”— Student 30

The findings aligned with the studies of Cai and Meng (2025) and Zimmerman et al. (2022), which emphasized that some students develop resilience, adaptive coping responses, and renewed motivation following academic setbacks and failure experiences. Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained that individuals may gradually adapt to stressful situations through coping strategies, social support, and cognitive reframing. The theme was further supported by Richard Lazarus Stress and Coping Theory, which suggested that individuals continuously evaluate stressful experiences and develop coping mechanisms that help them emotionally adjust and recover over time. In the present study, participants demonstrated resilience by reframing entrance examination failure as a temporary setback rather than a permanent limitation. The findings implied that emotional support systems, peer encouragement, and guidance interventions play significant roles in helping students recover psychologically and sustain motivation despite academic rejection and disappointment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that college entrance examination failure extended beyond academic rejection and significantly affected the educational experiences, emotional well-being, and self-perceptions of students. The participants experienced multiple academic setbacks, including disrupted educational plans, financial and institutional limitations, declining academic confidence, social pressure, and compromised career aspirations. Psychologically, the participants encountered anxiety, shame, emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and fear regarding their future. These findings demonstrated that college entrance examinations, particularly within highly competitive educational systems, may profoundly shape students' academic trajectories and emotional experiences. In the contemporary educational landscape where academic achievement is strongly associated with personal success and social mobility, failing entrance examinations may become a deeply personal and emotionally challenging experience among young individuals.

The study further revealed that academic failure should not be viewed solely as an indicator of intellectual ability, but rather as a complex experience influenced by educational pressures, financial realities, family expectations, and social comparison. While many participants initially experienced emotional distress and diminished confidence, some eventually developed resilience, acceptance, and renewed motivation to continue pursuing their goals through alternative pathways. This finding highlighted that students possess varying emotional responses and coping capacities when confronted with academic setbacks. The study therefore contributed a more humanized understanding of entrance examination non-passers by emphasizing their lived struggles, emotional realities, and processes of recovery rather than merely focusing on academic outcomes alone.

Overall, the study underscored the importance of strengthening emotional, academic, and institutional support systems for students experiencing educational rejection and uncertainty. The findings suggested that schools, universities, families, and guidance offices play critical roles in helping students navigate academic setbacks and maintain positive self-worth despite failure experiences. In a time where educational competition continues to intensify, the study highlighted the need to cultivate more compassionate, supportive, and psychologically responsive learning environments that recognize failure as part of students' growth and development rather than as a permanent measure of their capability or future potential.

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